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Scott

Stephen Hawking versus Piers Morgan: Women's Unprecedented Societal Empowerment

March 21, 2017

Carline Klijnman and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Piers Morgan has often been the subject of intense scrutiny, even more than his interviewees at times. This tends to especially occur in the interviews with prominent individuals in the political, scientific, and entertainment industries. This time around, it was in the scientific arena.

Recently, Morgan interviewed one of the most respected intellectuals of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Professor Stephen Hawking. During this interview, Morgan got schooled by Hawking on a matter outside the scientific realm, namely: gender equality.

Morgan has been criticised for the recent remarks that showed an ignorance of the meaning of being a feminist, or just someone with an advocacy orientation for women's rights, especially his reactions to several female celebrities' wardrobe selections. This reinforces one double standard. For example, his response to the now infamous photo shoot of Emma Watson in *Vanity Fair*.

The actress got lots of negative publicity. She was called a "hypocrite" because she called herself a feminist. Why? She showed the infamous 'underboob'. Amongst the criticsers was Morgan, who stated that Watson was merely "seeking attention". Remarkable.

It seems like belittling of [sexual] women, to us, and has also been visible through his remarks against Kim Kardashian. He referred to the robbery experienced by Kardashian in Paris as a "wake-up call". Amongst other (some more deserved) remarks, he stated that the celebrity should stop posing nude, or else she would be 'inviting' people to take advantage of her.

Although, Morgan spoke against "the most sexist man in politics" during *Good Morning Britain*. He does not seem to know feminism's definition, theory and practice.

With regards to five of the most powerful positions in Britain, all of which women hold (Queen Elizabeth II; Prime Minister, Theresa May; Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon; Home Secretary, Amber Rudd; and Metropolitan Police Commander, Cressida Dick), Morgan asked Hawking whether this could be seen as scientific evidence for gender equality.

Hawking responded: "It is not scientific proof of gender equality that is required, but general acceptance that women are at least the equals of men, or better. This is coming. If we factor in high-powered women in Europe as well, such as Angela Merkel, it seems we are witnessing a seismic shift for women to accede to high-level positions in politics and society."

To the question whether Hawking considered himself a feminist, the scientist responded with an affirmation. Hawking gets gender equality. He knows the empowerment of women is crucial for societal development.

If women's rights are advocated for, enacted, pervasively implemented, and respected as part of the legal tradition and general culture (along a spectrum), then society, as a statistical trend, does well. The health and wellbeing of a nation appears almost proportionate to the health and wellbeing of its women citizens.

Years ago, Hawking called women "The biggest mystery in the universe". Fortunately, however, he also states that the question of whether gender equality is still an issue is a no-brainer.

Hawking welcomes the general acceptance of women's liberation. It is a cause he supported throughout his academic career. On the matter Hawking said, "...I have always supported women's rights. I moved the admission of women to my college, Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. The results were wholly good."

Now, Morgan never opposed gender equality, on the contrary.

He claims to be a big supporter of the cause. In his blog post published on March 6th, 2017, he listed the high-list women mentioned, and noted: "*With the exception of the Queen – who has turned out to be arguably the most successful monarch of all time – they all got there strictly on merit. As Oprah Winfrey put it so perfectly: 'Excellence is the best deterrent to racism and sexism.'*"

However, this seems questionable. Does he know the scope of inequality? That same inequality that women's rights campaigners and defenders have fought for decades to reduce.

Yes, more and more women take political positions. However, as Hawking points out, the public sector is behind. Furthermore, the women at the top can be treated with less respect than their male colleagues.

Therein lies the problem, not merely the statistical representation, but the inequality in treatment that renders the numbers meaningless; the fact women are visible in the political landscape does not mean women have fair treatment.

The listing of these 5 women as being "scientific evidence for gender equality" seems to imply that the battle for the empowerment of women is done. If you think gender equality is achieved by five big female names, you fail to grasp the complexity of British society and its norms.

When you assume every woman who tries to spread feminism in a less conventional way, or that every woman who is not ashamed to show off her sexuality is seeking attention, you seem to embody subtle sexism, showing that there is – as the truism goes – still work to be done – even in the United Kingdom.

Women's History Month: Why is It Important?

March 22, 2017

Beatrice Louis and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

As the month of March slowly winds down, we are approaching the end of Women's History Month, a month dedicated in some parts of the world to celebrating and marking the contributions of women throughout human history.

Readers will find fewer mentions on their social media feeds of famous women. Amongst these fascinating tidbits, and in light of the backlash against the women's movement all over the world, the significance of this attempt at inclusive memory, its origins and its purpose become ever more poignant.

Why celebrate an entire month as Women's History Month? Does that imply a deliberate conspiracy by historians to suppress women? Or is the rationale that women's role in history has been forgotten by accident?

Did the proponents of this idea believe that women's role has been overwhelmed in collective memory by subconscious beliefs that are more subtle, yet simultaneously more insidious? How did it all begin?

According to the National Women's History Project, in the article entitled the "History of National Women's History Month," the foundational ideas of Women's History Month span back over a century ago, at least, with the first International Women's Day.

At least in America, some of this began with the foundation of the National Women's History Project in Santa Rosa, California.

It was the pioneering work of Molly Murphy MacGregor, Mary Ruthsdotter, Maria Cuevas, Paula Hammett and Bette Morgan which developed the open portrayal of women's achievements, unabashedly.

Based on some of their work, and in part due to the work of the National Women's History Project through leading a coalition, the movement grew in strength and took shape. Originally, only a week was dedicated to this commemoration and was chosen to coincide with International Women's Day in March 8th.

In 1987, after being petitioned by the National Women's History Project, the entire month of March was authorised in the U.S as National Women's History Month.

The American example is not a random sampling, or an unimportant one. Much of what happened in the United States did bleed out into other places in the world, and provided a space for open conversation about women's accomplishments and to learn about female exemplars – some known, others completely unknown, and who may never have been known in history.

In the process of this project, there came stories of bravery and valour, of sacrifice and leadership, of indispensable contributions that made some of the greatest discoveries possible.

Today, with the movement of gender equality having made great strides, does this movement and its importance continue to hold sway? Or is it part of an attempt to push a female-centred narrative into mainstream reflection of society?

To understand the importance of commemorating a whole month as Women's History Month, one needs to first be aware of the *idea* that women and their contributions to history can be overlooked or forgotten because of the way traditional power relations have worked.

Now, this may sound, to some, like a conspiracy theory concocted by feminist thought, but a simple example can serve to illustrate just how believable this is.

Sandi Toksvig, a well-known author and radio broadcaster, when discussing the launch of her book 'Girls are Best' described how she came to realise that the forgotten contributions of women were probably all around her.

While in Cambridge, she reported, an anthropology Professor held up the picture of a bone with 28 incisions carved on it. "This is considered to be man's first attempt at a calendar," the Professor had said while students dutifully wrote it down.

The Professor then stunned them with a follow-up comment – "My question to you is this: What man needs to mark 28 days? I would suggest that this is a *woman's first attempt* at a calendar". That lesson, Toksvig reports, changed her life and the way she saw the world, and made her question everything she knew about the past.

The simplicity of that lesson, and its significance is undeniable. If one were to successfully imagine the state of emptiness and lack of knowledge in which prehistoric men would have found themselves, this theory makes perfect sense – not just to historians, but as a matter of rational inference. It is overwhelmingly possible that it was the *woman* who needed to mark 28 days, and therein began the idea of months.

But it is not just in terms of *tangible and direct contributions* that the role of women has been forgotten or glossed over. There are other instances where celebrated achievements would not have been possible had it not been for women, that Women's History Month seeks to memorialise.

The most obvious of these, is of course the development of modern gynaecology. J. Marion Sims, a South Carolinian, is today championed as the Father of Modern Gynaecology, and statues of him dot the landscape of medical campuses.

These celebrations of his memory, until recently, omitted the lives and names of the enslaved women that he experimented on, in order to arrive at and perfect his 'revolutionary' ideas for treating women's diseases.

Today, only three names have survived the tides of history – Anarcha, Lucy and Betsey, their pain and suffering mere echoes. Very little information survives about what was done to them, and how many of their babies were lost in the process.

This erasure of women in the annals of human history, whether intentional or unintentional, continues to this day.

It is not only in fading history books that women and their contributions were forgotten, but coverage of women's history in online encyclopaedias was so thin that Wikipedia initiated the *WikiProject Women's History*, a collaboration area for Wikipedians interested in improving coverage of women's history.

The project's primary purpose is to provide support for members and any other editors in improving Wikipedia's coverage of women from a historical perspective. But woman's history is not just about the battles they fought and the countries they ruled.

As Tracey McCormick insightfully divines in *Famous Women in History*, the history of women is often a secondary and less dramatic history; of serving tea at document-signings, caring for men wounded in battle, standing off to the side at men's election victories, designing new farming techniques, and keeping populations alive during profound periods of starvation and famine.

In that sense women's history is about the 99.9% of things happening outside the battles and conquests and therefore, is closer to the lives of ordinary people than regular history. By studying these footnotes in history, we benefit from a richer perspective of how and why human society developed the way it did, and the wisdom of those whose lives got lost in the background noise.

The celebration of women's history month today serves a twofold purpose. One, of course, is to highlight and make a conscious effort to remember and unearth the contributions of women throughout history.

The second is to remind us of the necessity to be self-aware of how dominant narratives of a society's existence can so often, willingly or not, blanket other, equally important stories because they are not deemed important enough.

It tells us that history's value lies not just in its facts, but in its path and process, in knowing how events can be expected to take shape. It holds us accountable to the less dominant groups in our society, and turns our attention to their lives and their invisible, but indispensable contributions.

EU-Turkey relationship status: It's complicated

March 26, 2017

Angelos Sofocleous and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Turkey's been in the news lately, mainly because of Erdoğan, but with recent comments, detachment of Turkey from the EU, and the internal referendum of Turkey too. Why?

After June 2016's failed coup d'état in Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the country's President, has been increasingly trying to shut down opposing voices in an attempt to dominate his position in the political scene.

In fact, a month after the alleged coup d'état, thousands of educational institutions had been shut down and thousands of academics, prosecutors, and academics had been imprisoned, arrested or sacked.

In the nine months that followed up to the present, Turkey was in a state of chaos and turmoil, with multiple terrorist attacks taking place in major cities of the country, political unrest in the Eastern part of Turkey, and the arrest of journalists, and the shutdown of newspapers and media channels in the nation.

All done in the name of *democracy*, which, according to Erdoğan, is threatened in Turkey, and so the actions, by this logic, are justified. It is on these grounds that Erdoğan and Binali Yıldırım, the Turkish Prime Minister, have put forward a referendum, which will greatly increase the power of the President and will severely limit the power of the Parliament as well as abolish the office of the Prime Minister.

Under the new constitutional amendments that have been put forward, the President will be both the head of state and head of parliament, while he has the power to appoint and sack the Vice-President and ministers of the government at his own will.

What is more, Erdoğan has said that, under the new constitutional amendments, the death penalty will be reinstated and those who were behind July's coup will face the death penalty.

The European Union and its members have not been idle on the current situation in Turkey, probably the EU's most important partner in the Middle East. Recently, the Dutch government blocked Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, who is the Turkish Foreign Minister, from entering the Netherlands.

Subsequently, Çavuşoğlu would address a political rally in Rotterdam in order to gain support for the upcoming referendum. Responding, Çavuşoğlu called the Netherlands "the capital of fascism" and Erdoğan said that the country will "pay the price".

The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, considered this inexcusable, and according to the New York Times, said that the Nazi comparisons must stop "without ifs or buts" because, as the attempts to send Turkish "surrogates" or representatives to Germany resulted in Turkey accusing

Germany of Nazism, the Turkish surrogates were not permitted to freely campaign. Things continue to heat up.

This is not a response that comes unexpectedly, as EU-Turkey relations after the *coup d'état* are becoming increasingly tense.

Since November 2016, and in response to Turkey's tactics against those allegedly involved in the coup, Members of the European Parliament adopted a resolution "calling for the negotiations to be suspended until the Turkish government ended its disproportionate and repressive response to July's failed coup".

Nevertheless, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seems unaffected by these claims and still supports that arrests and human rights violations are needed in order to restore democracy in the country. The restoration of the death penalty is another crucial point for the EU-Turkey relations.

While Erdoğan is determined to bring the death penalty back after the referendum, the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has warned that the return of the death penalty in Turkey is a "red line" in Ankara's stalled bid for membership in the European Union, essentially freezing Turkey's negotiations for accession in the European Union.

Turkey's relations with other EU member-states are getting tenser as well. Specifically, relations with Greece were strained after Greece's Supreme Court ruled that eight Turkish soldiers who fled to Greece after the *coup d'état* would not be extradited to Turkey after fears of their human rights being violated. Ankara reportedly stated that Greece "has failed to fulfil the basics of the fight against terrorism".

What is more, Turkey's southern neighbour, Cyprus, is at the moment in the path to reunification after the island was divided following a Greek *coup d'état* in the 15th of July 1974 which was succeeded by an invasion by the Turkish military five days later.

Turkey's relations with Cyprus are being stressed as Erdoğan is asking for the support of nationalists who fiercely oppose the idea of Turkey ceding its control over Northern Cyprus and allowing the island to be reunified without having foreign military troops or foreign guarantors.

The possibility for becoming a part of the EU has been seriously put in question, regardless, with statements by Foreign Minister Sigbar Gabriel. Gabriel said, "Turkey certainly isn't on the verge of joining (the EU), but in no case should we close communication channels, even though things are difficult."

In fact, the deterioration of the ties between Europe and Turkey, and especially the EU and Turkey, could be signs of a greater risk internally, where the country, based on reports of someone that would know the country better than others, could be heading into dictatorship.

Therefore, the claims about the dictatorial or Nazi actions of Germany, or the Netherlands, could be distraction from the current oppression and shutdown of the media or the press, for

example. The Guardian published an article by Can Dündar, who was the editor-in-chief of the *oldest* newspaper in Turkey called Cumhuriyet.

In it, he puts faith in the voters, in the final say of the vote of the citizens, but is seriously concerned about the real possibility for the country to lean into dictatorial leadership, even an outright dictatorship.

“Using the coup attempt to reinforce his power, the president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has since been ruling the country under what is in effect martial law without the army,” Dündar said. The number of jailed journalists after the coup shot up by 400% from 30 to 150 – so 120 or 400% more.

The government of Turkey made calls on the European Union and the Council of Europe – an international organisation devoted to democracy, human rights, and rule of law in Europe – to ‘speak out’ against the “breach of fundamental freedoms and European human rights convention” by the Netherlands, which is alleged at this point in time.

The accusations went forward. That is, they said that the Dutch government was the cause of the crisis in international law because of its “violence against Turkish demonstrators,” according to EU Minister Ömer Çelik.

Then there are other recent, relatively small, things such as the ban on the electronics in flights, Eyewitness News reports. The US has done the same jointly with Britain, but the main focus is on Britain here because of its containment in Europe.

There are purported restrictions in the ties with Russia for Turkey, according to Panorama. The implication of this is that deteriorating relationship with the European Union, or Europe in general, the greater the relationship potential with Russia for Turkey.

The director of the Oriental Studies Institute of the National Academy of Sciences, Ruben Safrastyan, said, “Europe continues the process of ‘shaping’ Turkey....especially during the ruling of Erdoğan, makes such steps and announcements that are not accepted in the European diplomatic practice...When observing the integration processes, we see...the European society dislikes many things and they speak them out.”

According to the Huriyet Daily News contributor Serkan Demirtaş, it is extraordinarily important to note that a country does not get to arbitrarily set the standards for becoming a part of the EU, to accessioning to the EU. Both sides, apparently, want to avoid the potential for conflict, but things are, as noted, heated.

Demirtaş posed the question of whether or not Turkey wants to be a third-world country. Turkish politician and deputy prime minister, Mehmet Şimşek, said that if it feels as if it can function apart from the EU, then Turkey will be seen as a third-world country. “The more Turkey shows progress in terms of European Union membership, the more it will become attractive,” Şimşek said.

So where does this leave us? Not necessarily with the last statement with the state of Turkey as a third-world country, but this does leave us with fewer questions and more statements about the tense situation between the EU and Turkey, Europe and Turkey, Germany and Turkey, the Netherlands and Turkey, and Turkey...with Turkey – that is, both externally and internally.

So we have some reflections as discussed. Erdogan has been shutting down dissent and imprisoning journalists, and shutting the media in general. So he has been actively suppressing the population's source of investigative truths.

From nine months ago to now, there has been terrorism, political unrest, arrests, and shutdown of media in the country. There have been attempts to consolidate even more power for Erdogan as the President. The death penalty will be reinstated.

The Dutch blocked Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu from entering Netherlands; Germany prevent the free campaigning of Turkish surrogates. Erdoğan called the Netherlands “the capital fascism”; he also accused Germany of Nazism. Erdoğan considers the violations of human rights within the country as necessary for ‘democracy’.

Also, the tensions with Greece are up after events with the Turkish soldiers event and the lashing out in a proclamation from Ankara about the failure to fight terrorism by Greece. Even the editor-in-chief of the oldest newspaper in Turkey warned of the possibility for Turkey becoming a dictatorship under Erdogan, the faith that the editor-in-chief of that newspaper, the Cumhuriyet, was the faith in the voters, in the citizenry.

This is all in the light of the query as to whether Turkey wants to be seen as a third-world country. Turkey has many risks and the leadership is lashing out at various countries in the EU and Europe in general. Things are tense now, but only the active participation of the citizenry and support from the outside will suss things out – and that will take time.

Is It Wrong to Assume Arab Countries Violate Women's Rights?

April 7, 2017

Sarah Mills and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

“Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. We are all equally entitled to our human rights without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible.”

United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner

Article 25.

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

To make the case for the disproportionate implementation of women's rights in the Arab League compared to other regions of the world, we need to define our terms. Our discussion implies some questions: What defines a *right*? What defines *women's rights*? Which countries are the worst, and by what metric(s)?

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. It sets the common standard for all Member States to abide by in the treatment of their citizenry.

Its thirty articles define human rights and freedoms in straightforward terms: freedom from oppression, including slavery; freedom of thought, speech, and religion; freedom from discrimination based on race, colour, sex, and political opinion; equality of all before the law; the right to education and to work.

Among the different stipulations, there are rights specific to particular groups. Mothers and children, for example, are entitled to “special care and assistance,” as stipulated in Article 25. Workers have the right to safe conditions and equal pay for equal work.

The overlap between countries in which there is a high risk of violations against both human rights and women's rights is neither coincidental nor inexplicable. Sub-Saharan countries, for example, consistently hold their position as high risk due precisely to their high levels of sexual violence, among other factors.

The worst offenders are those that deny women their fundamental rights as humans. Those countries violate the inalienable right to enter marriage consensually, fail to ensure favourable work conditions, and legislate guardianship laws so extreme that women cannot vote freely. These *de jure* violations are unspeakable, in and of themselves.

What about the *de facto* restrictions imposed on women and girls? For example, the innumerable societal pressures and the constraints imposed by religion or custom? Or those that negate the freedoms women have under the law? What of the economic disadvantages women face? What about the pressure to marry and start a family at a young age?

These can impede access to other fundamental human rights, such as the right to education, making attendance or completion impossible. News stories emerge at a consistent rate about Arab League nations and their violations of women's rights. With the image of a women's conference in Saudi Arabia making its rounds on the internet – women conspicuously lacking- we can reflect closer on the countries ranking the worst in their treatment of women.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) in article 25(2) – and throughout it.

Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960) in Article 1 and Article 2.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) in Article 3 and Article 13.

The Istanbul Convention in Article 38 and Article 39.

Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1993).

Beijing Declaration (1995), United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000).

Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (2000).

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa or the "Maputo Protocol" (2003).

There is an international tradition devoted to women's rights. Since 1948, at least, these documents have represented efforts to establish parameters for the equal treatment of women. One general assertion is that the Arab League disproportionately violates women's rights compared to other regions of the world.

Before this can be argued for, or against, we must consider the facts through the analysis of metrics including the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Gender Gap Report and the Human Development Index.

The WEF's Gender Gap Report "quantifies the magnitude of gender disparities and tracks their progress over time, with a specific focus on the relative gaps between women and men across four key areas: health, education, economy and politics."

In a total ranking of 144 countries, of the bottom 4 on the listing, 3 are in the Arab League: Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen, numbers 141, 142, and 144, respectively. The gender gap becomes even more pronounced when considered in the context of a country's total development. The

Human Development Index is a significant metric in this case as it can be used alongside the Gender Gap Report.

On page 3 of the 2016 Human Development Report, the Human Development Index is described as the integration of “three basic dimensions of human development. Life expectancy at birth reflects the ability to lead a long and healthy life. Mean years of schooling and expected years of schooling reflect the ability to acquire knowledge. And gross national income per capita reflects the ability to achieve a decent standard of living.”

When we take both metrics into consideration, the gap between the genders and the development of the citizens of the country as whole are shown to be significant. Women’s rights fall behind. Take, for example, the case of Saudi Arabia.

Although the Human Development Index for Saudi Arabia is improving, the GGR places it among the lowest on the ranking for its treatment of women. While Saudi Arabia ranks 38th out of 187 countries on the HDI, which is rather high on the rankings of human development, it is among the lowest in terms of gender equality.

Syria ranks 142nd out of 144 on the GGR, but only 149th out of 187 on the HDI. Life quality is poor for Syrians in general, but is worse for women even in those circumstances. Yemen has the worst ranking in the Gender Gap Report. The Human Development Index ranks it 168th out of 187. While life quality may be poor in Yemen, it is, like the other countries we considered, predictably worse for its women.

These are extreme cases- the worst in the Arab League. What about moderate countries like Lebanon?

When discussing Arab countries and their treatment of women, we look to moderate nations as examples of what can be achieved within the framework of societies influenced by religion in a negative way. Lebanon comes to mind, a country often the object of international contention and internecine strife but that has nevertheless been able to achieve relative stability between its numerous factions.

While the Lebanese constitution formally recognises equality between all its citizens, the power is distributed between diverse religious groups, the values of which differ widely and influence the rights women have in their respective communities. An article from Human Rights Watch (HRW) states the following:

“Lebanon has 15 different codes – for Sunni, Shia, Druze, Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical groups and others – governing divorce, child custody, and the financial rights of spouses during and after marriage”

Lebanon is comparatively progressive to other Arab League countries. Women earned the right to vote in 1952, five years after men. Married women have the right to independently own and manage property.

And yet, neither the woman's spouse nor her children can inherit her citizenship. While problematic in and of itself, it is not comparable to the injustices women endure in the legal realms of divorce and rape.

Article 503 of the Lebanese Penal Code defines rape in the following terms: "forced sexual intercourse [against someone] who is not his wife by violence or threat." In other words, Lebanon does not recognise spousal rape.

While laws against domestic abuse do recognise violence and threats thereof, whether the penalty of jail time is enforced or not depends on the state of the victim, and whether she has required a minimum of ten days to recover.

The fine itself is paltry, equivalent to anywhere between \$6 and \$33 USD. Civil marriage is not recognised in Lebanon; religious law dictates how divorce is handled.

Sunni, Shia, and Druze men can divorce their wives simply by uttering the words, "I divorce you." If the women, however, wish to divorce their husbands, the process is arduous and the grounds are limited. The burden of proof is on the women to supply evidence pointing to "hardship and discord."

Progress on some of the more egregious violations is a recent phenomenon. As of February 2017, Lebanon has abolished Article 522, which allowed men convicted of rape to avoid a penalty if they supplied a valid marriage contract.

In August 2011, Article 562, which had been previously allowed perpetrators of honour killings to commute their sentence, was repealed. Adultery and abortion still remain illegal and women are significantly underrepresented in politics. If Lebanon, a country that boasts a reputation for being progressive, still contends with these issues, where does that leave other nations in the Arab League?

Sethrida Geagea, member of parliament and wife to the leader of Lebanese Forces, says that to effect change, women also have a responsibility to 'stop giving priorities to the son over the daughter in terms of education.'

She references other instances in which men and women both might combat stereotypical roles that have their origins in the notion that women are inferior, such as the portrayal of doctors or businesspersons as men and women as their secretaries.

While working to change collective mentality is essential to overcome harmful views of women, it is idealistic if not accompanied by international pressure and cooperation on the part of those who influence public opinion.

We must above all fight at the legislative level to provide a legal framework in which women may assert their right to the same education, work, opportunities, and protection as men.

The way a country chooses to view and treat its women often means the difference between a developed country and a developing one. Investing in women is investing in the country's economy, in untapped potential. As women have increased access to education, proper nutrition, and reproductive healthcare, they have more time, energy, and resources to invest in children.

With the individual children better provided for, and with equitable and safe access to reproductive health services, including abortion, women tend to have fewer children, as is the case in the most developed nations.

Women who are educated and independent have control over their health and their finances. They have a lesser chance of being exploited. They do not settle for low standards and unsafe working conditions.

Denying women fundamental rights directly impacts other vulnerable groups, including workers and children. Economies and societies lose potential growth by denying women their rights. Human rights, and therefore women's rights, go hand in hand with development.

Those who can, who are either in positions of power or privilege, must not stay silent on the abuses endured by women in developing countries. We must be especially critical of any beliefs or cultural norms that only serve to legitimise the mistreatment of women.

We must fight against the blatant permissiveness in the face of these continuing offences. They are an affront to human dignity. What is more, no country can benefit, or has been shown to benefit, from the mistreatment of half its population.

Reflections on the Gender Pay Gap

April 8, 2017

Beatrice Louis and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

#EqualPayDay is over. With it, we find the regular slew of mutual recriminations. While liberals resolved to fight the good fight to decrease the gender pay gap, Conservatives have re-posted and rebooted a number of videos, and articles, intent on destroying what they like to phrase as the 'pay gap myth', raising a lot of questions about the argument and the intent.

People from both sides of the debate might have found their social media peppered with well-meaning, sometimes cynical posts – about the supremacy of facts, the insidiousness of prejudice, and the general hopelessness of it all. In the midst we ask, what do both sides actually claim about the gender pay gap

The Former US President Barack Obama has lamented the gender pay gap in his public addresses, going so far as to hold the idea that a woman is paid only 77 cents for every dollar a man makes. He states that this should be repulsive to all right-thinking people.

That number has since undergone some revision, and more recently, literature on the gender pay gap quotes the gap at 20 per cent. So it seems the gap has been reduced by a 3% difference, which, statistically speaking, is quite a lot.

The contention is, that *on average* a woman earns 80% of what a man earns because she is a woman, by dint of being a woman. That gender pay gap is said to increase steeply when it comes to women of colour such as Hispanic, Black, and Native American women, for examples.

However, without more information, the above quoted statistics tend to induce a slight feeling of discomfort. A feeling that either this is one of the great injustices of the age that needs rectification, and yet does not.

More often however, there is a sense that a more nuanced based parsing of the factors is seriously required because arriving at a number to represent the gender pay gap, observed through the averaging over the labour and qualifications of all women in a country, leave alone the world, is notoriously difficult.

An averaging of the pay of all women, from CEOs to middle managers to mom-and-pop shop owners to caretakers, simply cannot stand up to a closer and rigorous statistical analysis. How could it? At face value, the number seems more like a slogan uncritically absorbed into the culture rather than an examined statistic taking into account the full nuance of the career and job market.

Does the average take into account that all of these women will be in wildly differing professions with extreme differences in pay, by virtue of their profession? Does the average take into account the time when the average woman starts working, and whether these women all retire at the same age?

Does the average take into account the number of working hours? What about the hours spent in overtime? What about the riskiness of the job with the potential for hazards to limb and even life? Does the average take into account differences in educational qualifications?

Does the average take into account the level of pay in the marketplace for those specific qualifications, whether at the undergraduate, graduate, or post-doctoral levels? Perhaps, most importantly in the context of women, does the average account for maternity leave, the resulting loss in career advancement and therefore loss in earnings?

What about the women who choose to take a break to have children which may run to a few years? These questions are not to attack feminist literature on the gender pay gap – with the exception of the last two factors, the previous are relevant in also calculating an average pay for men.

There are some unavoidable things in a society and in life, for men and for women. Societies and their citizens have a stake in continuing to exist and develop in healthy ways. But people die and societies need new people.

Women bear the greater burden in this responsibility compared to men in terms of physiology. Women are pregnant for 9 months; men are simply not. These are facts of life. An unavoidable such as this should be impetus for the support of women by society with compensation in time and care, especially as many women are taken from their jobs in this.

There are plenty of other factors. Simply put, without controlling for a very long list of variables (qualifications, professional choices, flexibility, overall duration as a professional), these factors are bound to affect a calculation of the average for pay men as well as women, and so influence the gender pay gap.

Strangely, very few of the pieces in support of the pay gap describe which variables were accounted for in the study they quote. Obviously, there cannot be an in-depth statistical analysis of a study in a blog post or short video, but there does seem to be a regrettable lack of information as to the variables that were controlled for, when undertaking a specific study.

Detractors of the pay gap argument argue that, once these factors are taken into account, it emerges that any subsisting pay gap is due almost entirely to individual career choices and fault those who insist on the pay gap, as peddling false statistics.

So, the implication is that those on the Liberal side are being dishonest when they present the gender pay gap, which is akin to the Liberal side saying that the Conservative side is lying when the conservatives claim that the gap does not exist in the first place.

By the same metric quoted above, it is clear that the arguments of those against the pay gap also require work. After some righteous flag waving about the paucity of proper research on the part of liberals, anti-wage gap activists simply argue that when these factors are taken into account, the wage gap reduces to the point of vanishing, but do not explain how they came to this conclusion.

Instead, they make a logical leap to alleging that the gap is due to women picking streams that pay less. Prominent critic of contemporary feminism Christina Hoff Sommers has caustically remarked that if women wanted to be paid equally, they should opt for electrical engineering instead of ‘feminist dance therapy’.

Of course, Sommers is trying to make a point about individual choices but, at the same time, it should be noted here that ‘feminist dance therapy’ is not a recognised discipline or field.

However, studies with a narrower focus that have attempted to survey wages within an industry have found that even within the same profession, with men and women seemingly starting at the entry level with similar qualifications, and after controlling for job title and responsibilities, a pay gap persists, although the statistic quoted is often in the 5 – 6 % range.

That leaves us with the 77%, implied 80%, and 94-95% gender wage gap. In each of these cases, the liberals have the stronger argument because, by definition, the gap persists to some degree, whether 23%, 20%, or 6-5%.

Other studies have refuted the mantra of the detractors, insisting that career choices do not, alone, explain the pay gap or pay discrimination. If there is an x factor that does explain the pay gap then, it is yet to be found. But the multiple measurements of the gender wage gap point to just that – a gender wage gap rather than the accusatory ‘gender wage gap myth’.

Curiously, those most reluctant to accept that there may be a pay gap may well be the most unlikely opponents the women’s rights movements expects to face – Men who find the suggestion of the pay gap offensive because they cannot imagine why a recruiter or hiring manager would pay anything other than the market rate in light of the skills an employee has.

In their view, to suggest that there are discriminatory payment policies occasioned by sexism is a personal affront to the purely dispassionate considerations that should guide a hiring process – namely, the value of one’s skills and qualifications.

Missing in the discussion about the pay gap, is the very real effect of gaps or breaks in women’s careers because of the physiological reality of maternity leave. Maternity breaks and policies obviously differ from country to country, and the amount of time taken off work by mothers obviously varies from woman to woman.

But it is not a feat of logic to comprehend that the break taken by women is bound to affect their advancement and promotions, and thereby their pay.

The pay gap discourse is by no means simple. From a political as well as an economic perspective, multiple factors affect a person’s pay and their overall income. The above discussion exposes the limits of relying purely on incomplete, or overly generalised statistics to solve a socio-economic issue.

If this discussion, and indeed the very issue of pay discrimination is to move forward, more innovative methods of gathering the information and data necessary have to be devised. A few issues must, of necessity, be highlighted here.

Firstly, any statistic that attempts to make a credible argument about a wage gap cannot, and must not be averaged over the entirety of the female workforce. Specific studies must be devoted to sub-groups of companies in a sector, and should not attempt to portray wages of all women in the country or a region.

Even within an industrial classification, such as the 'finance industry', those obviously include investment banks, hedge fund managers, and a host of other types of companies. An argument relating to a wage gap within the financial sector must of necessity separate these different categories of companies.

Secondly, research must focus on a smaller sample of women who graduated with qualifications similar to men at a specific point in time and track their progress through a defined number of years.

If this set of women are observed to avail of maternity leave, appropriate adjustments have to be made to account for the regression in professional advancement and loss of earnings.

Useful comparisons may be made to the rate of progression of men through the industry when they may have also availed of 'leave' for medical / physiological reasons, in order to determine whether sexist, or discriminatory factors affect women's progress in the workplace.

There are, undoubtedly, studies and statistics that are more nuanced, arrived at in more scientific conditions, and are therefore more defensible. They have to be incorporated into the rhetoric in order to reduce, or at the very least mitigate the damage done by detractors.

Throwing around large, shocking numbers for emotional value is doing infinitely more damage to this issue than can be assessed. In fact, it has become commonly accepted by now that attempts to address the inequity have slowed since 2001.

These are just two examples of variables that have to be accounted for in research that purports to hold the divine truth about a wage gap.

Lastly, there are a few characteristic tropes and arguments that should cease to be part of the wage gap discourse. A prime example is the lack of women in 'STEM' fields and the resultant impact on their earnings.

When confronted with the allegation that women earn less because they choose lesser paying jobs, feminists often retort that STEM is also closed off to women because of the same factors that engender pay discrimination.

However, true as that may be, it is *irrelevant to the wage gap discourse*. The ‘wage gap’ discourse and the rhetoric that surrounds it is based on the notion of ‘sexism’ or ‘gender discrimination’.

To elucidate, the ‘issue’ that the women’s rights movement invites focuses on is the eradication or rooting out of unjustified gender biases that impact how women’s professional contribution and skills are assessed.

The underlying assumption therefore, is that *despite the presence of qualified and motivated women*, they are not being valued accordingly. The *lack of women* in a specific field therefore, is extraneous to this discussion and should not be confused.

That women are a minority in STEM fields, and therefore less represented in such high-earning industries is, and should be a separate issue.

Sexist and misogynistic tropes and attitudes that drive women out of, or keep them away from STEM fields is rightly an issue for the women’s movement, but should be divorced from the wage gap discourse which is predicated on unjustifiable biases and preconceived notions. The bundling of these ideas in debates does no one any favours.

There is clearly a problem relating to a gender pay gap. But unlike domestic violence, education, or sexual harassment, the wage gap is a highly complex issue. Treating it otherwise for the sake of brevity and activism, or, quite simply as a public relations tactic is extremely damaging.

As a first step, writers on the issue should commit to using verified, cautious statistics that clearly elucidate what variables have been controlled for, and what industry they are applicable to, instead of catchy videos about a general gap.

NUS Vice President Claims Westminster University “Destroyed” Qurans

April 13, 2017

Benjamin David and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Shelly Asquith, vice president of the National Union of Students (NUS), yesterday caused controversy after claiming on Twitter that The University of Westminster had “destroyed all the students’ Qurans”, which she insisted was “caused” by the Government’s PREVENT Strategy. Shelly Asquith speaking at a free education demonstration in Birmingham in 2015. Photo: William Pinkney-Baird.

Deeming the Westminster University’s Islamic Student’s Society a victim of the Prevent Strategy, Asquith also this week spoke out in defence of the society which she claimed was being “spied” on after the university had installed CCTV cameras in the prayer rooms: “Absolutely shameful that [the University of Westminster] installed CCTV cameras in the prayer rooms. Spying on Muslim students who already feel targeted.” Asquith’s allegations prompted notable critics of the UK Government’s PREVENT strategy, including CAGE (which has claimed that Prevent “gives people permission to hate Muslims”) and Prevent Watch UK – to demand further details from Asquith:

The Prevent Strategy:

According to the United Kingdom (UK) Government’s website, the Prevent strategy aims to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. However, many in the NUS, including Asquith, claimed Prevent is a “racist agenda” and promotes a “state-sponsored Islamophobia“. The Prevent duty requires schools and local authorities to “have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”.

About 7,500 referrals were made to the scheme in 2015-16 – the equivalent of 20 a day. Of the people referred to the scheme, set up in 2005 in the wake of the 7/7 London bombings, one in 10 were deemed to be vulnerable to terrorism and were referred to Prevent’s Channel programme.

The programme has been criticised by MPs, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Muslim Council of Britain.

However, a senior police officer recently called the government’s Prevent anti-extremism programme “absolutely fundamental” in tackling terrorism in the UK.

The University of Westminster:

The University of Westminster

The University of Westminster’s Islamic Student’s Society has received notable criticism since 2015 after the university commissioned a report concluding that the Islamic community is

“dominated by ultra-conservative Muslims.” Also, the report included complaints about the conduct of the society’s members. For example, some of the members refused to speak with female Muslim staff members. Furthermore, it was revealed that complaints made about the society were usually ignored due to Islamophobia fears.

Furthermore, women were found to be subjected to “hostile or intimidatory” attitudes by male members of the Islamic Student’s Society. A four-member inquiry panel described the society as “Apostles of a self-contained faith, concerned very largely with matters of religious orthodoxy and perceived heresy.”

The LGBT student group at Westminster University previously expressed concern about the extremist views of speakers at the Islamic Student’s Society.

The concern, in addition to revelations about Jihadi John’s (once the world’s most wanted man and a member of ISIS) association with the Westminster Islamic society, prompted the society to cancel a planned speech by Sheikh Haitham al-Haddad, who has been known to have extreme views on homosexuality.

Disputed claims:

However, activists, including the award-winning host of *The Godless Spellchecker Podcast*, Stephen Knight, have questioned the veracity of Asquith’s claims.

This caused Asquith to renege on her original claim: “The students are no longer allowed them in the room. Is that fair?”

Delineating the controversy on his blog, Knight claimed he had communicated directly with the University concerning Asquith’s allegations:

“A Spokesperson from the University told me that in 2016 it was decided that a prayer room at the University would be turned into a multi-faith room. The consultation/transition period for this change began in the summer and ended in December 2016. During this period, the Islamic Society (ISOC) were consulted and made aware that any existing materials would need to be removed from the room, otherwise they would be disposed of on a forewarned date. And that is exactly what happened.”

He went on to challenge Asquith’s allegations which he asserted had “the potential to get people killed”:

“This wasn’t an act of desecration, it was planned maintenance. And maintenance that was carried out with due consideration to, and consultation with, the interested parties.” Since 2010, there has been various noted cases of people arrested for damaging the Quran – including a teenager who was arrested over a “distressing” video posted online which allegedly showed him ripping up and burning the holy book.

April 22 2017 is Earth Day

April 15, 2017

Phoebe Davies-Owen and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

300 million tons of plastic is produced each year to make bags, bottles and packages. Another option is to pledge not to use disposable plastic. Earth Day has another petition for this issue and consider it a priority.

At present, 300 million tons of plastic is produced each year to make bags, bottles, packages, and other commodities for people all over the world. But! Only about 10% of this plastic is properly recycled and reused. The rest ends up as waste in landfills or as litter in our natural environment, where it leaches dangerous chemicals into the nearby soil and water, endangering humans and wildlife alike.

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

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

Women's Rights in the Philippines – An Overview

April 25, 2017

Danielle Erika Hill and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

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

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

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

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

Filipino women enjoy a high literacy rate. The Philippines consistently earns high marks in terms of equal opportunity in education and employment, where a new law was passed in the Senate extending paid maternity leave to 120 days.

And for LGBT women, an Anti-Discrimination Bill had been languishing in the Senate for the past 17 years, but is being debated now.

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

The Philippines continues to lag significantly behind in some aspects. Filipino women are empowered, development studies say. However, matters of the heart and the vagina do not seem to be included in this empowerment.

Even with anti-Violence Against Women (VAW) campaigns by the government, Filipinas are still affected by gender-based violence, which is not limited to socioeconomic or educational status.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The taboos around sex do not help Filipino women, or society and culture in the Philippines.

A proper sexual education curriculum (which includes safe sex practices, consent, and the variety of contraceptives on offer for men and women) would improve the situation for women in the Philippines. Universal access to evidence-based sexual and reproductive health education for children would be a great first step in this direction.

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

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

And Article 16:

Article 16.

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

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

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

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

Oldest Woman Alive, Now Dead

May 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

CNN reported on the recent death of the oldest known living person. A woman named Emma Morano. She was 117 at the time of death.

She is the last known person to have been born in the 19th century, the 1800s. She was born on November 29, 1899. Morano held the Guinness World record for the oldest living person and woman at the time prior to death.

Guinness World Records said, “She joined our celebrated hall of fame with her amazing achievement when she was announced in 2016 as the oldest living female, and was officially confirmed as the last person to be born in the 1800s.

Based on self-report, if thinking about the lifestyle, diet, and exercise regimen to live a long life, Morano credited three things in two categories. Two in food. One is lifestyle. Morano ate raw eggs. She loved cookies too.

She “credited her longevity to ending her abusive marriage” in terms of the lifestyle change. Talking about the 1938 divorce or separation from the abusive husband, Morano told The New York Times, “I didn't want to be dominated by anyone.”

Leaving the domineering husband in 1938 and a steady diet of eggs and cookies, according to Morano, are the source of the longevity, she had a mischievous streak too. She loved cookies, a lot.

In fact, she used to hide them under the pillow of the bed to hide them from the doctor, Carlo Bava. Bava reported this to be true. The reason for under the pillow is “so no one would eat them.”

With the death of “American Susannah Mushatt Jones” at age 116, Morano became the oldest person in the world alive at the time. For the oldest person ever, Jeanne Calment is the longest-lived person. Calment died at the age of 122.

“Guinness said the oldest living man is Israel Kristal, a Holocaust survivor who turned 113 in September.”

The Christian Association of Nigeria, Buhari, and Government Turned Religious

May 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Guardian reported, briefly, on The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). CAN's Youth Wing claimed that the president Muhammadu Buhari made the government religious. Those that didn't get with the program were victimized.

President Muhammadu Buhari is the leader of Nigeria. The national president of the association, Daniel Kadzai, took the time to speak with journalists at Yola international airport. He was *en route* to Abuja.

Kadzai "noted that the recent suspension of the secretary to the government of the federation (SGF) Mr. Babachir David Lawal and the Director General of NIA Mr. Ayo Oke, is a confirmation that religion has become immunity under this administration."

He also made the case that Ibrahim Magu, acting chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), has been indicted by the Department of Security Service (DSS). However, he remains in office because of his religion.

"Kadzai pointed out that the present government declared war on Christians when the present minister of education removed Christian Religious Knowledge (CRK) as a subject in the academic curriculum of the country."

Magu considered the suspension of two people – "Lawal and Oke" – suspicious. In that, it seemed to permit the "indicted Magu" to continue work in office, and that the suspension of the two was an attempt to "plant Muslims in those vacant seats."

Social Scientists Vocal About Funding Cuts

May 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

It has now become increasingly clear that the Trump Administration is waging an all-out war on the sciences, particularly the social sciences.

The disdain for science, scientific and rigorous study of social phenomena is a well-known pet peeve of the religious right in the U.S.A., a faction that seems to have only grown stronger and more petulant in the Obama years.

Thus, even agencies which have normally received bipartisan support are finding themselves to be victims of a deep cut in funding that will cripple most of their programs, driven by powerful Republicans, and conservative forces, cutting social science research and education funding.

One linguistics researcher, Evan Bradley, spent about 14 years studying linguistics. He has a deep relationship to music and the tonal languages. An example of a tonal language, for reference is Mandarin.

On March 29, in Capitol Hill, Bradley and 69 other social scientists marched for science, protesting against the funding cuts and demanding their work be recognised. The stakes are high for Bradley and fellow social scientists.

The American president, Donald Trump, has also proposed cuts to some of the major physical science agencies, e.g. the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Institutes of Health.

Lamar Smith, Texas Republican, wants to take 70% of the National Science Foundation (NSF) budget meant for numerous areas.

Then he wants this concentrated into 4 domains. Smith suggests biology, computing, engineering, and mathematics and the physical sciences.

Bradley, who works at Pennsylvania State University's Brandywine campus in Media, talked about how in the past there was an "armchair activism." He said, "I felt it was important to get involved on the ground."

The 70 researchers advocating for science set a new record. After Capitol Hill, these scientists went to meet 80 members of Congress. It was the first time for the scientists talking to an elected official.

A political scientist from University of Kentucky in Lexington, Emily Beaulieu, met up with an aide to 1 of 2 of her state's senators. Republican senator Rand Paul, who publishes relatively regular reports on government programmes seen, by him, as wasteful. Often, science and social science are targets.

Others met with public officials. One confusion was the definition of “proper science.” The proposed cuts to social science are familiar to social scientists in the professional world. However, these have never gathered sufficient support “to become law.”

Anthropologists in the United States could suffer with regards to their research endeavours with the reduction in funding. This is according to the executive director of the American Anthropological Association, Ed Liebow.

“I don’t think it’s a good thing,” says Scott Collins, an ecologist at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and a former NSF programme director. “We’re not out here to eat our own. Science is interdisciplinary.”

Religion is Flourishing in Atheist-Majority China

May 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

With the ruling of the communists in China circa 1949, religion was viewed by the leadership as something anti-modern, superstitious, and regressive to the advancement of the communist regime

So they acted accordingly. The communist regime attempted to wipe our religion and religious life entirely from the country. By the late 1970s, they were relatively successful in the elimination of religion and religious life.

The author of “The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao,” Ian Johnson, said, “There were basically no functioning places of worship in the entire country. This is a place that had over 1 million temples and scores of churches and thousands of mosques...They were all closed down or destroyed.”

Now, he sees a revival of the spirit of religion in China. Where Johnson notes that Marx, in one popular line, described religion as the opiate of the masses, China might see this as an opportunity for keeping people in line and controlling them.

The current President, Xi Jinping, of China describes the Chinese citizenry to be “unyielding Marxist atheists.” Based on Jinping’s analysis, even assertion, the 85 million Communist Party members have been, and continue to be, atheists.

As time is progressing, he removed the strictures on formal religious institutions within China. Some Chinese authorities have begun to assist some religious practices to come back as a form of “traditional culture” renewal, as the government calls it.

Johnson talked about the Buddhist-inspired funeral procession at the Temple of the Tolling Bell in Beijing. Then he looks at a small sect called the Eastern Lightning. It has some cultish aspects to it.

The small cultish sect “dared” to assault the image of the Communist Party. The Eastern Lightning members combat the Great Red Dragon, or the Communist Party, from their perspective.

“They operate illegally, and they almost try to hijack church congregations. They sometimes resort to violence,” Johnson said, “...their very secretive nature, their proclivity for violence, in some ways, this also reflects how the Communist Party runs China.”

The main line not to cross with the ruling communist regime, or government, is the involvement with the international community. If there is money, training, and so on, then the Chinese government see this as enough of a threat as to need control.

One issue, as noted by Johnson, is the international nature of many religions. If many of the religions in the world are global, by their very nature and operation, then this could become a serious and increasing problem for the Chinese authorities in the future.

“It’s a double-edged sword for the government...religion creates values that are above any government values, ideas of justice, of righteousness, of truth and these are things can come back to haunt the party.” Johnson said.

Over 2,000 Self-Identified Jedi in Ireland

May 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In a recent census, thousands of citizens identified as follows of the Jedi, Satan, spaghetti, and 'Star Wars' generally. Over 2,000 listed themselves as Jedis in the Irish census.

There are over 50 official religions from within the 2016 census. Those that don't believe in a deity or theity are included too. More men than women believe in the force and of themselves as the justice and peace guardians for the cosmos – 1,722 men and 328 women.

Since 2011, the Jedi religious self-identification have come out of nowhere, essentially. Any belief with more than 30 adherents is officially a religion in Ireland. Readers or others may be tempted to created their own spinoffs or original religions altogether.

There are 78 Satanists since 2011. There was also an incident with the Pastafarians of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. The Equality of Authority claimed a man that wore a pasta strainer for religious head gear for his driver's license photo could not.

The Pastafarian going for the driver's license claimed this was discriminatory. As well, the Victorian spiritualist movement is alive and well in Ireland with about 3,000 adherents. Over 7,000 identified as out-and-out atheists.

There are about 100 Pastafarians in Ireland. The spiritualists claim to be able to speak to the dead or "commune" with them. The pagans came in at about 2,600 people. Hare Krishna has a total of 87 members circa the recent census.

Other faiths, such as the Church of Scientology, had 87 members. There were more lapsed Catholics than atheists at over 8,000, and the total Roman Catholic population came in at 3.7 million out of the 4.7 million in Ireland as a whole.

The Force, the Holy Spirit, Hubbard, Pasta, the Dead, and so on, are alive and well and flourishing with the Irish population based on the statistics from 2016 and remains overwhelmingly dominated by the Catholics.

The Search for Christ's Genome

May 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

A “hunt” or search is on for the genome of Jesus. Christ’s DNA is being searched for by a team of religious scholars and scientists, who are together in a purportedly “groundbreaking” initiative that aims to find living descendants of him.

Some artefacts have been analysed such as the Sudarium of Oviedo and the Shroud of Turin. As well, some bones were analysed. They are thought to have belonged to John the Baptist. The hope is for clues as to the DNA of Jesus or family.

In the asserted intermingling of religion and science, a geneticist and a biblical scholar are working on finding the DNA of Jesus. One of the targets is living descendants of Jesus.

The document based around the bones thought to belong to John the Baptist, found in 2010 in Bulgaria, will air on the History Channel on Easter Sunday. The Bible scholar is Joe Basile and the geneticist, from Oxford University, is George Busby.

They will make their way through Spain, Italy, Israel, and the Black Sea in their search for Christ’s genome. The bones were found to be about 20 centuries old with “similarities to Middle Eastern populations.”

The latest technology is being put use for this scientific and religious exercise. Busby, in an article for The Conversation, said:

‘We can compare the DNA from a relic to DNA from other relics...If we find other relics purported to be from John the Baptist, or a close relative of Jesus, then we could use genetics to compare the two to see if they are likely to have come from the same or related people...Also, we have growing collections of DNA sampled from people around the world, which we can use to make a guess on the geographical origins of the relics.’

The Shroud of Turin, or the purported linen cloth wrapping the body of Jesus Christ, has been, and continues to be, a point of interest for investigators and believers – and non-believers – of many backgrounds.

In the small town of Liray between 1353 and 1357, there appears to be historical accounts of a shroud, possibly the Turin one, with an image of the crucified Christ, if not a man in general. However, there is a claim to this being a possible forgery.

Since the 15th century though, whether forged or not, there has been a consistent historical record of the Shroud of Turin. Even in 1532, there is record of it being damaged based on the chapel of Chambéry fire, which was in the capital of the Savoy region.

It was stored there. It was removed from the chapel in 1578 to Turin. It has been there since. Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler is one well-known obsessive over the shroud. He wanted to steal it, apparently or so it is claimed, and then perform black magic with it.

In May, 2010, Pope Benedict permitted public viewing of the shroud. However, any extracted DNA is not necessarily that of Jesus, nor is there a lack of a possibility of contamination of DNA too. Bearing in mind, the genome's information and quality degrades based on the wear and tear of time.

Patriarch Bartholomew Defence of Pan-Orthodox Council

May 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, or Patriarch Bartholomew, presented an address at the World Council of Churches. In the address, he defended the Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete from 2016. The address was on April 24, 2017.

The Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete was “damaged” through the withdrawal from a number of churches near the end of its completion. Patriarch Bartholomew convened the council solve the problems that the Eastern Orthodox Church has had for a long time.

In particular, one issue related to the way that the church should approach the current era. He emphasized the need to protect the environment and young people.

The intended audience were the Eastern Orthodox Church members. It was a council intended to bring 14 “autocephalous”, or simply independent, churches together. 5 churches withdrew, which was a blow to the authority Patriarch Bartholomew.

The big leaver was the Russian Orthodox Church, which is quite big. He saw the council as necessary for the dealing with its big problems. One being the general proclivity of the Eastern Orthodox Church to splinter off into independent churches, as per the 14.

He said, ‘each of the Churches promotes its own interests and ambitions – which are not always of a strictly ecclesiastical nature...a sentiment of self-sufficiency within the individual Churches’ and ‘introspective and self-absorbed tendencies’.

Within the Orthodox diaspora, there appeared to be the overlap of jurisdiction from one bishop to another. It is not a permissible thing with the theology of the church, but it happens within the church.

The planning and attendance at the council was stated as a “considerable achievement,” but also a failure because of its loss of authority with so many of the churches leaving. Also, there is a tug-of-war between Constantinople and Moscow.

The Russian Orthodox Church has become more powerful with Putin in Russia. Some activists see it as pre-eminent over the authority of Constantinople. Patriarch Bartholomew called for action on environment protection, or “care for creation,” and climate change.

‘Scientific knowledge, supported by statistics and climatic models, as well as plain observations made by peasants, farmers,’ Bartholomew said, ‘indigenous peoples and coastal inhabitants has confirmed that the climate is changing because of human activities and that such change will prove disastrous for life on this planet, while we are still unable to take the unavoidable steps to detain the already tangible and oncoming appalling events.’

Roman Catholic Pope Targets East-West Christian Better Ties

May 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Roman Catholic Church's Pope has recently praised the apparent unity of vision and ties between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, and hoped to strengthen the ties between the two major Christian sects.

Pope Francis is the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Francis travelled to Egypt, recently, with one part being an intention to improve ties with the Oriental Orthodox Church.

This is new, but old. The new is the attempt to improve the ties. The old is the breakage of the ties in an older council. One of the oldest councils is the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which resulted in the breakage from the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches to form the Oriental Orthodox Church.

So the Oriental Orthodox Church is a result of the Council of Chalcedon from 451. Pope Francis met with the patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria is the patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

It is reciprocal trip to the one made by Pope Tawadros in 2013 to Rome. It was shortly after the formal election of Pope Francis. This meet was a moment of the 40th anniversary for the signage of Paul VI and Shenouda III making the Christological declaration.

In spite of the name "Orthodox" in the titles of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Church, no formal relation exists between the Oriental Orthodox Church or the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The leader of the Oriental Orthodox Church is still Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, and the leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church is the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I, or Patriarch Bartholomew.

This work is an effort by the Vatican, and agreeing and meeting parties by implication, to "heal this ancient wound for decades," through increased dialogue. It is stated that this is difficult because of the length of the division between the various sects of Christianity.

As well, the surrounding religions for the history of the Catholics, the Orientals, and the Easterners have been different. Where with the Orientals, there have been hostile relations with the Muslims or communists.

Other reasons for a difficult dialogue are for the nature of Christ. Who is he? What is his nature? These Christological issues have been present for centuries and have subsequently separated the churches.

The Roman Catholic Pope said, “We have met, we have embraced as brothers, we have prayed together and shared the gifts, hopes and concerns of the Church of Christ...We have felt as one her beating heart, and we believe and experience that the Church is one.”

Archdiocese of Ernakulam, Kerala, Father K.M. George, who is a priest in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church said, “I personally believe that Pope Francis has a unique vision, although some people would say that he is too idealistic...He has a new vision of Christianity.

I think he is going back to the original gospel message. So we need to have a new paradigm of Christianity to live in the present world.”

Humans as Good, Bad, and Ugly, and Beautiful and Evolved

May 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In a book review by Anne Harrington, summarized and judged *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* by Robert M. Sapolsky, who students, it is assumed, must love him.

Sapolsky is a neurologist, primatologist, and science communicator with the writing style of a teacher. He takes various “topical stories and pop-culture allusions” and weaves them into the narrative.

Behave was written with morality in mind. The author, Sapolsky, sought to comprehend the reasons for the human species being able to “ruthlessly pull a trigger or compassionately touch an arm.”

This is a tradition of evolutionarily oriented texts from the 1960s, at least, to the present, where the difficult questions are targeted and attempted to be answered as to the good or bad nature of the species since its origin.

Are we lovers or killers? Are we aggressors or peacemakers? Are we good or bad? What are we, mostly, and how much? To Sapolsky, humans exhibit all of the relevant traits above in various ways, to different degrees, and more or less in different contexts.

He argues against mono-theories and for the fact that we are both. It depends on the information and factors that you take into account. “...we need the insights of neuroscience, endocrinology, primatology, developmental biology, evolutionary theory, clinical psychology and social psychology.”

It is important to see the parts in the whole, but as or more important to decipher the comprehensive portrait. Ideas and evidence “utterly intertwined.” Harrington was disappointed in the narrow view of disciplines.

His idea “tribe” was kept local. No one else needed, says Harrington. It came as a shock that chimpanzees have a culture. Humans remain in a distributive landscape. Distributions with hills and valleys. Those hills and valleys indicative of relatedness of traits.

Nothing necessarily unique, but more or less to one degree of having the trait. Sapolsky was noting that the scholars took part in “contentious debates” with postmodernists. Sapolsky refuses to partake of that tradition.

He likes the “intuitive” idea of culture from Frans de Waal. Doing and thinking passed non-genetically, de Waal argues. That is culture. The 700-page book looks like 2. One on behavioral biology. The other an anthropological look the poles of humans.

Humans as good, bad, and ugly, and beautiful and evolved, but emphasizing variety of non-rational forces that produce dehumanization, tribalism, and war in addition to compassion, tolerance, and peace.

Sapolsky sees words such as evil and good, and soul, and so on, as irrelevant, and the idea free will as ambivalence-producing. He likes free will, socially. But scientist him doesn't know. It might not exist, says the scientist. It might, thinks the regular person Sapolsky.

This created a problem for Sapolsky. In the denial of free will, and in observation of our worst behaviors, free will must be denied in the light of the worst and the best of human behaviours. "And Sapolsky can't bring himself to do this," Harrington said, "He clings to the 'homuncular myth' that humans can transcend their circumstances and do the right thing, even if it is the harder thing."

He views the moral exemplars in history such as martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela as examples of self-transcendence.

Harrington concludes, "In the end, it is impossible not to deeply admire a project bold enough to ask an entire field to work to create a more just and peaceful world. Whether or not success is assured, Sapolsky exhorts us all — please, just try."

The Christian Association of Nigeria, Buhari, and Government Turned Religious

May 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Guardian reported, briefly, on The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). CAN's Youth Wing claimed that the president Muhammadu Buhari made the government religious. Those that didn't get with the program were victimized.

President Muhammadu Buhari is the leader of Nigeria. The national president of the association, Daniel Kadzai, took the time to speak with journalists at Yola international airport. He was *en route* to Abuja.

Kadzai "noted that the recent suspension of the secretary to the government of the federation (SGF) Mr. Babachir David Lawal and the Director General of NIA Mr. Ayo Oke, is a confirmation that religion has become immunity under this administration."

He also made the case that Ibrahim Magu, acting chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), has been indicted by the Department of Security Service (DSS). However, he remains in office because of his religion.

"Kadzai pointed out that the present government declared war on Christians when the present minister of education removed Christian Religious Knowledge (CRK) as a subject in the academic curriculum of the country."

Magu considered the suspension of two people – "Lawal and Oke" – suspicious. In that, it seemed to permit the "indicted Magu" to continue work in office, and that the suspension of the two was an attempt to "plant Muslims in those vacant seats."

Interview with Ian Bushfield – British Columbia Humanist Association

August 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Ian Bushfield, M.Sc. is the Executive Director of the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA). He earned an M.Sc. in physics from Simon Fraser University and a B.Sc. in Engineering Physics in 2009. He is the Events and Development Coordinator, and has been the Director of Development, at the Cerebral Palsy Association of British Columbia. He was the Founder and President of the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics. He is an Ambassador for Dying with Dignity. He grew up in the “Bible Belt” of Alberta – Southern Alberta. He fought to reduce the influence or mention of God at the University of Alberta convocation ceremony. Here is his story.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Thank you for taking the time to be interviewed. Let’s start the interview talking about your background. Do you have a family background in humanism?

Ian Bushfield: Not formally.

I was raised in a fairly non-religious household. It was basically areligious in that we didn’t really even talk about religion. I joke that I first learned about religion from The Simpsons.

SJ: When did humanism become the philosophical and ethical worldview for you?

IB: I think like most secular people, Humanism was always my somewhat default mindset, even if I didn’t really come across the term and context until university. I was raised with the idea of being good to others because it’s the right thing to do and, at its core, that’s all Humanism is. So as I got involved in atheist activism in my undergrad, I came across Humanism in my reading and I naturally gravitated to it as an identity for my worldview.

SJ: What seem like the more pressing topics for humanism in British Columbia at this time?

IB: BC is a pretty nonreligious province, yet we still retain a few specific privileges for religion. I think the most egregious are the public funds that go to religious private schools, through our own sort of voucher program, and the fact a number of our public hospitals are still run by religious institutions.

Both these schools and hospitals are able to turn people away who don’t conform to the institution’s narrow dogma. For example, some evangelical schools require students to be able to speak in tongues, while Catholic hospitals in the province refuse to provide abortions or medical assistance in death, both of which are legal in Canada.

Beyond that, BC is no more immune than the rest of the world to the rising xenophobic, misogynistic and anti-Humanist populism we're seeing around the world. We're lucky in Metro Vancouver to have a fairly tolerant and multicultural society, but there are still white nationalist groups and anti-immigrant sentiments bubbling under the surface.

SJ: You made a video about the Big Bang, which was great. I recommend it. You work as the executive director of the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA) in British Columbia (BC), and for a better world through compassion and science.

It begs the question: what is the "better world"? Also, how, and why, are compassion and science the two best tools to reach that better world?

IB: Thanks. My concept of a 'better world' is somewhat utilitarian – that is, one with more flourishing and less suffering. Compassion in this case is shorthand for being empathetic to the plight of others and seeking means and paths to improving as many people as possible, both alive today and in consideration of future generations.

I say science is one of the best tools we've discovered to learn about the world as I think it's empirically true (and yes, I realise that's a bit circular). Science at its core asks us to test our ideas against the real world. So if we have a set of propositions about why apples fall from trees, science gives us a path to figure out which one is closer to reality.

The same process works for solving more human problems, like how to tackle an overdose epidemic. Here in Vancouver, science has shown that a supervised safe-injection site and related harm reduction policies save more lives than the sort of "war on drugs" mentality.

Of course, science on its own is not enough. We need compassion or some kind of value system to guide what and how we use that tool.

SJ: What tasks and responsibilities come with being the executive director of the BCHA in BC?

IB: My job is basically to handle the day-to-day operations of the organization. Whether that's lining up programming for our events in Vancouver, giving advice to local groups across the province, working on any of our campaigns or even answering interviews like this, no two days are the same.

SJ: The BCHA had a recent success with the biblical texts, Gideon Bible distribution, in some schools in the province. Some of the story, in general, is in the article. What are the next battlegrounds for the BCHA in BC? Why?

IB: As I mentioned, I think two of the big challenges are going to be around the public funding of religion in our private education system and in our public healthcare system. Those are going to be long fights as none of our politicians want to upset those constituencies at this time.

Our other challenge is working to get recognition to perform marriages in BC. Humanists in a number of countries around the world and in the province of Ontario are able to perform weddings but the Government of BC doesn't consider us qualified under the law here. We've put out a report documenting the differences between these jurisdictions and believe we can press the government to either change the law or take the case to court.

SJ: You work for the 'Politicoast' podcast. What tend to be the political themes discussed on the podcast? Why?

IB: PolitiCoast is more of a hobby in my spare time than a job in of itself and it's completely independent of anything else I do. Mostly, my friend Scott & I wanted to get more discussion about BC politics out there as it's somewhat neglected in the broader scene of politics podcasts.

We met through Vancouver Skeptics in the Pub so I think we both try to bring a bit of that sceptical approach to our analysis, even if we come from slightly different partisan bents.

SJ: "Terahertz" is a common theme, e.g. Terahertz Atheist. Why this title throughout some work for you?

IB: I took on the moniker back in undergrad when I was working in a terahertz spectroscopy lab and kept it as I continued to work on similar technology in my graduate studies. Basically it refers to the band of the electromagnetic spectrum between radio waves and infrared radiation.

We've only recently been able to generate those kinds of pulses and they're incredibly useful for analysing the properties of semiconductors and are actually also used in some kinds of airport full-body scanners.

SJ: You contributed to the Canadian Atheist, Pharmaceutical Journal, Postmedia Network Inc., St. Catharines Standard (Letter), Terahertz Atheist, The Province(Letter), and the Vancouver Humane Society.

You spoke for the Secular Student Alliance, on Afternoons with Rob Breakenridge, and Left at the Valley, and at the Café Scientifique Vancouver, South Fraser Unitarian Church, and Leeds Skeptics. You are a founding donor for Bad Science Watch.

You have been featured in Humanist Action and Indi in the Wired. What inspires this activism and writing in multiple domains through different outlets and organisations?

IB: I think it's just a curiosity that extends to a wide array of different interests. I spend a lot of time, probably more than I should, reading things I come across through social media and that forms different thoughts and ideas in my mind.

Perhaps it's my privilege, but then I guess I've just felt confident enough to express them anywhere people are willing to hear me. I do like to think that it's all tied to a common thread of Humanism though, whether it's promoting better science, equality and liberty, scepticism or even a politics that puts people first.

That's not to say all Humanists will necessarily agree with me on everything of course.

SJ: You provided “significant support” for E-382 (Blasphemous Libel), which argued for the removal of blasphemy libel. As e-382 stated in full:

Whereas:

It has been eight decades since the last conviction under Section 296, and thirty-five years since the last charge of blasphemous libel was laid;

Blasphemous libel serves no purpose in Canadian law or modern-day society, and would likely be found to contravene section 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which protects freedom of expression;

In Canada and elsewhere, blasphemy laws have been abused to suppress minorities and stifle inconvenient speech;

Authoritarian states point to Canada's blasphemous libel law to defend their own laws criminalizing blasphemy;

Repealing Canada's blasphemy law would demonstrate, at home and abroad, Canada's commitment to the value of free speech for all; and

Freedom of expression is the foundational human right in our society. Many others, including freedom of assembly and freedom of conscience, are derived from freedom of expression.

We, the undersigned, residents of Canada, call upon the Government of Canada to repeal Section 296 (Blasphemous Libel) of the Canadian Criminal Code.

Was it a success?

IB: The campaign is still in progress. We're lucky that this government was elected in part with a promise to reform the justice system, including the *Criminal Code*. So in her response to the petition, which received over 4700 signatures, the Justice Minister said that the blasphemy law would be included in the review of the *Criminal Code*.

We've seen one bill come forward to strike sections from the *Code* that the courts have ruled unconstitutional and frustratingly the blasphemy law wasn't included in that draft. We expect the government is still working on other bills and we're optimistic that this section will be repealed in one of those.

SJ: You weighed in on the Trinity Western University LGBTQ+ issues:

“It represents a shockingly outdated view of the discrimination faced by the LGBTQ community,” said Ian Bushfield, director of the B.C. Humanist Association, another intervener.

Are there similar cases outside, even inside, of BC?

IB: This case is relatively unique in Canada. We don't have many private religious universities in the country and TWU is the first to really push the limits of how many programs it can offer while still maintaining very strict anti-LGBT policies.

So as this case moves forward to the Supreme Court of Canada it will really be a litmus test of what approach our courts take to religious freedom as an organisational right. In the USA, the courts have opened the door wide and allowed religion to trump a lot of other concerns with rulings like *Hobby Lobby*.

We're hopeful that the courts in Canada will take a more balanced approach and include other considerations, like the equality rights of women and the LGBTQ community, in their ultimate decision.

SJ: You spoke on the “Urgency of Humanism.” In BC, this seems like an easier message to disseminate with the ‘oasis’ of non-believers, the Nones, or those with no formal religious affiliation. What, still, is the urgency of humanism?

IB: While BC is overwhelmingly non-religious, and our polling suggests as many as 70% of British Columbians don't practice a religion or faith, Humanism is more than just rejecting organised religion – it's that positive and progressive framework that gives life meaning. With rising intolerance and open bigotry, I think we, even in BC, need an open and inclusive Humanism more than ever.

SJ: You can be found on LinkedIn and Twitter. Any other recommended means for people to be involved with or contact you?

IB: I'm not sure whether it's a blessing or curse, but as far as I can tell I'm the only Ian Bushfield to ever exist, so I'm pretty easy to find online. I'm most active on my personal Facebook page, where anyone can follow my public posts, and Twitter.

SJ: Thank you for your time, Ian.

IB: Thanks for the questions Scott.

Q&A on Ex-Muslims with Waleed Al-Husseini – Session 2

August 2, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: With the foundations laid in Session 1, and in our interview, how does the Council of Ex-Muslims in France help ex-Muslims not feel alone?

Waleed Al-Husseini: To speak about this in France, the situation is complicated for many ex-Muslims because they experience threats. That's why they don't show themselves in public. But they always take the risk to meet in coffee shops, or restaurants, to try to make friends. They don't want to feel alone.

Also, such meetings and being with other ex-Muslims gives them some courage. At the Council of Ex-Muslims in France, we provide conferences in public wherein many can get support. Also, we as ex-Muslims recently had a big secular conference in London – a conference in which many Ex-Muslims came together.

What we do for society is the main fight for us – to show that we exist and that we are active, to work for laïcité – I intentionally use the French word because it's different than secularism. I prefer to use it, always.

So, we work for that. That's why we are with all the organisations who work for laïcité, and are also a part of the segment of French society who fight for these values.

We speak Arabic. Islam is Arabic. We know all these Islamist movements. We know how Islamists work. We have important knowledge about a problem which has become truly international.

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 Council of Ex-Muslims in France? And has she helped the council in any way?

Al-Husseini: Yes, of course, we created Ex-Muslims in France with her. She always supported us. We are all part of an important group of ex-Muslims, a group that has people in Germany, UK, France, and North America. We all work together and support each other. In the conference in London, we were all there together.

“I can tell you there are ex-Muslims in every family in Muslim country, but they can't speak.”

Here in France, we have more than 100 ex-Muslims involved with our organisation. We have many friends and supporters as there are many other French people fighting for the same values; this gives us the power to feel that we are not alone!

Jacobsen: The Council of Ex-Muslims in France calls 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 right to protection of children, and the right from intimidation tactics by religion.

How much success has your organisation had on each of these fronts?

Al-Husseini: Acquiring these things are long processes. We want our voice to be heard on these issues. In Muslim countries, we try to help those who are arrested, make their story known, and contact governments, especially if it is an atheist or activist who has been arrested.

All the movements for rights in Islamic countries, such as the one we did in Tunisia this week for not fasting during Ramadan, are a stance of solidarity. For them to admit that we exist is a success, because they never admitted that before, but we still need more effective and ubiquitous successes.

Jacobsen: Have there been murders of ex-Muslims in France for their renouncement of Islam? Does this happen as often with another religion's faithful becoming faithless? Or does this happen mostly with Islam?

Al-Husseini: At this point in time, it's only Islam that does this. The other religions are past this; only Islam still closes on itself after 1,400 years, and doesn't accept anything modern.

Jacobsen: What can improve the state of free speech for ex-Muslims in France? What can build bonds between ex-Muslims in other countries? What can help build a community/coalition of ex-Muslims in countries in the Middle East?

Al-Husseini: Many things can be done to improve the situation. Firstly, we need more opportunities to talk – they need to give us the space to speak our minds and to not limit free speech or speech in general in the name of “Islamophobia”.

This word has always been used to stop people like us, and to stop others from listening to us. Why? Because we can stop terrorists through discussion and showing many things. If you want to stop terrorists, then listen to ex-Muslims.

“Firstly, we need more opportunities to talk – they need to give us the space to speak our minds, and to not limit free speech or speech in general in the name of “Islamophobia”. This word has always been used to stop people like us, and to stop others from listening to us.”

What can help build communities is to first put pressure on the government, to stop all the blasphemy laws and stop treating ex-Muslims as threats and criminals; through this, people may stop attacking us.

Then many of us will be more open about who we are in public and speak more freely without so many threats from the religious communities and the government. I can tell you that there are ex-Muslims in every family in Muslim countries, but they can't speak.

Jacobsen: Thank you for taking the time once more, Waleed, always a pleasure, my friend.

Interview with Doug Thomas – President of the Secular Connexion Séculière

August 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Doug Thomas is a secular activist and Canadian agnostic humanist. His academic background is in North American Constitutional History and North American Literature. He is both the president of Secular Connexion Séculière (SCS) and an active member of the Society of Ontario Freethinkers. Interview edited for clarity.

Scott Jacobsen: Would you say you come from a humanist family background?

Doug Thomas: I suppose I did, in a way. My parents were what I would call practising Christians; that is, they followed the ethics of Christianity, or the humanist ways of dealing with people and situations, but they weren't particularly religious and certainly weren't people who quoted the Bible at every turn.

When I decided I didn't believe in the divinity part of Christianity, their only concern was that I maintain the set of ethics.

Jacobsen: What work did you do before entering into professional humanism and did this previous work help you in your current path?

Thomas: By way of clarification, I try to maintain professional standards in my work with SCS, but it is a voluntary position.

My academic background includes a degree in research and communication and another degree in methods of teaching those skills. The university calls it a degree in History and English, and it can carry on with its delusion if it wishes.

Perhaps it is relevant that the core of the History degree was North American constitutional history—an insight into the structure of governments.

I taught secondary school intermittently for twenty years and this certainly gave me experience with all kinds of social and cultural backgrounds and with how people perceive things based on those parameters.

Communication skills are vital to keeping thirty or so individuals who would rather be doing something else engaged. At the same time, I was developing theatre and co-operative education programs in the school system so I gained considerable experience in working with senior school board officials.

I also spent a number of years in the business world, quite a bit of it selling manufacturing management software. To be successful, I had to find out more about the client's business than

they usually told me and then explain why I thought my company's solution was the best for them. Again, communicating abstract ideas and benefits gave me applied experience with the research and communications skills I acquired at university.

The third useful endeavour has been working on various boards of directors and community committees over the years. These include the local Chamber of Commerce and several liaison committees between local businesses and the community.

As a result, I am comfortable contacting and communicating with government officials at all levels, from school boards to the ministries of governments. They have particular concerns about how they can get their job done. Knowing how to detect those concerns and bring forward ideas that help them rather than challenge them is very useful.

Jacobsen: Now you're the president of the Secular Connexion Séculière. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

Thomas: When we founded SCS in 2011, I think we had the idea that secular humanists in Canada were looking for a group that would work actively to represent the secular humanist perspective and concerns to governments and to society in general.

Certainly, we heard people speak enviously about the Freedom From Religion Foundation in the US. and I guess we assumed people would welcome SCS with open arms.

One task, however, has turned out to be getting the attention of secular humanists who are scattered across a large geographical area, with two official languages and many different social and cultural backgrounds.

Most of my task has been to establish SCS as a presence in the secular humanist landscape, differentiating it from the other two national organisations and gaining the confidence of secular humanists. We began that differentiation by refusing charitable status.

That separated us from other groups in two ways. First, we had to explain why donors could not have income tax deductions for donations, and second, we had to make the point that we could speak to governments in ways that the other two groups could not if they wished to keep their charitable status.

My other task, more serious than I originally thought, was to establish communication in both official languages, English and French. Even the basic terms of secular humanism do not translate well through the cultural filters of these two languages even though, historically, they are welded at the hip.

Communication within the secular humanist community has been a continuing challenge and I still spend considerable effort to find ways to do it. The social media tools that mesmerise everyone are surprisingly ineffective in getting people's attention, and, frankly, they are full of so much chaff and static that much of their supposed effectiveness is wasted.

In addition, Canadians are transfixed like moths to a flame by American events. Often Canadian issues, even those that directly affect them, sit in the shadows and are less exciting than American ones. This phenomenon is not unique to secular humanists, but it is a major challenge in getting Canadian secular humanists' attention.

Of course, the central task has been to get the attention of politicians and bureaucrats. They are busy people and getting through the various bubbles around government agencies is a challenge. Consistent and persistent efforts pay off, but they take a great deal of time.

This frustrates most secular humanists so getting them to write their MPs or Senators on a regular basis is difficult.

That is one reason that, recently, I became a registered lobbyist with the federal government. This has helped develop confidence in SCS with secular humanists since it can now claim recognition from the government and it helps do the same with bureaucrats because they see SCS as a serious representative of secular humanists—one that is open about its contacts with them.

Jacobsen: What seem like the perennial threats to the practice of humanism? Who have been unexpected allies?

Thomas: The most persistent and perennial threat is the sense of entitlement that religions have in Canada. Religious people assume their philosophy is the norm and the anything else is a threat to civilisation itself. This is largely a matter of historic presence.

Since the late 16th and early 17th century, Europeans have been coming to this part of the world, declaring that their religion, primarily Christianity, is the only moral path. Since they have dominated the government and social structure since then, encountering secular humanist unnerves them and they tend to push back.

Christians, for example, assume that their right to freedom of religion includes the right to impose their religion on others over PA systems and in public ceremonies. They tolerate the presence of other religions and will accommodate them because they think theism of any kind provides some kind of moral base.

When secular humanists speak up against this imposition of religion, the reaction is often negative and we are accused of denying them their freedom of religion.

Since following a known religion is accepted as the norm, and since most politicians do claim a religion as their own, getting politicians to change the discriminatory legislation in Canada, or even recognise that it exists, is difficult. Sometimes I can tell that they are sympathetic, but that politics won't let them really act.

Religions already have representatives on every parliamentary committee for the simple reason that most MPs are religious and those who are not keep their political heads below the rampart.

For example, when the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Physician Assisted Dying met, it chose to hear from four religious advocates, but from none of the three national secular humanist organisations. SCS has raised this inequity with members of the federal bureaucracy and continues to attempt to appear as witnesses before parliamentary committees.

The other threat is complacency. For the most part, discrimination against non-believers in Canada is pretty benign. However, that results in a “don’t ask-don’t tell” society that keeps social discrimination under the radar.

For example, non-believing university students do not put their involvement in secular humanist organisations on their resume as religious students do because they know it will be taken negatively, but it is difficult to take that to a human rights tribunal.

The systemic discrimination that the International Humanist and Ethical Union has identified in Canada, is also problematic, partly because it gives permission for theists to promote their philosophy in O Canada, for example.

The blunt truth is that several Canadian laws, including the Criminal Code of Canada and the Income Tax Act discriminate against non-believers.

Surprise allies have included almost all Canadians to whom I have explained the two offending sections of the Criminal Code of Canada: the anti-blasphemy libel law (section 296) and the clause giving religious people permission to publish hate literature (section 319, 3b). Most people, religious or not, are unaware of these clauses and are shocked and supportive of change when they hear about them.

Jacobsen: As a humanist organisation meant to facilitate communication and dialogue among Canadian humanists, how does Secular Connexion Séculière accomplish this?

Thomas: This is may be our biggest task and challenge. SCS tries to work in both official languages and we work on keeping an informative website up to date and attractive. I must admit to carpet bombing Facebook groups when an issue seems important enough, but that is surprisingly ineffective.

SCS is proactive in attending conferences like the Imagine 7 Conference in Toronto this spring. We are one of the sponsors and hope to raise our profile with the humanists who attend. Recently, we have appointed provincial advocates covering 9 out the 10 provinces so that we have direct representation.

These advocates will be contact points for secular humanists who feel that their right to freedom from religion has been compromised. SCS can offer advice and, when appropriate, intervention in these situations. For example, there have been a number of cases where religious groups have managed to get religious materials into public elementary schools in violation of that right.

SCS has intervened successfully to get school board officials to enforce their policies against this.

SCS also has a new SCS Forum for people who contribute more than \$20 annually to the organisation. This will let interested secular humanists participate in guiding SCS policy and priorities.

Listing SCS with web pages like Atheists Enlight Ontario Network (www.atheistsenlight.network) and the Secular Directory (www.Seculardirectory.org) will, hopefully, raise people's awareness of SCS.

Jacobsen: The Secular Connexion Séculière has a number of goals and principles. It does not seek governing powers in the humanist community in Canada. It wants to assist the efforts of Canadian humanists. What are some of the main educational initiatives and social and political supports provided by the Secular Connexion Séculière for the Canadian humanist community?

Thomas: I mentioned the new provincial advocates. These are an addition to SCS' work in teaching secular humanists how to deal with situations in their community and, of course, supporting them in their efforts.

SCS has focused for some time in educating politicians about the right to freedom from religion. Sometimes, this has meant informing local politicians about Supreme Court decisions like the *Simoneau v. Saguenay* decision that clarified that opening prayers at municipal council meetings are unconstitutional. Some of those councils thought the decision applied only to Québec.

Informing the federal government and its bureaucrats of our secular humanist concerns about systemic discrimination and sensitising them to these concerns continues to be a major task. The hard truth is that there is no magic way to do this. Consistent and persistent emailing and writing campaigns are the only truly effective way to work on this.

We are developing Skype and You Tube presentations to bridge the geographical gaps in Canada. Given the cost of travelling across the country, both in time and money, these may become staples in our education and awareness campaign.

SCS is embarking on a new fund raising campaign, albeit a modest one by most standards. Even though SCS is a completely voluntary organisation, we need funding to operate. For example, we are working toward getting media releases published in major media outlets.

Since Canada's so-called free press is actually a vertically integrated capitalist system, no major outlets will publish independently sent news releases. We have to pay a media company to run a campaign for us at a cost of about \$1,500 per campaign.

Jacobsen: I like the new O Canada non-theist and non-sexist lyrics from Secular Connexion Séculière. What was the inspiration for the new lyrics? How can these be implemented throughout the country and replace the lyrics biased towards one grouping—the theists— of the country?

Thomas: I have long been interested in the concept of having a national song that all Canadians can sing and have watched the amazed faces of the American women's hockey team when the whole arena of fans sang it during the gold medal ceremony in Calgary.

As a university student in the 1960s, I was an active participant in a protest that got movie theatres to play O Canada at the beginning of movies instead of God Save the Queen. When Pierre Trudeau proposed the current theist version of the song in English, I actively opposed it and advocated for restoration of "in all of us" into the second line.

The current motivation is simply that non-believers, immigrants, and women should all be able to sing O Canada without being hypocrites. Neither of the official versions allow that. The National Anthems Act of 1980 does not provide for any penalty for singing other words. It simply declares the current words as the official version.

Implementing the new words must have two approaches. One, get as many people aware of and singing the new version as possible, and two, continue to make Senators and MPs aware of the deficiencies of the current version.

To this end, SCS recently sent emails to all Senators encouraging them to consider the new words while they debated a minor change in the words – "all thy sons command" to "all of us command."

Jacobsen: What is your philosophy in running Secular Connexion Séculière?

Thomas: SCS should be the voice of secular humanists speaking to governments and it should be the go-to organisation when secular humanists need support in situations that affect their right to freedom from religion. SCS should focus on eliminating both systemic and social discrimination against non-believers in Canada.

Jacobsen: What are the upcoming initiatives for Secular Connexion Séculière? What are the new battlegrounds, and the most controversial ones? How can they be tackled and won?

Thomas: SCS is broadening its approach to include provincial matters through its provincial advocates and increased intervention in local situations.

SCS is developing a plan to make all school boards across Canada more aware of the right to freedom from religion and to encourage those boards to review and enforce their policies on inclusion and equality to include non-believing children.

The new battlegrounds, or at least the ones we are now ready to tackle, are the provincial governments, school boards, and business that are not aware of or choose to ignore the rights of secular humanists.

O Canada will certainly be a wedge issue since people just assume that it has some kind of special constitutional place in our heritage when, in reality, it has been rewritten several times and doesn't deserve an argumentum ad antiquitatem (appeal to tradition).

In the background will be the struggle to stop the practice of parliamentary committees selecting witnesses to support their own biases. Achieving more openness in this selection process will take some serious lobbying.

Again, there are no magic bullets. While some members of the secular humanist community are frustrated that SCS does not look like the Freedom From Religion Foundation, SCS actually does pretty much the same thing without the money that their 30,000 or so donors provide.

Billboards are effective in motivating non-believers in the social discrimination atmosphere of the US., but probably have much less effect than the letters that the organisation sends to governments—the kind of letters that SCS sends regularly.

Jacobsen: Folks can donate and contact Secular Connexion Séculière. How else can people become involved with Secular Connexion Séculière?

Thomas: SCS is still looking for advocates in Québec, Nunavut, The Northwest Territories and Yukon Territory. For that matter, SCS would like to have advocates in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island rather than covering all the Maritimes from Newfoundland and Labrador.

Secular humanists should report incidents they think are violations of their right to freedom from religion to their provincial advocate (<http://www.secularconnexion.ca/provincial-action/>).

Secular humanists should write their MPs. This is like voting between elections. I can guarantee that religious groups are doing this all the time. One should not expect immediate feedback, but MPs tally emails like votes and every vote on the secular humanist side of an issue helps.

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

Thomas: Well, first of all, thank you for the opportunity to give people an insight into SCS. Merci bien.

I often feel that I am trying to sell abstract ideas to people who do not perceive any immediate threat to themselves.

If they could hear and understand the frustration of Canadian secular humanists whose children have religion imposed on them; of those who live in fear of dismissal if their boss learns of their secular humanist life stance; of people who must feel left out of ceremonies, then perhaps they would be more inclined to step up.

My challenge, regardless of how SCS can do it is to raise awareness and sensitivity to the problem both within the secular humanist community and with the general public and government.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Doug.

Government Crackdown on Ex-Muslims in Malaysia

August 7, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Malaysia's religious departments could take action against a group of Muslims if proven that they have been involved in "atheist activities".

The Malaysian government says it will investigate claims on social media that Muslims attended a recent meeting organised by international group Atheist Republic in Kuala Lumpur. According to the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Dr Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, the government will investigate if there are Muslims who have joined the Kuala Lumpur Atheist Club

According to Asyraf Wajdi, jurisdiction on Islamic faith is under the Syariah Criminal Enactment of each state, while at the Federal Territories level it is under the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department (Jawi). He told reporters after officiating the Indera Mahkota Division Umno Youth Delegates' Conference:

"If it is proven that there are Muslims involved in atheist activities that could affect their faith, the state Islamic religious departments or Jawi could take action. I have asked for Jawi to look into this grave allegation."

The issue first came to light after several Islamist blogsites posted a photo of the group's gathering in Kuala Lumpur.

"The Atheist Republic Consulate of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia held its annual gathering and it was such a blast! Atheists from all walks of life came to meet one another, some for the very first time...each sharing their stories and forming new friendships that hopefully will last a lifetime! We rock!"

News coverage led to a lot of Malaysians also calling for apostates to be fired, jailed, and even beheaded.

In many countries across the world, social rules disallow public displays and conversation about atheism, so the atheist communities can be disparate, which can leave many atheists feeling isolated.

The Atheist Republic ([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [website](#)) is the largest public atheist Facebook page.

The page has more than 1.7 million likes, making it the most popular atheist community on any social network. It uses that platform mostly to post memes that criticise religion – though stresses that it doesn't intend to attack religious people.

The Atheist Republic has [consulates](#) throughout the globe in the major cities of the world.

The Atheist Republic does work within communities through activities, including helping people in the midst of natural disasters and in fundraising, such as the Atheist Republic Metro Manila.

It also helps to bring non-believers together, ensuring that atheists, who tend to be disproportionately demonised, ostracised, and stigmatised, can feel a sense of belonging and community.

Despite the dangers, Atheist Republic continues to help those who leave or want to leave their religion through fundraising, community-building, and providing other help in times of need. Atheist Republic has received numerous comments online.

Founder of Atheist Republic, ex-Muslim and member of Conatus News, Armin Navabi, said, They are now asking for me to be beheaded for simply starting a group where Malaysian atheists can meet each other. Atheist Republic's Malaysian consulate is now being targeted by their government. Our Indonesian consulate is also under attack.

Tell me why is our Manila consulate not under such attacks? It can't be the economy since Indonesia and Malaysia have a higher GDP per capita than the Philippines. It can't be western colonialism.

They are all in the same area. Can it possibly be that Indonesia and Malaysia are Islamic and the Philippines is Christian? Weren't Indonesia and Malaysia supposed to be examples of "moderate" Islamic countries?

In response to the controversy, Rev. Gretta Vosper – a United Church of Canada minister – wrote to Chrystia Freeland, who is Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, urging her to reach out to Malaysia's Prime Minister, Najib Razak. Vosper said, I write with deep concern for atheists and secular humanists in Malaysia.

Recently, whether intentionally or otherwise, one of Malaysia's Government Ministers, Shahidan Kassim, who is reported to be close to the Malaysian Prime Minister, incited extremists to violence against atheists, secular humanists, and ex-Muslims by challenging Malaysians to hunt them down "vehemently" and return them to the Islamic faith.

The statement from the government official was to a photograph of several young people who are members of a Facebook group, The Atheist Republic. They had gathered together to meet one another and build friendships. It was a casual and friendly gathering and, as so often happens when joy is present, photographs were taken and posted to social media.

The founder of the Facebook group is Armin Navabi, copied on this letter. He is a friend and an ex-Muslim who lives in British Columbia. Subsequent to the posting of the photograph, Armin has been the subject of threats, including a call for his beheading. Others have called for the burning alive of the members of The Atheist Republic pictured in the photograph.

In 2013, Bangladesh, despite its status as a secular state, refused to placate extremists calling for the execution of secular humanists, instead choosing to label them atheists and further incite

hatred against them. In 2015, Avijit Roy was murdered by machete-wielding attackers while in Dhaka for a book fair. The editor and publisher of Avijit's book, *The Philosophy of Atheism*, were both subsequently murdered. Avijit's co-author, Raihan Abir, is a good friend.

He was recognised as a refugee by the Canadian government in 2015. He and his family are now helping grow Canada and make it a better place.

The congregation I serve has received permission to bring to Canada as a refugee a Bangladeshi atheist and his family. We chose this family because the father's photograph has been so widely distributed across Bangladesh and elsewhere that he cannot be seen outside of the place he now hides, fearing for his life.

The photograph of the happy gathering of atheists in Malaysia will be used to imperil their lives and to "hunt them down vehemently" as Minister Kassim has urged Malaysian citizens to do. All their lives are now in grave danger.

We cannot stand idly by and watch Malaysia become another Bangladesh, indifferent to or even supportive of the murder of atheists and secular humanists. Canada has had a long and friendly relationship with Malaysia, dating back to the earliest days of that country's founding.

We continue to build on our sixty year history and share our Canadian values within our relationship. Those values include the protection of marginalized groups and advocacy for religious freedoms. The right to refuse religion, the freedom from religion must be just as strongly defended as the right to believe.

I urge you to reach out to Malaysia's Prime Minister, Najib Razak, and remind him of his democratic obligations to protect all Malaysians, regardless of their religious beliefs or lack thereof.

I urge you also to request that he publicly and swiftly denounce the words of Minister Kassim before they are used to spread fear, sanction violence, or lead to the murder of innocent civilians.

The Malaysian Consulate released a long statement tonight explaining the "hidden crisis of ex-Muslims" and the legal form of freedom afforded to religion in the country:

"Many Muslims who have attempted to convert or leave Islam have received death threats. Those who have converted or left Islam, lead a secret double life. The civil court claims that conversions are under the jurisdiction of the [Sharia] courts, but converts contend that as they are no longer Muslim the [Sharia] courts hold no power over them.

Authorities only allow Sunni Islam to be practised, arresting those who stray from those beliefs. Converts taken to be rehabilitated by Islamic authorities are forced to dress and act as Muslims.

If ever there was a phobia that we're experiencing in Malaysia, it's not Islamophobia. Its Apostophobia (fear of apostates). A fear or hateful stand that is usually swept under the carpet since everyone is bent of protecting the sensitivities of Muslims..."

Any crackdown on non-believers in Malaysia will affect its global image as a moderate Muslim-majority country, international non-profit group Atheist Republic said.

Interview with Arifur Rahman on Being an Atheist in Bangladesh

August 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In this interview, Arifur Rahman talks to Scott Douglas Jacobsen about discovering blogging and how this provides freedom of speech to minorities, who would otherwise not be heard. Arifur Rahman also talks about how the Bangladeshi government fails to protect freedom of speech, while atheist and secularist bloggers keep being murdered.

Arifur Rahman is a London-based Bangladeshi atheist, humanist, and secular blogger who has long campaigned for secular values. Arifur had to flee Bangladesh after receiving a number of death threats. Dozens of people were killed in Bangladesh since 2013, under accusations of 'blasphemy'.

This interview has been edited for clarity and readability.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was your moment of political awakening and political activism?

Arifur Rahman: When we started, we didn't think of this as a political activity, at all. Now, we realise that in some way it was, but we didn't see it that way.

The definition of political activism we knew didn't involve what we were doing. To answer your question, how did I get involved? It spontaneously happened. I was in the UK. I was here for the last 12 years. I came here to study. Eventually, I got a job. I stayed back.

While I was here, it was an interesting phenomenon happening across the globe, blogging. People could write their own thoughts, express their own mind, using some sort of internet platform like WordPress or community blogging. To us, that was something new.

Before that, anything we'd see written would be either a newspaper, which was going through an editorial process, or a book. People would reprint some material. It would not be an individual's thoughts. People would write stuff. When we found out about the Internet, we saw an opportunity to write our own thoughts.

We took it on. We began to express our minds. For us, it was a way to connect like-minded people across the globe. I was an expatriate in of like mindthe UK. There are a lot of people like me. Obviously, being outside of Bangladesh, you don't get to meet everybody like you used to in person.

We discovered this digital presence. We discovered that if we get involved with blogging we can express ourselves. We could find like-minded people in Bangladesh and other countries across the globe. What made me start writing and blogging is more of a reaction to what we've seen in our language and in our country: we saw a rise in Islamist narrative spreading.

“What made me start writing and blogging is more of a reaction to what we’ve seen in our language and in our country: we saw a rise in Islamist narrative spreading”

Islamists were using the power of the Internet to spread their ideas. We see it around us now, but we saw it rising 10 years ago. We started protesting. We started countering their narrative, as it should be. There are lots of details surrounding it. In summary, that is the answer to your question.

Jacobsen: As a platform with blogging, people call you bloggers, but, in essence, you are writers. In a way, it is digital protest when other ways aren’t necessarily available without significant, sometimes physical, harm to the writers. What are some more prominent cases that are more tragic of people who have had physical altercations because of their being a Bangladeshi blogger or writer?

Rahman: This physical violence is something very recent in Bangladesh. It only started in the beginning of 2013. Before that, all sorts of threats were often like death threats. Islamists and extremist Muslims, whatever category you put them in, were doing death threats quite regularly.

“What you are writing boils our blood and you are doing it behind the anonymity of the Internet, and we dare you because you would not actually come to meet us in real life, and if we see you in real life, we are going to sort you out.” We used to hear and read this very often.

We never realised that we would ever get really, really seriously hit by that. In early 2013, a colleague of ours, a great satirist, Ahmed Rajib Haider, was murdered in front of his house. Then, we realised something was going to happen.

That was the first murder of that year. In 2013, there were more murders, but the government, as a result of Islamist uprising, took a stance of appeasing Islamist methods or strategies. The government initiated the passing of some laws, which criminalised atheist practices; not atheism *per se*, but vilifying religion or critically talking about religion.

2013 saw a number of brutal murders of atheist and secular bloggers in Bangladesh. Then, 4 of our colleagues were sent to jail. Everything was surrounded by serious media activity by the Islamists because they own a lot of news outlets and television channels.

The general view of the people was that they fell for the narrative that the Islamist media were spreading. In 2015, 2 years later, a Bangladeshi-American citizen who lived in America and who was almost like me, was murdered. I was there on that same day.

I met him an hour before, in person, alive, and we were walking around the book fair that he was visiting. Then, an hour later when we all went to the hospital he was dead, as he was brutally murdered by the Islamists. That was surreal.

Following that, a month later, one of our colleagues was murdered, at least, in Bangladesh. Niloy Chatterjee, among others, was also murdered.

We had other murders too. Non-bloggers, like teachers, were murdered. General activists were murdered as well. Most of the time, after every killing, the media would not come out and denounce these killings.

The media would be more interested in trying to find the reason why they were murdered. They were trying to find out what these murdered people were writing about. They would target any critique of religion and amplify it in the media to make it okay for the murders to happen in the public mind, whether the prophet was “insulted” or otherwise. So, religion somehow allows that sort of recoil.

Jacobsen: You mentioned two phrases before: “extremist Muslims” and “Islamism”. Are these differentiated terms to you?

Rahman: We never used to differentiate between them, at least in Bangladesh. Recently, I have seen all of these killings happening. In July, there was an ISIS-style attack, which took place in a restaurant where almost 14 people were killed in an ISIS-style murder.

Literally a murder; they took over the restaurant. They locked themselves in and slaughtered people. Interestingly, these killings were not of bloggers. These were foreign nationals, like Japanese and Italian expatriates visiting Bangladesh.

This happened inside a diplomatic zone, the most secure area of the country. After that, the government and the whole country seemed to have come to their senses or, at least, pretending to come to their senses.

Obviously, the excuse-giving actions were just starting. They said, “Oh, these are some few bad apples”. So, the Muslims who were very much eager unanimously say bloggers should be killed and should be sorted out. Now, they are distancing themselves from these killers.

Now, they’re saying, “These are Islamists.” We can’t really argue with them because we don’t have much media firepower. They are saying some are Islamists. My definition of an Islamist is:

One who thinks of Islam as a source of law which can be inflicted in political life and structure of a country; whereas, extremist Muslims are the same people, but who would not violently act upon their belief. That’s how I would vaguely differentiate them.

But, given the chance, an extremist Muslim can become an Islamist. An Islamist is an extremist Muslim, by definition, but an extremist Muslim is not always an Islamist. In the core, everybody wants to believe that Islam is a way of life and Islam is something that needs to shape the existing structure of a society, in general.

Jacobsen: What are the numbers that you know – estimated – of those protesting through blogging about their being ex-Muslims or atheists being in Bangladesh, the UK, or elsewhere?

Rahman: We are always the minority.

We are never the majority for a variety of reasons. The predominant religion in the UK is not Islam. Here, Islam itself is a minority. And then, we, apostates and atheists who have an Islamic background, are a minority within a minority.

So, the numbers are not visibly high. However, there are a lot of closeted atheists out there who would not voice their opinion or identify themselves because of fear based on ostracisation, recoil, or being chucked out of family or society.

“There are a lot of closeted atheists out there who would not voice their opinion or identify themselves because of fear based on ostracisation, recoil, or being chucked out of family or society”

In the UK, the situation is like that. In Bangladesh, even though it is predominantly an Islamic or Muslim country, the Islamism we face is a new phenomenon. Bangladesh was not like that, even 30 years ago. It was formed in 1971 by kicking out a relation between Bangladesh and Pakistan.

We separated from Pakistan; we used to be one country. Surprisingly, it was separated by India in-between Pakistan and Bangladesh, which was something weird the British did. We wanted to be a Bengali nation rather than a Muslim nation.

Bengali is a secular identity. It is based on language, culture, literature, etc. It refers to the more human side of things. Pakistan is more Islamic. It is no surprise that it's referred to as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. I don't have to tell you.

You know. Because of global politics and intervention of the United States inside Bangladesh, the situation started to change. Saudi Arabia took an interest of rooting out the cultural element within Bangladesh and tried to terraform Bangladesh into a predominantly Muslim country. In the past 30 years it has become more Islamic.

That is the history of the situation.

Jacobsen: You mentioned a phrase: “minority within a minority.” Those are groups that aren't necessarily considered by the larger populace in general. They might actually be subject to worse discrimination because if you're within a minority that is already discriminated against.

If you're in a minority within a minority, your discrimination might be worse based on ostracisation within that minority, and not being considered even within the mainstream discourse. Does that seem correct to you?

Rahman: The term “minority within a minority,” is a term coined by Maajid Nawaz. He is saying that within the Muslim community there is a bunch of ex-Muslims. I am not originally from the UK.

If somebody is breaking away from a minority community, and that minority community is a religiously identified community, their becoming an atheist (or even their becoming a humanist or identifying as a human), indicated that they're becoming part of the bigger pot.

If we're leaving Islam and become atheists, we are not creating our own community. We are blending into the larger community.

Unfortunately for Maajid Nawaz and people like him, for some reason, they want to keep us. We have even broken away from the minority community. They want to keep us tied to the religious identity, which I don't personally like. Earlier, you were saying about the numbers.

In Bangladesh, there is a huge number of people who are of an atheistic disposition. Unfortunately, because of social pressure and peer pressure, and the same fear of recoil from their family and their immediate social groups (even direct threats of dying), a lot of people are closeted.

When we started our movement, our goal was to create a snowball effect. It worked. We saw a lot of young people declaring themselves as atheists. They were losing their fear of religion. It is not love for their religion that keeps them in the religion.

It is fear. A lot of young people came out of their closet, it was creating a critical mass of atheists. After that, the deaths started.

The killings started to reverse the effect that our actions had. The killers are successful because the media and the killers together started this campaign against us. They were, and still are, quite successful. Fear is embedded in everybody.

Nobody would openly claim that they are atheists. Even if they do, they would be careful to not welcome the wrath. In Bangladesh, there are many atheists, but you can't just report their number through a census.

Jacobsen: Now, since we've covered the terminology and some of the background, and your own becoming politically active, I want to cover some of the content that the writers or bloggers write about, whether based in Bangladesh or elsewhere. What are some of the critical thoughts that they are putting forth about religion in particular?

Rahman: This is a good question. It goes back to the fundamental question: why? Somebody who came from an Islamic background has seen how it works and how in Islam, or in any other religion for that matter, through indoctrination, teaching, and parental teaching, people are guided towards the faith and religion.

We have seen that. We can see that religion is actually crippling us. It is taking away a lot of human values and capabilities. Values and capabilities which a human should be allowed to fulfill and pursue.

In Islam, the beauty of love is not allowed or it is heavily restricted and guided. So, Islam would say, 'You can love your wife, but you cannot fall in love with somebody before you are married.' That is a restrictive direction. Love is not just platonic. Love has no strict definition, no boundaries.

That is defined as a crime. If you fall in love with somebody, if you express your love more than platonically, then you will have committed a sin, in Islamic terms. It is completely inhuman and medieval. We started talking about those things.

That is only the tip of the iceberg. So many injustices happen within this minority community in the UK, or any other pockets of Muslim ghettos throughout the world, because they are autonomous systems. They managed differently than what is in the larger society. We don't know what goes on inside. It is almost like the mafia.

We saw the way the rest of the world is like. If we use a bad analogy of race and colour, we try to be white. It is a bad way to say this. For example, the white Christian culture that has polished and furnished their own culture, has included all of these human elements.

Maybe, they have weaponised them to make the world more capitalist, but that is a different discussion. But it looks like the design was supposed to be that 'you guys are brown people and Muslims, so you should have a less than human life; whereas, the rest of the world can enjoy the beauty of life, express themselves and enjoy music, art, literature, and poetry, and so on.'

Anything that is about people being creative and happy is a no-no in Islam. Their goal 24/7 is to please their God. They are told by their mullahs that this is their purpose. It is to be partly a human.

You can live the life in this world, but your ultimate goal is the afterlife. We saw this, in our terms, as bullshit. We started talking about it. If somebody is maintaining a system, they will not like that sort of divergence.

"Anything that is about people being creative and happy is a no-no in Islam. Their goal 24/7 is to please their God"

Jacobsen: More often, men run the system. Is that correct?

Rahman: Absolutely, all of the time.

Jacobsen: Are the restrictions, therefore, more stringent on women than on the men?

Rahman: Oh! [Laughing] It goes without saying.

Jacobsen: [Laughing]

Rahman: Like the medieval times, Islam is a male-dominated, patriarchal system. In fact, it is so literal in Islam that it reflects in Islamic law. In Islamic law, the so-called Sharia Law, a woman is equal to half of a man. So, that means two women equals one man.

If you ask to give evidence in Islamic law, if you're bringing one male witness, you cannot bring one female witness. You have to bring 2 female witnesses. That is a simplification, but that is the fact.

If you need to sign a deed, or a contract, and if you need a witness, you cannot have one male and one female witness. You need one male and two female witnesses. This principle has a lot of various different manifestations.

For example, another version of this is if a woman gets raped then it is her fault for getting raped because she was not supposed to be going out of her security boundary, which is maintained by the male guardian.

A woman cannot be her own self in the Islamic system, ever. A woman is primarily owned by her father, then when she is ready to be wed, she would be handed over to her husband, who would then literally use her for sexual purposes, for breeding purposes, and for house maintenance purposes.

When she is old, she will become and go under the security boundaries of her son. She cannot be her own person. She is property. Women, in Islam, are just property.

Jacobsen: There's another system called triple talaq, which is, basically, a one-word say of the man to divorce his wife, within Islam.

Rahman: Yes.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more astute critiques of Islamic law that Bangladeshi bloggers have written that you have seen or have written yourself?

Rahman: I never bothered with debunking Islamic law itself. My focus was primarily about modern life and how Islam does not fit into modern life. Because it was a big team, there were some of us writing in that manner.

Some were talking about science. I, primarily, tend to bring the fight in my own daily life. For instance, we talk about how the world should be and how Islam does not fit in the ideal world.

One of the critiques I have done of Islamic law is that it does not follow the correct way a law should be created and accepted, in whoever the subjects are, e.g. the common law the world runs on.

A law should be formed and then should be ratified through some democratic processes. Ideally, the proposal would go through some system like a parliament, depending on the country. Eventually it should go through a process and become accepted as a law and be enforceable.

Islamic law, fortunately or unfortunately, does not follow this. Its stem or root would be the primary book, the Qur'an, then the hadiths or the sayings of Mohammed, and then the rest would be determined by so-called Islamic scholars.

There is an international standard for them and for how an Islamic law can come into effect. It is more of a council-type thing. There is no method. You cannot challenge or question an Islamic law. The choice is always based on the qazi, a representative of the Islamic power culture.

This is how an Islamic law comes into effect. There are other things also. Inside Bangladesh, even though it is not 100% Islamic, there are aspects that govern parts of life. For example, there is a law for family law, as they call it.

That is governed by Islamic sources. When somebody dies, and if they have property, and if they have male and female children, the way that property gets divided is decided by Islamic law. It is not equal. Women always get less than men. It is imbalanced.

“The madrassah education is a bunch of people who don't know how the world works, have zero knowledge of English, history, science, mathematics. All they know is the scripture and different incarnations of it. It is a mullah-production facility.”

We criticise it. To give another example, inside Bangladesh, when the government and people wanted to change the unfair family law, the mullahs, the enforcers, came down to the streets and started protesting. Since they have leverage, they used that leverage to revert the government decision. So, inside Bangladesh, that law is not there.

There is the education system too. We have a triple education system: English system, Bengali system (mainstream), and a huge madrassah education (huge Islamic education). The madrassah education is a bunch of people who don't know how the world works, have zero knowledge of English, history, science, mathematics.

All they know is the scripture and different incarnations of it. The madrassahs only work to build another mullah.

It is a mullah-production facility. The only purpose of a mullah is to lead a prayer in a mosque. That is all they are good for, all they can do. They are not trained for other social or national services.

For example, anybody coming out of a madrassah are not even accepted in the services. There is a huge number of people who are a worthless piece of junk. Bangladesh is a severely densely populated country. Within 6,000 square miles, we have 117,000,000 people.

If you can imagine that, if you can put that in perspective, it would be shocking. It is one of the most densely populated countries. The Bangladeshi government cannot enforce family and birth control measures.

Mullahs come out and say somebody's life is a gift from God. It is almost like the Christian churches saying to not use contraception. Those are a few examples I can think of right now.

Jacobsen: That segues into something personally important: women's rights – international women's rights, empowerment, and general advocacy, when I think about it, many of the cases that you've noted are mostly run by men. Men are the religious leaders.

The madrassahs are training mullahs, who will be men. The restrictions in marriage, social, and personal life are more stringent on women than on men. In that sense, at least within the Muslim community in Bangladesh, and based on what you're saying, international women's rights are not well-respected or implemented in those areas.

Rahman: Interestingly, Bangladesh is trying to keep its image. It is a highly advanced chameleon, at least the system. It has recently become a dictatorship. What I mean is that it is not the military dictatorship that you know.

It used to be a bipartisan system, but now, the majority party has made ties with the majority Islamist party. Thereby, they gained a lot of support and power by supporting Islamists. This highlights the power of the media.

Another Islamic state, Saudi Arabia, owns a lot of media throughout the world, and the power of lobby is not something I need to explain to you. A good example is the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Saudi Arabia is a member. At some point, it was the chairperson of that council. It's an oxymoron that Saudi Arabia can become a chairperson of the Human Rights Council. The reason I say Bangladesh is highly supported by Saudi Arabia is that in the whole world there are only two countries that declared the day King Abdullah died a national mourning day.

One was Bangladesh. The other was the United Kingdom, which is quite unusual. All of the reasons I am saying this is the image of Bangladesh as highly managed by media in the rest of the world.

There was a report recently that said Bangladesh has achieved, among all of the other South Asian countries, better gender equality, as they call it. However, the reality is more and more women are getting raped because the male psychology inside of Bangladesh is predominantly becoming a rapist psychology.

Historically, because Bangladeshi women were not always having to wear the burqa or Islamic veil, they did not have to go to school – not all of them – but Bangladesh did a better job of having women going to school and getting educated. This has all changed.

Violence against women is becoming more prevalent. There are activists inside of Bangladesh who are working for women's rights, such as Sara Hossain, who also works for human rights and women's rights. She is a well-known, renowned lawyer.

In our generation, Marzia Prova, in India, is working on having girls use sanitary napkins, and also to have them used in the garment industry where most of the workers are women. With women being there, they tend to use unhygienic methods for this. That is another good thing, I would say.

Jacobsen: Is your work causing trouble?

Rahman: We are causing trouble. We thought we were causing trouble, but society thinks of us as troublemakers because the majority of the people are actually, in some form or degree, Islamic-minded within our societies. They don't think much. They don't want to think much.

They haven't been taught to think. Most of the people are subject to the Islamic system. We thought the businesses and the modern world might help us free them from the shackles. But we realised the Islamic system has become today's monster because of the help from the bigger system.

That is a revelation for us. No matter how much we try to break free or change, we will always be seen as fringe. Even if we want to become the mainstream, the whole system with enough firepower came down so hard on us that we became completely scrambled and a lot of our friends have to hide, seek asylum in other countries, and deactivate their social network accounts and completely rethink and reshape their life.

So, inside of these communities, and inside non-Bangladeshi communities where Islam is not the main problem, it is even more difficult because of the white Christian or the secular white societies, as I mentioned earlier.

They have been trained to see Muslims or ex-Muslims and other cultures as just brown people rather than different shades and cultures. It is an Islamic way of looking at people, Brushing them with the same Muslim stroke makes things even more difficult. Even if we come out, we are seen as ex-Muslim.

I don't like the term. Some see it as a temporary strategy. That means, even if we left Islam, that hangover still haunts us.

Even if we try, we will still not be able to be a human without any colour of background. The system is still very interested in cutting people up by colour and religion. Even if you just want to become a human, they are still getting a lot of help from the world.

Jacobsen: In a way, you are playing by the religious fundamentalist rules by having the label "ex-Muslim."

Rahman: Correct, correct, I fight with some of the ex-Muslim leaders sometimes because I come from Bangladesh. When we came out of Islam, we became gnostics. Gnostic means atheist. Unfortunately, those in North America and Europe that come out as 'atheists' come out as ex-Muslims, as if the divide is still continuing. I don't know for whose benefit.

Jacobsen: In a way, some of that might reflect fear relative to the country's quality of life, and so on, from reprisals in the country.

Rahman: Right.

Jacobsen: Atheism does not have a positive valence in any country. It might be tactful in one's family, community, and country to label oneself gnostic rather than explicit atheist (though gnostic means atheist).

How did the fundamentalist religious leaders view countries in Western Europe, in North America, compared to their own? What is their perspective there?

You did mention white seculars and white Christians in Western Europe and North America, say, viewing much of the world as simply brown people rather than different colours, different ethnicity, different religions, and so on.

Rahman: The Islamic leaders class them as kafirs, which means non-Muslims. They don't differentiate between America or Europe. To them, they are all kafirs.

When the concept of discussion about these countries comes up, they focus on the social life of a white person, and on their interpretation of how life should be; so they are more focused on drinking, premarital sex, or fornication, and they have a very dim view of alcohol altogether.

They have trained their disciples and subjects' minds towards Western and white people saying that these people are kafirs. These kafirs drink, have sex with people they aren't married with, and these things combined are used to portray a picture of the devil or near-devil.

Islamist groups in Bangladesh have issued a 'Bloggers hit list', which also includes Arifur Rahman

That's the social discussion, but when they obviously blend in with political aspects. The Middle East comes into the narrative. They have killed Muslims in Palestine. They have bombed a lot of countries.

In that discussion, they blame the whole of the Western world in one sentence or container. It doesn't matter if the USA, France, or the UK has bombed. They say, "The Western kafirs have bombed a Muslim country." They simplify things for their subjects. Most of the time, the mullahs are more interested in managing the minds of their subjects.

They aren't interested in a mindful discussion or the content of the debate. Their interest, most of the time, is in how they can present the discussion in front of their subjects so that the subjects respect them because their system is based on authority. The mullahs are in a position of authority. Whatever they say, their subjects consume and adhere to.

Jacobsen: I notice another thing as well, which has had, at least in America and the UK, been thrown around: “Islamophobia.” Of course, there’s anti-Muslim, anti-Christian, anti-atheist bigotry.

Even when individuals critique particular ideas within Islamic doctrine, they will be termed racist. There is a confusion to me between criticising a set of ideas and a group of people. If one critiques a set of ideas, then this becomes a critique of people. Do you notice this?

Rahman: Oh yes, it is part of the system. It is not by chance. It is by design. It is a defence mechanism of the idea itself. A defence mechanism being that it would infect their subjects with the ideology, and then, thereby, multiplying in numbers. When the ideology is under scrutiny, it would hide behind the subjects and would declare that the subjects are being targeted. It is a very smart way of defending itself. Essentially, it is using the subjects as its shield against criticism. So, there’s a parallel narrative between racists and them.

There is a number of uneducated people in the population who are subject to the same type of simplification. There is xenophobia against migrants in the white population, cheating benefits, taking our jobs, and so on. I did the Rubin Report once. In that interview, I said it was my suspicion that the Christian white supremacists may be working behind the screen together with the Islamists to feed the hate between the two silos. My suspicion was that nobody is trying to set the record straight.

Everyone is creating more and more confusion, then gaining political benefit and other benefits from it. Islamists are interested in hiding behind Muslims and then anybody criticising the ideology, they call them Islamophobic.

But, then again there are people like Donald Trump in America or UKIP in the UK, and Pegida in Europe. All of these are white supremacists. They are not worried about Islam. They are more annoyed and critical about other races because their narratives are not defined properly; they blend them together. Muslims become either brown people or brown people become Muslims.

Jacobsen: For a last question, we talked at length of Sharia Law/Islamic Law. In the UK, there are segmented areas with Sharia courts. What are your own thoughts on this? Do you see this as a problem? What are some solutions, if so?

Rahman: It goes back to what I said earlier about it being by design. The government and the state wants to keep the Muslims inside of the ghetto. Maryam Namazie and a few others like her did a petition to repeal or investigate the Sharia courts inside of the UK.

Unfortunately, Theresa May, who is a very Christian person, decided that she is going to investigate and employ the very same people who are behind the Sharia courts and who are proponents of the Sharia courts to investigate the Sharia courts.

As you can see, the government and state have not changed their mindset and are going ahead with their own strategy of empowering the very same people who are not just part of the problem, but they are the problem itself.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Arif.

Clinical Psychology & Secular Therapy with Dr. Caleb W. Lack – Session 1

September 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Caleb W. Lack, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical psychologist, an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Central Oklahoma, and the Director of the Secular Therapist Project. Dr. Lack is the author or editor of six books (most recently Critical Thinking, Science, & Pseudoscience: Why We Can't Trust Our Brains with Jacques Rousseau) and more than 45 scientific publications on obsessive-compulsive disorder, Tourette's Syndrome and tics, technology's use in therapy, and more. He writes the popular Great Plains Skeptic column on skeptick.com and regularly presents nationally and internationally for professionals and the public. Learn more about him [here](#).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What separates clinical psychology from other domains of psychology?

Dr. Caleb W. Lack: Clinical psychology is one of the most applied sub-fields in psychology, as both research and the practice in this area are focused on understanding, preventing, assessing, and treating psychological distress and impairment.

For most clinical psychologists, this means working with people who have cognitive, behavioural, or emotional difficulties, but in further specialities like behavioural medicine or paediatric psychology, it may mean working on one's behaviour or thoughts to help decrease a chronic or acute physical health problem.

The closest other psychology sub-field to clinical psychology is that of counselling psychology.

The primary difference is that clinical psychology tends to focus on more severe, less common psychological problems (such as schizophrenia or obsessive-compulsive disorder) while counselling psychology often is focused on more normative life stressors (i.e. marital problems, stress from typical life changes).

Research foci and methods are also often different. While counselling programs (in the U.S., at least) are starting to have more of a focus on severe issues, the two are still distinct.

Jacobsen: What common terms can readers expect to encounter here? What defines them, with examples, please?

Lack: Two major terms that I will often use are evidence-based psychology (EBP) and cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT). EBP refers to therapies and assessment methods that have a solid grounding in scientific research which has controlled for both placebo effects and regression to the mean.

This means therapies that have had multiple clinical trials published in legitimate, peer-reviewed journals. Such trials will optimally be randomised, placebo controlled, double-blinded trials, which are the gold standard for treatment outcome studies.

Therapies which have lower levels of evidence (single-blinded, wait-list controlled, small N designs, and so on) must have a sufficient amount of studies to be considered EBP. Anecdotes and the number of people who use a particular therapy do not matter, just the evidence showing it actually works.

CBT refers to a wide collection of therapies that focus on changing the way that we think or act in order to change our emotional state. Depending on what a person is struggling with, a therapist using CBT may focus more on thoughts by using techniques such as cognitive restructuring or on behaviour using techniques such as exposure with response prevention.

Most CBTers, though, will work on both cognitions and actions, as well as incorporating relaxation or mindfulness techniques.

CBT is distinct from other types of therapy in several ways, most notably, in that it tends to be briefer and time-limited, as well as highly structured and directive. While the therapeutic relationship is seen as necessary for making change, it is only a starting point and not the focus of therapy.

There are many distinct types of therapy that fall under the umbrella of CBT, including parent-child interaction therapy (PCIT), dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), parent management training (PMT), and many others that are developed for specific problems such as depression, OCD, anorexia, and more.

Jacobsen: Who seem like some of the foundational names and associated theories in the field?

Lack: That depends on your theoretical orientation! As a psychological scientist and cognitive-behavioural therapist, my big list focuses on those who have contributed to a scientifically informed, evidence-based view of human behaviour and the treatment of disruptions to our functioning.

Historically, Lightner Witmer is regarded as the father of clinical psychology, as he coined the term and opened the world's first psychological clinic in 1896, following that up by founding the first journal of clinical psychology.

Other major figures in the early part of the field were those who were first laying out the laws of behaviourism, such as Ivan Pavlov, John B. Watson, and E.L. Thorndike.

In the middle part of the 20th century, researchers like B.F. Skinner had their experimental work turned into clinical applications by people like Joseph Wolpe and Ole Ivar Lovaas who rejected the pseudoscientific underpinnings of most people doing therapy, which were based on psychoanalytic or psychodynamic views of human nature.

In the 1960s, pioneers such as Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck began incorporating new work on social cognition into working with mental health problems, setting the stage for a unified cognitive-behavioural therapy movement that has steadily built increasingly effective therapies for most major mental health issues over the past 50 years.

Over the past 30 years especially, clinical scientists such as Judith Beck, Alan Kazdin, Marsha Linehan, Scott Lilienfeld, David Barlow, Edna Foa, Phillip Kendall and many others have massively improved our understanding of origins and treatment for mental health problems.

Jacobsen: When patients come to secular therapy, what is the respectful, constructive attitude therapists take in working with the patients to help them build the tools to overcome their problems?

Lack: The best advice that I can give anyone when choosing a mental health professional is to see someone who practices evidence-based psychology.

Stated simply, EBP is a guiding principle that means a therapist, whether that person is a psychologist, counsellor, social worker, or psychiatrist, is guided in the treatment and assessment methods they use by the current best practices as defined by scientific evidence.

Unfortunately, many therapists have not been trained in these methods and instead, rely on intuition; what they think has worked well, or what they were trained in, regardless of the evidence or lack thereof for its effectiveness.

Asking a potential therapist what their primary therapeutic orientation is, and how they know the type of therapy they do works, are great ways to find out if a therapist uses EBP.

The second piece of advice is that you need to be sure that your therapist does not attempt to push their own personal value system onto you. While this is both an unethical and inappropriate thing to do, from my own experience with clients, I can tell you that a large number of them report this happening (and it was a major impetus behind the creation of the Secular Therapy Project).

While this does not mean that you need to find a therapist with your exact religious, political, ethnic, and cultural background, it does mean that your therapist needs to respect what your beliefs and values are and recognise that their job as a therapist is not to convert you.

If you find yourself in a situation where this is occurring, I would recommend giving the therapist a warning that you are becoming offended by their actions. If they continue to push their own agenda at the expense of your mental health, a report to their licensing board would be appropriate.

Interview with Cynthia Todd Quam – President of 'End of the Line Humanists'

September 17, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Cynthia Todd Quam is the President and founder of 'End of the Line Humanists', and writer and poet. In this interview she talks with Scott Jacobsen about all things humanism.

Scott Jacobsen: What is your family and personal story – culture, education, and geography?

CTQ: I was raised in a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant family, originally from Pennsylvania. We moved to the Chicago area when I was two. My mother was Presbyterian and involved in the church, though not particularly devout.

My father, a commercial artist, simply ignored religion; he never attended church but never openly disparaged it – I suspect because of the social norms of the time. I'm the elder of two children; my sibling is an evangelical Christian, and has been, more or less, since her teens.

I attended public schools, where I was an introverted child and a reader. Not sure what I wanted to study, I dropped out of state college at nineteen to live on my own and work in downtown Chicago.

I grew sceptical of religion at an early age and spent most of my life as a nonbeliever, except for a brief period in my mid-twenties when, after attending a "Jesus rally", I was "born-again" and identified as a Christian.

Shortly thereafter, I married a Catholic and took classes to join the church, culminating in what they ironically called the "grand slam of sacraments": baptism, first communion and confirmation, all on the same day.

Fortunately, none of that stuck. By my early thirties, I was divorced and finished with religion. I was a single parent for ten years. During that time, I went back to college as an adult, earning a BA in English, and then an MFA in Writing and Literature.

I remarried, and my husband and I adopted two teens internationally, bringing our combined total to six children, who are now all grown. I spent some years teaching college-level English courses, but now devote my time to writing, family, and our humanist group.

I have lived in the Oak Park, IL area, a proudly diverse community with a strong cultural and intellectual base, for the last 20 years.

SJ: When did humanism become self-evidently true to you?

CTQ: I remember at seven or eight being told that people who were not Christian – including those who had never heard of Christ – were going to hell. That didn't seem fair. When I learned there were people of other faiths who in turn thought Christians were sinful and doomed, the whole concept fell apart for me. It was obvious, even at that age, that one religious claim was as subjective as another.

The only part that made sense to me was the Golden Rule, and my personal ethics evolved to approximate that. Years later I found the website for *American Humanist Association*, which supports being “good without a god.” The idea was to live an ethical, compassionate life without religion. That was the “Aha!” moment for me. I understood that I had been a humanist for most of my life.

SJ: You are a writer and poet. What is the typical content and inspiration for the poetry and the writing?

CTQ: When I first began writing poetry, I wrote about my personal life: love won and lost, interpersonal relationships, life experiences. My poetry chapbook, *The Letter Q*, is mostly concerned with those subjects.

I've also always been interested in mysteries, first as a reader and then as a writer, and I've focused some of my work in that direction and continue to find it engaging. I have a mystery novel in progress, and one of my poems in that vein was recently anthologised in the *Nancy Drew Anthology*, Silver Birch Press.

Some of my earlier poetry was about falling away from faith. Later, as the Religious Right began to rise to power, my writing changed to reflect concerns for social justice and the separation of church and state.

My humanism began to inform and inspire my writing, and also the reverse. I began work on a humanist novel, which is still in progress. When I came to the part of the story where my protagonist meets a humanist group, I realised that I had little real experience of that sort.

So, I gathered other like-minded individuals and formed a local organisation, *End of the Line Humanists* (so named for the two elevated train lines that terminate in our town), a chartered chapter of the American Humanist Association.

Not only did it give my writing the depth of actual experience, but in the process, I found my philosophical community. In the end my novel took a back seat to my real-life humanist work. After the 2016 election I, like many others, found I had a lot to say.

I began to write and publish articles on the current political climate, and humanism has given me the context for that work.

SJ: You wrote *An Action List for the (Un)Faithful* on November 29, 2016. You outlined things for activist humanists to do, if they so choose, to get some change going.

Of those listed, what are the top two or three more effective ways to advocate for humanist principles and values “in the immediate wake of Donald Trump’s victory” and for the next four, possibly eight, years?

CTQ: Humanist values are humane values, and so the obvious answer would be to work on social justice issues in whatever ways we can. However, since so many of our rights and values are threatened because of religion, or religion’s alliance with corporate money, it becomes essential to address the source of these attitudes.

Toward that end, I feel that coming out as a nonbeliever is one of the most effective things a humanist can do. Of course, there are times and places, even in this country, when it isn’t safe to do so. But it’s crucial to make ourselves visible on a personal level and insist on inclusion and acceptance.

As the Trump campaign has shown – to unfortunate effect in his case – normalisation actually works. LGBT rights have come a long way in a seemingly short time, but that rapid progress could not be made until gay people were willing to identify themselves, band together and demand that they be heard.

The same was true for the disabled. Only after we are accepted will people listen as we point to the out-sized influence of religion in government and its effects on our social order.

Another way to highlight humanist values is making art. The artistically talented among us need to bring our ethics and philosophy into our work. Very few books, plays, movies, or songs have specifically shown atheists, agnostics, or humanists in a positive light, though that is changing.

If we want to be heard, we need to be acknowledged by and reflected in the culture. Prominent humanist characters and role models will do more toward the acceptance of non-theists than anything we could preach. Some claim that a few seasons of “Will and Grace” did more to further the LGBT cause than all the years of gay activism put together.

SJ: What is the importance of humanism in America at the moment?

CTQ: Humanism shows people a way to be moral without worshipping a deity or participating in religions with draconian social agendas. I feel for younger people who’ve been sold the idea that you’re either religious or you’re sinful.

Popular music is filled with their angst: “it’s where my demons lie,” “don’t want to let you down, but I am hell bound,” “we were born sick, you heard them say it.” Many give up, finding it impossible to think of themselves as honourable people without a religious framework.

Humanism is one answer to that. It allows us to make being decent to one another our most important value.

Also, in what many are calling the “post-truth” era, humanism is one of the few evidence-based life philosophies. It provides a model at a time when a return to evidential truth is essential for the survival of our democracy, our culture and our planet.

SJ: What is the importance of secularism in America at the moment?

CTQ: Secularism is crucial at this moment in history, and in particular danger, as those now in power are desperate to legislate their archaic values before they are further outnumbered. Separation of church and state is the only way to ensure fair representation for all.

It protects both believers and nonbelievers from coercion by institutions which may become more popular or powerful. Secularists fight to ensure our children’s education will be based in fact; that we may follow our own consciences in matters of love, worship, marriage, and reproduction; that the dangers to our environment will be acknowledged and mitigated.

The importance of secularism in the coming years will be as a watchdog to safeguard American values and constitutional rights.

SJ: What social forces might regress the secular humanist movements in the US other than Trump alone?

CTQ: That depends on what you mean by “regress.” Trump’s election and the Republican ascendancy are actually *energising* humanists and other secular groups.

The AHA reported a large bump in donations following the election, and we’ve seen the will to action rise in our own organisation. Young people are increasingly more secular, and their ranks are growing. Religion can’t hold out against this reality forever.

Trump, of course, is not the only problem. Mike Pence is a Christian nationalist who would be even worse for humanists. And with so many branches of state and federal government controlled by conservatives, who – let’s face it – owe their jobs to evangelicals, there is no doubt that secularism will be under wide attack in the coming years.

Congress will try to repeal the Johnson Amendment, allowing churches to endorse candidates from the pulpit and involve themselves in political campaigns. Some state legislatures are already proposing and passing more “religious freedom” laws, allowing businesses and organisations to discriminate against people who don’t share their religious point of view.

I believe we’ll see prominent individuals spotlighted and judged on the basis of whether their religious views correspond to those of fundamentalist Christianity, particularly in upcoming elections. But those are really *political* forces.

The biggest *social* hurdle for humanists is how we are perceived by the public. Recent polls show that Atheists, humanists and non-theists in general are held in lower regard than virtually any other group.

We need to work on visibility, educating the public about ourselves, and improving and normalising our image. We also need a few brave souls to run for office.

SJ: What tasks and responsibilities come with being the founder and current president of the End of the Line Humanists? What is the current size of the ELH?

CTQ: End of the Line Humanists is only three years old. We are a small but growing organisation. As president, I plan activities, convene and lead meetings, write and handle most communications and promotion, book venues, coordinate with other officers, and represent ELH to the public and our parent organisation. Since our officer elections in June of '15, I have helped with some of those tasks.

ELH has 60-70 people who come to our events; about a third of those are dues-paying members. Usual attendance is around 20, more for special events. We have over 150 on our mailing list and over 300 members on our Meetup group, so it seems that many are watching what we are doing and saying, perhaps waiting for the right moment to join us, perhaps just learning and thinking.

We don't have a building and must hold our meetings and events in public spaces. However, we are growing every day and have a stronger core group and more enthusiastic members as we evolve.

SJ: ELH is run out of New West Suburban Chicago. What is the humanist culture like in Chicago? What activities, campaigns, and initiatives take place there through the End of the Line Humanists?

CTQ: The American Humanist Association has two charter chapters and one affiliate chapter in the Chicago area. Each has its own mission and character. We occasionally attend each other's functions and/or work together, as we did when we were host chapters for the national AHA conference that was held in Chicago this past summer.

Being a large metropolitan area, there are chapters of other non-theist groups including American Atheists, Secular Coalition for Illinois, and Freedom from Religion Foundation, to name a few, and a number of independent non-believer Meetups and gatherings.

Job One for our group, which is new and small, has been to build a local humanist community. We hold social events, present speakers, discuss important issues, disseminate information about humanism, and run an annual food and funds drive for the local food pantry.

We volunteer at the annual library book sale and are currently working with the Oak Park Homeless Coalition to set up volunteer nights for our group.

Since the election in November, our membership is more enthusiastic and more inclined toward activism. The timing is right for us. Having built a base of mutual values and trust, we are now ready to engage.

We have formed a humanist action committee to seek out and recommend various issue-based actions that our members can take, both together and individually, in order to make a difference and bring more humanist light to the world.

For example, we will be attending the March for Science in Chicago on April 22nd. We have also put together a speaker series for this spring and summer. Our first event will be a panel discussion held at the Oak Park Public Library on March 26th: *Wide Awake: Progressive Rights Watch for 2017 and Beyond*.

Representatives from local rights and environmental organisations will participate to update us on what is happening in their areas, and what we as citizens can do to safeguard our rights and freedoms. (Details of the event below.)

SJ: You were interviewed in *The Wednesday Journal* too. You told the story of gathering humanists from the local areas such as Forest Park and Oak Park. In becoming more acquainted with humanism, you noted some principles were “tolerance, service to others, making the world a kinder and gentler place.”

Also, the ELH membership are ambivalent about organised religion and not by necessity atheists. Other than these principles and dual-nature (religious or irreligious, inclusive “or”) of humanism, what makes humanism appealing to you?

CTQ: Actually, the ambivalence to organised religion statement came from a former ELH member who was also quoted in the article. I would say her opinion is not the norm for our group members. Identifying as atheist or agnostic is not required to join our organisation; but nearly all of us eschew religious belief.

Humanists by definition are people who believe in living ethical lives *without the supernatural*, and that is pretty clear-cut as we practice it, not really dual-natured. It is actually this clarity that is appealing to me – the idea of good for its own sake, rather than for heavenly reward, or to avoid divine punishment.

Humanism falls under the atheist umbrella; the difference is that the emphasis is on what we believe in rather than what we don't. I find that positive focus inspiring.

SJ: What informs humanist beliefs for other humanists in general based on interactions with them? Some might note ecstatic/transcendental experiences, improved relationships, disillusionment with established religions, or something else.

CTQ: Just like religious believers, humanists have an entire spectrum of reasons to be involved. Many people are, as mentioned, disillusioned with religion; many are simply looking for like-minded individuals or social engagement that doesn't involve a church.

Most find that letting go of the Big Brother aspects of traditional faith gives them substantial relief from guilt and anxiety, and the development of and reliance on their own personal ethics is empowering.

Many more seek a way to contribute to society that is not funnelled through a faith-based organisation. Most humanists tend toward liberalism on social issues, sharing a respect for the planet and the humanity of all the people living on it. In practice, we live for the same things that religious folk do — relationships, family, jobs, hobbies, interests – minus the gods.

And we value many of the same things: good health, freedom, honesty, integrity, kindness, etc. The humanist approach has traditionally been more rational than emotional; however, that is expanding as we explore new ways to express the joys and trials of life within the context of our philosophy.

As to ecstatic experiences: one of the much-debated questions in humanism is if humanists can by definition be “spiritual.” Some say ‘yes’, others ‘no’. Some find transcendence in things like nature, yoga, meditation, or the arts; others strictly refute that any higher state is possible or real.

We may sometimes disagree, but we value open discussion first and foremost.

SJ: Also, what makes humanism seem more right or true than other worldviews to you – arguments and evidence?

CTQ: The humanist value of doing good for its own sake is hard to argue against, even for the religious. Also, I think the fact that one’s intellect and emotions can be in sync really helps. No mental or semantic contortions are necessary to function as a humanist.

We don’t have to disavow obvious realities or twist our lives to follow the often-contradictory rules in one 2,000-year-old book in order to feel secure. As for evidence, we have the evidence of the world: the fossil record, scientific method.

However, in the case of an invisible deity who allegedly created the universe and controls our lives, the burden of proof is clearly on the believers. As we nonbelievers like to say, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

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

CTQ: Those interested in our organisation can email us at beings@ELHumanists.org and ask to be added to our mailing list. Others ways to keep up with our activities are to visit our website at www.ELHumanists.org or join our Meetup or Facebook group.

The best way to get to know us is to come to one of our events. We’re very friendly and always happy to meet and welcome new people.

SJ: Thank you for your time, Cynthia.

Event details:

Wide Awake: Progressive Rights Watch for 2017 and Beyond

A panel discussion on safeguarding our democracy, rights, and environment

Oak Park Public Library

834 Lake St., Oak Park, IL

Veteran's Room

Sunday, March 26th, 1:30 – 4:30 p.m.

Featuring:

Brad Bartels, Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association

Anthony Clark, Suburban Unity Alliance

Terry Grace, Move to Amend

David Holmquist, Citizens' Climate Lobby

Ian Wagreich, American Immigration Council

William Zingrone, Secular Coalition for Illinois

Join us as we discuss issues of critical concern in the coming years. Learn which of our rights, policies and programs are currently vulnerable; what congressional, judicial and executive actions to watch for; and what we as citizens can do to protect our civil liberties.

This is an informative program intended for the general public. The audience will have the opportunity to ask questions and join in the discussion.

This program is sponsored by End of the Line Humanists, not the Oak Park Public Library.

www.ELHumanists.org

beings@ELHumanists.org

Clinical Psychology and Secular Therapy with Dr. Caleb W. Lack – Session 2

October 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Caleb W. Lack, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical psychologist, an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Central Oklahoma, and the Director of the Secular Therapist Project. Dr. Lack is the author or editor of six books (most recently Critical Thinking, Science, & Pseudoscience: Why We Can't Trust Our Brains with Jacques Rousseau) and more than 45 scientific publications on obsessive-compulsive disorder, Tourette's Syndrome and tics, technology's use in therapy, and more. He writes the popular Great Plains Skeptic column on skepticink.com and regularly presents nationally and internationally for professionals and the public. Learn more about him [here](#).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How does evidence-based therapy work?

Dr. Caleb W. Lack: There's not one way that an evidenced-based practice works, because that's more of a general name than a specific model of treatment. Evidence-based therapies are those therapies which have been shown to work via clinical trials that are placebo-controlled, blinded or double-blinded, and that make use of control groups.

Our gold standard trials (randomised, double-blinded, placebo-controlled studies) allow us to have great certainty that any improvement someone makes is due to the treatment itself, and not just placebo effects or regression to the mean (where people would naturally improve over time, regardless of what treatment they do or do not get).

Jacobsen: How does cognitive behavioural therapy work?

Lack: CBT is the broad name for those therapies that attempt to change how we either act or think, in order to change the way we feel, think, and act. Depending on what's bringing a person into therapy, the focus can shift between working on thoughts and cognitions, working on actions, or often by targeting both at once.

The general idea behind these therapies is that many people develop maladaptive ways of thinking about situations or interpreting information, which then changes our behaviour in ways that cause us to feel sad, anxious, fearful, and other negative emotions.

What a good CBTer does is work with clients to identify what behaviours are maintaining or reinforcing these negative emotions and thoughts, and then develops highly specific interventions designed to address both the maladaptive thoughts and behaviours.

To give an example, let's say that someone comes in and reports symptoms typically seen in major depressive disorder, things like a lack of energy, avoidance of previously enjoyable activities, irritability, feelings of sadness, and so on.

A CBTer would work to identify several things. First would be what types of automatic negative thoughts the person was having. These are thoughts that just “pop” into your head, so to speak, and often then cause you feel sadness or worry, even fear.

After identifying these, you could begin work with what we call cognitive restructuring, which is working with the client to have them start questioning the validity of such thoughts, comparing what the thought is to reality.

In doing this, one begins to see that their depression is causing them to have a skewed view of the world, one that doesn't match up with objective reality. At the same time this is happening, you could also begin to target the behaviours which are maintain their depression, and those tend to be escape and avoidance behaviours.

Using what we call behavioural activation, you begin (in a very progressive, careful fashion) to stop avoiding activities and instead engage in them as you did when you weren't depressed.

The therapist then helps the client learn these new skills (cognitive restructuring, behavioural activation) both in session and via between-session assignments and tasks, often referred to as homework.

Before too long, the person will find themselves more easily able to both engage in activities they would have avoided and to catch those depressive thoughts and fight back against them.

Jacobsen: Why do you use these therapies over others?

Lack: For me, as a scientist-practitioner, I place my trust in what works for the treatment of any health problem in repeatable, verifiable, empirical evidence.

Just as I wouldn't want my physician giving me medications that I don't know works, or a surgeon doing an operation that isn't supported by research outcomes, I would hate to be a mental health practitioner who relies on intuition or hypotheses that are unproven when I'm working with someone.

By relying on evidence-based therapies, whether that's CBT, or interpersonal therapy, or applied behavioural analysis, we can provide our clients with the greatest chance of improving and being able to have better lives.

Jacobsen: Will there ever be a point at which a therapist is only needed minimally for the recovery into healthy living of a patient?

Lack: That's a great question. We actually have a fairly good amount of research into both traditional bibliotherapy (taking evidence-based interventions and turning them into self-guided books) and technology-assisted therapy (using computer programs, either alone or in combination with therapy) across the past three decades.

I would summarise it by saying that, if a book or program is based on a good, well-studied therapy, then by following it you can often see notable improvements.

Here are two great lists of such books; software options I recommend include e-couch and Mood Gym, and here is a nice overview of OCD treatment technology. However these improvements tend to be a) less than those seen when working with an actual therapist and b) the greatest among more mild cases of depression, anxiety, and so on.

For those people who have moderate to severe levels of impairment in their lives, seeing a therapist is certainly the first step to take.

Jacobsen: How do you approach the individual needs of the subject as they first enter the room, shake your hand, and sit down – whether literally or metaphorically? Is it more listening and helping them help themselves or assertive engagement in the moment with the tools of the trade, or both, or others, etc.?

Lack: My first rule of working with someone is understanding that people are people, and we are all more similar than we are different. By that, I mean that everyone who comes in wants and deserves certain things from me.

First is that people want a non-judgemental atmosphere, where I don't try to push my personal beliefs or some personal agenda onto them. Second is to be treated as an individual, not as a disorder or a symptom.

I can have two people come into my office with a diagnosis of OCD and they can have very little in common, both in terms of demographics and in terms of what types of obsessions or compulsions they are struggling with.

Good treatment begins with a good case formulation – understanding why this person, right here, has OCD or depression or what have you – and then moves into the application of evidence-based modalities that have been shown to help with those problems.

Third is using methods that are most likely to help achieve a particular goal. A key aspect of being a good provider is what we call “flexibility within fidelity.”

This means that we need to use and stick with those treatments that actually work, while at the same time being able to mold the treatment to the individual, taking into account characteristics like religion or lack thereof, social support, education, developmental level, and much more.

So, although I may use the same overall treatment, like exposure with response prevention for OCD, the application of that treatment may end up looking a bit different depending on who I am working with.

Stay tuned for more from Dr. Caleb Lack!

Q&A with John Perkins on Australian Secularism – Session 1

October 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

John Perkins is the President of the Secular Party of Australia. The party is intended to promote secular humanist ethical principles in Australia as well as advocate for the separation of church and state. Scott interviewed John Perkins in April on the Secular Party of Australia, and the associated ideas, policies, and initiatives. In this educational series, they discuss secularism in Australia.

Scott Jacobsen: What is the current state of secularism in Australia? How does secular culture benefit Australian society?

John Perkins: Secularism exists in Australia in the sense that there is no state religion. However, Australia offers generous benefits and tax concessions to religious organisations. Australia would majorly benefit financially from a more secular culture, whereby religions are not supported, subsidised and promoted by the government.

Currently, billions of dollars per annum are expended supporting religious schools. Religious organisations are tax exempt, costing further billions in government revenue. “Advancing religion” is, of itself, considered a charitable purpose, whether there is a public benefit or not, which is the core problem.

There would be an even greater benefit from a secular culture by creating a more harmonious society without the sectarian divisions which religious ideologies create. These divisions are intensified by religiously segregated schools that promote indoctrination of children into particular religions.

This happens to a much greater extent in Australia than other comparable countries. Enrolments in religious schools, especially Islamic schools, have increased.

Jacobsen: What are some major ongoing threats to secularism’s survival?

Perkins: Paradoxically, as the population has secularised over recent decades, the state has increasingly advanced religious causes.

As government social services have been privatised, religious organisations have been granted supervisory roles. Education is the main area in which secularism is threatened. While chaplains have been introduced at government schools, it is private religious schools where the main threat lies.

Religious schools have proliferated, with government support, and in the case of Islamic schools, with Saudi seed funding. Apart from teaching the standard curriculum, there is no control over what is taught in private religious schools.

Hence a whole generation may pass through these sectarian schools, which may indoctrinate extremist views, without contact with students of other religions. The secular nature of society is thus eroded.

Jacobsen: You want to bring about “true” separation between church and state. What might be the negative outcomes if the culture was largely non-secular – where the church and state separation is nearly non-existent?

Perkins: The negatives can be observed when separation of church and state is absent. A few countries have strong constitutional separation of church and state. In most non-Muslim countries, however, there is little separation and the consequences are mainly in terms of inequity and wastage of economic resources, as in Australia.

In all Muslim majority countries, however, religious law challenges or dominates civil law. Many Muslim countries constitutionally enshrine sharia law, which is the antithesis of secularism. There are strong blasphemy laws in most cases.

Freedom, human rights and democracy are undermined, as civil law is subservient to religion. As a consequence of the rise in global Islamism in recent decades, we have witnessed many countries fall into dysfunction, violent dystopia and failed state status. Few people, however, are able to recognise this as being an inevitable consequence of the loss of secularism, an essential ingredient of modern civilisation.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, John.

Interview with Ibrahim Abdallah – Muslimish Co-Founder

November 2, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Ibrahim Abdallah is the co-founder of Muslimish. In this interview he discusses his stance on religion, how Muslimish facilitates a safe environment for Muslims and ex-Muslims, blasphemy laws and threats to free speech.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your current stance towards religion? How does this impact your personal life?

Ibrahim Abdallah: I think religions are false primitive ideologies and I am against them as a system of governing people in our times.

It affects my life positively. It generally has to lead me to act rationally, guided by scientific information and data; it makes me aware of my primitive origins which help me deal with their pre-wired impulses more efficiently; and above all, it makes me a better father for my children since I don't teach them lies as truth.

Jacobsen: In order to create the support and space for the free exchange of ideas, how does Muslimish facilitate this environment for Muslims and ex-Muslims?

Abdallah: By organising meetings, real meetings, on the ground, where people meet each other. This is not a Facebook group. We meet in person, we practice having a discussion, we find common objectives, and we enjoy having our culture back without all the primitive 'hocus-pocus.'

Meeting intelligent, questioning believers has taught me to focus on people's actions and not what they say they believe. Besides terrorists, no one really believes in a literal interpretation of the Bible or the Quran, everyone else picks and chooses.

Also, Muslim believers meeting ex-Muslim atheists and hearing their issues with the Islamic faith helps to normalise former Muslims in the American-Muslim community. Our hope is that this interaction will lead the entire community towards a more pluralist, pragmatic, rational, and secular approach to its unique problems.

Jacobsen: Why do blasphemy laws need to be abolished? How do they violate human rights?

Abdallah: Muslims in Muslim-majority countries are not allowed to change their religion in direct violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

With that said, blasphemy laws are older than modern laws and what we now understand to be the basic human right of free speech.

Blasphemy laws in Muslim-majority countries are the main reason millions of atheists and secular people are not able to publicly advocate for equal rights for women or even criticise unhealthy or unethical religious behaviour without fear for their freedom and safety.

Jacobsen: How are the irreligious silenced in Muslim-majority countries?

Abdallah: Actual state laws prohibit criticising Islam with punishments ranging from imprisonment, in Egypt; to beheading, in Saudi Arabia. And that is if the person opposes certain aspects of Islam and is not silenced in other ways through family and community pressures.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more egregious penalties for those who are viewed as ‘not ‘Islamic enough,’ insufficiently Muslim, or nonbelievers?

Abdallah: Execution is the most egregious penalty there is.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more promising movements that expand the conversation for ordinary Muslims and ex-Muslims?

Abdallah: There is a group in London called Faith To Faithless, and there are now Muslimish groups in NYC, Detroit, Atlanta, Toronto, and Chicago, with plans to expand to all major US cities.

Jacobsen: What are the larger impediments to the free practice of ordinary Islam and for those who have left Islam to live peacefully without threats to life?

Abdallah: State laws and fear of community terrorism.

Jacobsen: What are the 3-year plans for Muslimish?

Abdallah: We don't have a 3-year plan. We continue to hold meetings, grow our community and strive to strengthen its connections. Our 20-30-year plan is to be a large enough group that can represent the former Muslim and secular Muslim voice in the American-Muslim Community.

We cannot allow terrorist enablers to be the only voice of Muslims in America.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Ibrahim.

Abdallah: Thank you for giving Muslimish a platform.

For more information, visit: <http://www.muslimish.org/>

Over 15,000 Scientists Issue ‘Warning to Humanity’ on Climate Change

November 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

As Earth’s biosphere undergoes its sixth major extinction event, 15,000 scientists have issued a stern warning regarding climate change.

Almost 1900 scientists have signed the second #ScientistsWarningToHumanity Let's hit 5000 by the end of the week: <http://scientistswarning.forestry.oregonstate.edu/>

The signatures were gathered as part of a collective effort to warn humanity about the detrimental effects a warming planet will have on the survivability of the human species. Forestry Professor William Ripple from Oregon State University came across a similar warning from 1992 and decided to relaunch the campaign on its 25th anniversary.

Ripple identified the following trends in ecological decline over the past 25 years, since 1992, including:

- A decline in freshwater availability
- Unsustainable marine fisheries
- Ocean dead zones
- Forest losses
- Dwindling biodiversity
- Climate change
- Population growth

Despite this, efforts by the global community have brought about one positive outcome: There has been a decline in the depletion of the ozone.

The signatures aim to raise awareness about the negative impact our industrial activity is having on our planet.

Scientists around the world are highly concerned about climate change and the effects it will have on societies in the coming years. As more countries industrialise and others develop, there will be an increase in global consumption patterns, which will lead to a heavier global carbon footprint.

Development will bring more people out of poverty and raise living standards, but it will likewise increase carbon emissions, creating a threat for the survival of our species. Science and Technology Professor at Virginia Tech, Eileen Crist, said:

Sometimes people miss ... the most significant event: the rapid rise of the global middle class, which is now more than three billion people in the world and it’s expected, by 2050 or so, to rise to five billion people.

This swelling of the middle class raises the potential for ecological disasters. One of the biggest factors is, simply, population growth. If family sizes were to decrease, and if consumption patterns were to be reduced per person, then the net carbon footprint could be reduced.

Global carbon emissions, however, have risen 62% since the original warning issued in 1992. This has produced profound effects. In many major cities, thousands of people die each year due to respiratory issues brought on by high levels of pollution in the air.

The very young and the very old are the chief victims of air pollution due to physical vulnerability.

Crist went on to say:

We are in the throes of a mass extinction event that is anthropogenic. This is not something we can fix. If we lose 50 to 75 per cent of the species on the planet in this century — which is what scientists are telling us what will occur if we continue to operate as business-as-usual — if this happens, this can not be fixed.

Unpublished

'Bear Prays for Naïve People as Food as Revenge for Climate Change'

April 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to Stephanie Kinsella of CBC News, a Canadian woman, Jessica Andrews, from Ocean View Photography took several pictures of a bear, quite recently. In one particular pose from the photographic set, the bear seems to pray in the front of a cross-shaped object.

It appears to be a "pious pose" by the bear. "I was blown away," the Andrews said. Indeed, it might seem miraculous by all narrow informational accounts. This event took place in Wesleyville, Newfoundland and Labrador, which is in Canada.

It has been a 'hit' image for social media. Andrews just started taking pictures because she was blown away. Andrews arrived home from work and "figured too much time had passed for her to catch a glimpse."

With a binocular view and a quick scan of the area outside her home, "All of a sudden, he was there in the binoculars and I was shocked at first and then I was like, 'Oh my God! What a beautiful animal!'"

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police – or the RCMP – warned the public to keep their distance from the polar bear. The woman from Newfoundland and Labrador, Andrews, was able to acquire about 200 photographs of the polar bear, which is stunning.

She shared on social media: "When I edited them, I saw after that he was by the cross. This is the one that people were commenting on and saying that, 'He's praying,'" Andrews said. "I didn't realize that I had taken the picture until I started looking through them."

Apparently, her main regret was not having the equipment, proper, for a better image of the wild animal. Although Andrews had a favourite, "My favourite one is the one where he is stood up, with his paw on the cross, looking straight at me."

Lifestyles of the Rich and Gamers

April 2, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Business Insider has reported on the huge, and growing, eSports industry in the world. The videogame industry has been growing at a phenomenal pace. Its advertising spending by brands in 2015 was \$197 million alone.

In 2017, 2018, and 2019 the total combined advertising and sponsoring funding is expected to come out to \$440 million, \$622 million, and \$800 million, respectively, or \$1.862 billion. There are popular games such as League of Legends, Call of Duty, Street Fighter, Dota 2, StarCraft 2, Counter Strike, Halo, and others.

This incredible wealth of time, energy and especially monetary input, makes for a new brand of sport. It is called electronic sports, or Eastport, which is new. Investors continue to flock to the video gaming industry and the revenues, based on these projections, will continue to grow into the future.

At the outset of eSports, the video gaming community – the professional community and its viewers – focused on three games: “Counter Strike, Call of Duty, or League of Legends.” Video gamers, professionals of their craft, compete for top spot.

Whether for shooting in Counter Strike, combat combos in Street Fighter, or team strategizing in League of Legends, the stakes can be large, and appear to be increasing with the growth of the industry.

Major sports media outlets are beginning to broadcast some eSports competitions and tournaments including Turner and ESPN. Twitch is one of the main platforms for the broadcasting of the eSports genre.

Amazon purchased the platform in 2014. The live video game streaming platform was followed by YouTube Gaming too because of the market there as well. As shown in the statistics and projections at the outset, the eSports industry is lucrative and “booming.”

Some of the original gaming experiences “started as friends gathering in each other's homes to host LAN parties and play into the night has become an official network of pro gaming tournaments and leagues with legitimate teams,” Business Insider reported, “some of which are even sponsored and have international reach. Organizations such as Denial, AHQ, and MLG have multiple eSports leagues.”

The prize pool, the collected prize money, for the recent Dota 2 tournament came out to \$20 million. In terms of the eSports industry, there was a report that was put out and some of the information was revealing.

For example, it is seen as a commercial opportunity with numerous independent and interrelated streams of revenue with room for growth. The digital streams for the content of eSports are the main drivers for the popularity of eSports.

And there are some opportunities for the traditional “sports franchises” to seize on the provisions of eSports. One possible avenue of big revenue streams might come from the relationship with “virtual and augmented reality firms” and eSports.

With the lucrative industry of video games, the various financial institutions are beginning to perk their heads up and look into the matter. And many of the growth opportunities for the industry are based on "profile, its size, global reach, and demographic, psychographic, and behavioral attributes."

Goldman Sachs estimates the value of the eSports at half of a billion dollars circa 2016 with an expected growth annually of 22% compounded over the next three years, which makes for a \$1 billion industry opportunity.

It is well-known that a 7% growth rate means that in 10 years - if compounded - the growth of the market will be double of the original evaluation. This is often used as a metric – 7% - for the growth of GDP of a nation.

In addition, organizations that are popular such as the NBA will be launching their own league in 2018. About 300 million people watch sports each day with the number growing rapidly, by 2020, the number is expected to be about half of a billion.

Women Plunges 60ft from Catwalk While Taking Selfie

April 7, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

An American woman who was taking a selfie on a bridge has plunged from a bridge. She fell from 60 feet, according to BBC news. The woman is reported to have lost her footing in the Northern California catwalk at which point she plunged and fractured the bone.

Friends and her were walking along the “girders beneath the Foresthill Bridge near Auburn.” The woman fell so hard that the 60ft drop knocked her unconscious. It is noted by police that visitors are warned to keep in the “designated spots.”

The selfie appears to be the main cause for the fall. After being knocked unconscious by the 60ft fall, the woman was found to have hurt her arm and will require surgery for bone fractures.

One of the woman’s friends – the woman who fell, Paul Goncharuk, said, “They were taking a picture on the bridge, and then the big bolts that are holding the beams together, she like stepped on them kind of weirdly and lost balance and fell backwards.”

The woman has been hospitalized and is expected to recover from her injuries. The main injury is to the woman's arm based on fracture to the bone and those will require surgery to be repaired and healed.

Given that the area is off limits, as this Sacramento, California woman violated that rule, the police in the county have reported that individuals that are caught in that area breaking that rule will be arrested.

The police stated it on Facebook as ““You will be cited and or arrested if found in any closed location,” the Placer County Sheriff’s Office said on Facebook.

Grenville Ontario Christian College Controversy

April 7, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

CTV News reported that Grenville Ontario Christian College, former students are going forward and stating that they had undergone severe psychological, physical, and emotional abuse.

Glossy images on the brochures of the college depicted a different environment for the students than the ones that these particular students have come forward stating now. The former students are describing their own experiences.

Outside of the depictions that were appearing to be positive about the elite boarding school, the fact of the matter came out now in the 2010s based on the reports of the former students about the psychological, sexual, and physical abuse experienced in the 1970s, 1980s, and even the 1990s.

“Probably the worst memory, they beat the crap out of me with a desk top to the point where I couldn’t stand, because God told them to do it to me.” Former student Mark Vincent said.

There were reported experiences of public humiliation in addition to the transformation of the purported religion of love into the purported cult of hate, which was the source of much of the psychological, physical, and sexual abuse of the former students that had attended there.

Many of the boys were ousted as "sinful boys" and many of the girls were subjected to public humiliation as a form of psychological torture, but as a separate form of punishment than the boys.

“One thing that stuck out in my mind and I found this particularly disturbing from the very first moment I witnessed it was the public humiliations in the chapel and the dining room where they (the headmaster and teachers) would drag a student onto the stage and that person would be ripped apart, humiliated, shamed in front of the entire student body.” Former student Andrew Hale-Byrne said.

A woman reported that she was subjected to being called the devil incarnate and that in essence women were seen as tempting boys in some way. That is, the women were asserted to have been inviting the sexual attention the boys, which some might see as a form of victim blaming.

Now, with the hindsight and the distance from the childhood abuses, the psychological, physical, and sexual abuses, the former students are now part of a collective effort to bring forth lawsuit coming in at about \$200 million.

The school has actually been associated with a cult in the 1980s and the former students are possibly using this in the case. As it turns out, the former or many of the former Grenville staff are denying the allegations "vigorously."

South Koreans Love Coffee

April 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The South Korea Herald reported that South Koreans drink an average of 500 cups of coffee per year based on a local report that quoted industry sources. The official statistics from the industry stated that coffee consumption was up to 25 billion cups of coffee in last year alone.

It is an increase of 25% based on the statistics from one decade prior. The population of South Korea is about 50 million people.

Coffee markets can vary in size based on instant and brewed coffee, or mixed services. Nonetheless, there has been a 3-fold increase in consumption and sales from "3 trillion won to 8.79 trillion won."

The 8.79 trillion is equivalent to 7.74 billion American dollars and some of the popularity of the drinks has been attributed to international coffee chains entering the market within South Korea. For instance, Starbucks Korea is a Seattle operated coffee giant and mainstay in China now.

It entered into the South Korean Market in 1999, or 18 years ago. The company has reaped in 1.03 trillion won alone. However, the sales for mixed coffee products has fallen to 910 billion won since last year. This is the first time in over a decade.

A Death in History, Saint Methodius of Thessaloniki

April 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

It feels important at times to reflect on people in the past, and their deaths, especially the length of their lives. On April 6, 885, Saint Methodius of Thessaloniki (Greece), "Equal of the Apostles," and Apostle of the Slavs (or slaves) died.

Methodius, born to Greek nobility, had a brother who also became a saint, named Saint Cyril. Both important in the Catholic tradition. He went to study at the University of Constantinople and began to teach philosophy there and became a priest.

After the time there, he was sent with Cyril, his brother, to convert the Jewish Khazars in Russia in 861 on the order/request of the Emperor Michael III. Following this, in 861, he was sent with his brother to convert the Moravians in the language of the Moravians.

When they were sent on their missions by the emperor, as noted before, Methodius and his brother were "considered ideal for this mission as they would need to communicate with the Slavic people the gospel. Their first task was to translate the Bible into the what is now [known as] Old Church Slavonic and in order to do this they created the Glagolitic alphabet."

There was some opposition to this conversion effort by Cyril and Methodius from some of those in the priesthood. Methodius was helpful in the development of the Slavonic language alphabet, which is known as "Cyrillic" to this day.

First there was criticism, and then the Liturgy was approved in the Slavonic language. He evangelised in "Moravia, Bohemia, Pannonia, and Poland" and baptised Saint Ludmilla and Duke Boriwoi.

"Cyril and Methodius wrote the first Slavic Civil code and due to this they are beloved by the nations whose current language is based on the Slavic alphabet."

Oftentimes, he was in trouble with "his use of Slavonic in liturgy, some claiming he preached heresy, but was "repeatedly cleared of charges." Methodius also translated the Bible into the Slavonic languages.

Now there is a church devoted to the memory of Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius in Thessaloniki. It should be noted that the education of Methodius was extensive and included Arabic, Hebrew, Slavic, and Syriac.

In honour of Methodius and Cyril the Church designated, for the two missionaries, that church, which "exists near the Nea Paralia area and several statues in different places in the centre of Thessaloniki depict the two missionaries."

City Harvest Church in Singapore Supreme Court Appeals

April 15, 2017
Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to The Straits Times, there have been hundreds of cases filed to the Singapore Supreme Court in the last 10 years. Only a small number reached the “highest court in Singapore as a criminal reference.”

During the years 2007 to 2017, there were 21 criminal references filed to the Court of Appeal. This is based on figures from The Straits Times. No further criminal references having been made in the previous two years.

“The rare procedure was in the spotlight on Monday after the Attorney-General's Chambers filed a criminal reference, days after the High Court's ruling on the six City Harvest Church leaders.”

There were 526 in 2016 filed at the Supreme Court in 2016 and 509 in 2015. The charges against the leaders of City Harvest Church were brought down when 2 of 3 judges made the ruling “that they did not commit criminal breach of trust as an ‘agent’.”

An “agent,” in this legal definition, is a term used by “the court connoted to be someone in a professional capacity.”

“Lawyer Lau Kah Hee, who specialises in commercial dispute resolution, stressed that a criminal reference is not a further appeal from a High Court's decision.”

That is, it should not be seen as an abuse of the system as a “backdoor appeal,” according to Hee. The State Court cases are heard and if deemed worthy sent to the High Court for final appeal.

So the cases heard for the City Harvest Church are at the High Court as the final appeal. It is like a filtration process for the various types of appeals, where those that go to the Supreme Court require a first-hearing in the State Courts.

Hee said, "Factual issues are not in play, since a criminal reference is not the same as a criminal appeal."

“The judges, in a criminal reference, have the power to quash the conviction, make no orders to the acquittal or conviction, or order a retrial by the lower court. The decision of the Court of Appeal in a criminal reference is final.”

Ex-Leader of South Korea, Park Geun-hye, in Prison for Third Week

April 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Korean Herald stated that the “Former President Park Geun-hye enjoyed special treatment at a detention center.”

This means the ability to not have to be inside of the prison cell. She was charged with bribery and is now in jail based on local media reportage. Geun-hye is in the Seoul Detention Center. It is south of the capital city of Seoul.

The cell for Geun-hye is 11 square meters and can hold up to 6 inmates. “The cell features a foldable mattress on the floor, a television and a toilet with a cold-water sink,” the South Korea Herald said.

However, there was a problem. The cell came without wallpaper. It looked grubby. So there needed to be wallpaper placed inside of the cell for Geun-hye based on a report from No Cut News.

The Seoul Detention Center staff attended to this want – or “demand” – of Geun-hye and permitted her to stay in the office rooms for night sift workers for 2 days.

“In another seemingly overly-generous gesture toward the prominent figure, the facility’s response is likely to trigger controversy as she had already been allocated with one of the larger cells to herself given her status.”

As with all inmates at the Seoul Detention Center, there is an allowance for use of the “communal hot bathing facilities in the detention building” twice per week. It is the start of the 3rd week of detention for the previous leader of South Korea.

Park Geun-hye was taken into custody over the bribery charges on March 31. It was reported as a “dramatic fall for someone who spent years living at the country’s sprawling presidential palace.”

“Her detention came after the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment motion against Park on March 10,” the South Korea Herald said, “for allegedly colluding with her jailed friend Choi Soon-sil in a bribery scheme.”

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