



CONATUS NEWS:
VOLUME X

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IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

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

in-sightjournal.com

First published in parts by Conatus News,
Not a member of In-Sight Publishing, 2016-2018
This edition published in 2018

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Published in Canada by In-Sight Publishing, British Columbia, Canada, 2018
Distributed by In-Sight Publishing, Langley, British Columbia, Canada

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Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

No official catalogue record for this book.

Jacobsen, Scott Douglas, Author

Conatus News: Volume X/Scott Douglas Jacobsen

pages cm

Includes bibliographic references, footnotes, and reference style listing.

In-Sight Publishing, Langley, British Columbia, Canada

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

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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Acknowledgements

I express gratitude to Benjamin David, Benedict Nicholson, Kevin Jenco, Dominic Lauren, and the editing team at Conatus News, and Nicola Young Jackson, Pat O'Brien, Reba Boyd Wooden, Eric Adriaans, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Roslyn Mould, Stephanie Guttormson, Alejandro Borgo, Tara Abhasakun, Kate Smurthwaite, James Underdown, Maryam Namazie, Tehmina Kazi, Rebecca Hale, Dana L. Morganroth, Angelos Sofocleous, Emile Yusupoff, Terry Murray, Pamela Machado, Nicola Young Jackson, Terry Sanderson, Anthony Grayling, Stephen Law, Nicole Orr, Jim Al-Khalili, Ali Raza, Linda LaScola, Bob Churchill, Jennifer C. Gutierrez, Vic Wang, Marieke Prien, Caleb W. Lack, Dr. Saladdin Ahmed, Sikivu Hutchinson, Haras Rafiq, Scott Blair, Andrew Copson, Matthew Rothschild, Nicole Orr, Adalet Garmiany, Roy Speckhardt, Anders Stjernholm, Tyler Owen, René Hartmann, Shari Allwood, Margaret Mitchell, Mikey Weinstein, Emmanuel Donate, Rob Boston, David Niose, and Marieme Helie Lucas, and Alida Thomas, Danielle Erika Hill, Ashton P. Woods, Waleed Al-Husseini, Ariel Pontes, James Croft, John Perkins, Jason Frye, Kim Gibson, Dr. Alexander Douglas, Amanda Poppei, Wade Kaardal, Simon Ørregaard, Marie Alena Castle, Julia Julstrom-Agoyo, Pamela Machado, Armin Navabi, Tim Whitmarsh, Andy Ngo, Hugh Taft-Morales, Yasmeen, Sven van de Wetering, Marie Alena Castle, Phil Zuckerman, Waleed Al-Husseini, Paul Knupp, James Adeyinka Shorungbe, Houzan Mahmoud, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka, Alexander Douglas, Dan Fisher, Sarah Mills, Carline Klijnman, Scott Davies, Lucas Lynch, Beatrice Louis (Linda Louis), Rebecca S. Markert, Dan Barker, Maija Ahrentløv and Tim Ahrentløv, Andrew Seidel, Dave McKee, Daniela Wakonigg, Dr. Darrel Ray, Andrew Copson, Faisal Saeed Al Mutar, Mina Ahadi, Seyran Ateş, Trabelsi Zeineb, Amardeo Sarma, PJ Slinger, Waleed Al-Husseini, Frank Mols, Stephanie Wimmers, and Tom McLeish. It seems like a valuable initiative to me. I feel honored to contribute to, participate in, interview and write for, and see Conatus News grow with each passing week.

Scott

Interview with David Rand, President of Atheist Freethinkers

August 3, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

David Rand is the president of Atheist Freethinkers. He participates in a Board of Directors and several affiliate coalitions including *Rassemblement pour la laïcité*(Quebec), *Atheist Alliance International* (AAI) and *International Association of Freethought* (IAFT). Here is his story. Edited for clarity.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: To begin, do you come from an atheist family?

David Rand: No, I grew up in a devout Christian environment. There was a certain liberal aspect to my parents' religiosity, but they participated religiously (pun intended!) in their church and donated regularly to it and to other religious organisations (for example the Bible Society). My mother's side of the family was also staunchly monarchist. I rejected Christianity in my early teenage years. In my early twenties I realised that I was an atheist and had been for many years. I also realised that I was against the monarchy, although that issue was less significant.

Jacobsen: What sort of work were you engaged with prior to your involvement in professional atheism? Did it help with your current work?

Rand: Well, I would not call what I do "professional atheism!" I don't get paid for it and never did (and surely never will). But I do engage fully in movements to criticise religious obscurantism and to fight against its influence in society, especially its political influence. In the 1970s and 1980s I was very active in the gay rights movement, first in Vancouver and then in Montreal. That was where I learned about political activism. There was, in fact, a clear link between my gay activism and my atheist activism: in the 1990s I was very concerned about the founding of various gay Christian churches and groups. Talk about an oxymoron: "gay Christian!" So I wrote an article about the dangers of embracing the ideology of one's oppressor, and it was published in the American magazine *Free Inquiry*. Thereafter, I started an atheist web site (now located at www.davidrand.ca), and that was the beginning of my work for atheism and secularism. Subsequently, I was involved in various organisations, in particular several years on the board of a Quebec secular organisation. Then in 2010-2011 I helped found *Atheist Freethinkers*.

Jacobsen: Now you're the president of the Atheist Freethinkers. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

Rand: It involves managing, in collaboration with our Board of Directors, our internet presence (two web sites, discussion groups for members, Facebook pages and groups, Twitter, etc.) and organising our monthly meetings. My responsibilities involve a lot of reading and writing – blogs, speeches, press releases, position papers, etc. Most of what we do is bilingual, French and English. *Atheist Freethinkers* is affiliated with several coalitions including *Rassemblement pour la laïcité* (here in Quebec), *Atheist Alliance International* (AAI) and *International Association of Freethought* (IAFT). I am also a spokesperson for the IAFT. I occasionally travel to speak at various events: for example, in March/April of 2017 I spoke at *Days of Atheism* in Warsaw and in September I will be speaking at an IAFT congress in Paris.

Jacobsen: What are the perennial threats to atheists? Who have been unexpected allies?

Rand: Undoubtedly the greatest threat for atheists is politicised religion, when religion obtains political power. This is most obvious when that power is exercised by Islamists, who promote a medieval theocratic totalitarianism. However political Christianity remains very dangerous, for example in sub-Saharan Africa, the United States and Poland. The current pope is a silver-tongued obscurantist. I recently stumbled upon a caricature comparing him with a pile of excrement sprinkled with brightly-coloured sugary confection. I think that image expresses very well what the Vatican is all about.

I must also point out that one of the greatest threats to secularism (and hence indirectly threatening atheists) in the current political climate is the so-called “regressive left” (I am not satisfied with that term, but have yet to find a better one) which is ferociously anti-secular – so much so that regressive “leftists” tend to demonise secularism by falsely associating it with racism and xenophobia.

As for unexpected allies (although this is not completely unexpected) persecuted religious minorities are potential allies. A year and a half ago I spoke at an interfaith event organised by Ahmadiyya Muslims. The theme of my talk was the complete vacuity of religious morality or “divine command theory” as it is called formally. Of course the Ahmadiyya (who are sometimes horribly persecuted by Islamists) have a completely different worldview from ours at AFT, but they welcomed our participation in a very friendly manner and did nothing to prevent us from expressing our point of view. On the other hand, I would question their support for secularism.

As a Montrealer, I must also mention that there is strong support for secularism among Quebec nationalists and so they are, or should be, allies of atheists. However, the demonization of Quebec nationalism (mainly by Canadian nationalists) is a serious impediment to that alliance.

Jacobsen: Your blog covers a variety of topics: atheism, LGBT, women, Islam and Islamism, Canadian multiculturalism, and so on. What guides the selection of topics? Can people become involved with the blog? If so, how can they help out?

Rand: The selection of topics is guided by our basic concerns as atheists (as expressed for example in our Manifesto, www.atheology.ca/manifesto/), by current events (for example the niqab or Motion M-103) and by whatever the individual author would like to write about. Our members are encouraged to write for the AFT blog. I have written many blog entries, but so have other members of AFT or signers of our Manifesto. (I also have a personal blog at blog.davidrand.ca)

Jacobsen: What are some of the main educational initiatives, and social and political supports, provided by Atheist Freethinkers for the atheist community?

Rand: On the educational front, I would say that our greatest strength is our criticism of communitarianism (a.k.a. multiculturalism) and its extremely deleterious effect on any movement towards secularisation. Being based in Montreal, we are acutely aware of this dynamic. The infamous “two solitudes” must be taken into account in order to understand the fight for secularism in Canada.

There are many in Canada outside Quebec who would call themselves secularists but whom I would call pseudo-secularists. If you do not question communitarianism, if you instead promote so-called “open secularism,” if you fail to recognise the importance of republican secularism, then you are on the wrong side of the fence because you are facilitating religious privilege.

There are obvious measures we can all agree on, such as removing “supremacy of God” from the preamble to the 1982 Constitution, repealing the law against “Blasphemous Libel” and eliminating all financial exemptions and privileges for religious organisations. However, in my opinion, a complete and consistent secularisation of Canadian federal legislation would necessarily involve at least the following measures as well:

Repeal of the religious exception in the Hate Propaganda legislation.

Elimination of line 17(1)b) of the Citizenship Regulations.

Repudiation of Motion M-103 and any other motion against so-called “Islamophobia.”

Banning all religious accommodations (e.g. the Sikh head covering in the RMCP).

Repeal, or at least substantial modification, of the Multiculturalism Act.

Banning religious symbols in public services, including those worn by public servants while on duty (but not by citizens using those services).

Banning face-coverings everywhere in public services (both employees and users).

Jacobsen: How can atheists better mobilise politically and socially in societal and communal life, and emotionally and intellectually in individual life?

Rand: A complex and very open-ended question. If atheists constitute a community, it is a very heterogeneous one, if a community at all. I remember an article from a couple of years ago where the author promoted the idea of atheists as an “ethnic group.” I am totally opposed to such an approach. We are not just another religious or ethnic group. We must not fall even further into the multiculturalist trap, increasingly essentialising people’s religious affiliation, dividing society up further into clienteles, even more easily manipulated by unscrupulous politicians. If we followed that route, then atheism would, paradoxically, become just another religious identity.

Rather, we must organise and unite on issues we share with other atheists: that is, an uncompromising criticism of religion, recognising that supernatural religious beliefs are utter nonsense, unworthy of our respect. Just as believers have a right to practice their religion, we non-believers have every right to live without having others’ beliefs shoved down our throats. But we must also ally with others who may not identify as atheists in order to promote secularism, which means that believers too would be protected from the religious excesses of their co-religionists and of those who follow other religions.

It would also help to stop being so timid about recognising what atheism and secularism have in common. They are different concepts, but they share one major aspect: both involve a refusal to accept divine authority. The atheist makes his or her moral decisions without reference to a god. Similarly, the secular state must base none of its laws or procedures on so-called divine command. That does not in any way prevent religious believers, as individuals, from participating fully.

Finally, I’m not sure what you mean by “emotionally,” but intellectually we must continue (and here is some good news) what atheists have already undertaken with enthusiasm: the analysis, criticism and deconstruction of religious beliefs, dogmas and practices in order to become stronger in our resistance to the ever-present and sometimes overwhelming religious propaganda that floods our society. But that criticism must not stop with Christianity. We must be just as

critical of other religions such as Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism, etc., which are minority religions in Canada.

Jacobsen: What are the upcoming initiatives for Atheist Freethinkers? What are the new battlegrounds, and the most controversial ones? How can they be tackled and eventually won?

Rand: Our priorities are; I think:

continuing and deepening our criticism of communitarianism.

rejecting modern forms of old restrictions on freedom of expression such as so-called “Islamophobia” which is the new recycled blasphemy.

Both are controversial, especially the first, at least in Canada. The initiatives would involve:

Educational work to explain to atheists (and to the general public) the importance of the above priorities, and

On the federal level, working for the legislative changes that I listed in a previous answer, starting with repeal of the religious exception in the Hate Propaganda law.

On the provincial (Quebec) level, working for numbers 6 and 7 of the legislative changes listed above, i.e. banning religious symbols and face-coverings in the public service, and eliminating the religious component of Quebec’s Ethics and Religious Culture programme, which imposes compulsory religious instruction on children throughout elementary and secondary school.

And, as always, the money aspect must not be neglected: opposing all financial privileges enjoyed by churches and other religious organisations.

Jacobsen: People can look at the Atheist Manifesto and sign it, and can become members of Atheist Freethinkers, and even can donate. How else can people become involved with Atheist Freethinkers?

Rand: They can:

attend our monthly meet-ups (www.meetup.com/lpa-aft/). For the time being they are held only in Montreal, but we would like to offer them in other centres.

join our Facebook group (www.facebook.com/groups/librespenseursathees/).

subscribe to our Twitter feed (twitter.com/lpaaft or twitter.com/aftlpa)

consult one of our web sites (www.atheology.ca or www.atheologie.ca)

consult one of our Facebook pages

(www.facebook.com/atheology.ca or www.facebook.com/lpa.aft)

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

Rand: The immediate future looks bleak. Religions are enjoying a comeback, thanks, in part at least, to the so-called regressive left. We must persevere. We also need to analyse the role of neo-liberalism in this sorry situation.

But in the longer term I am more optimistic. I think the current outbreak of religious fanaticism is part of the death throes of religion. The treachery of religious institutions and the utter vacuity of the extravagant nonsense they promote are becoming increasingly obvious to more and more

people. Religious believers, including Muslims, are abandoning their faith, sometimes quietly (because they fear reprisals) and sometimes more openly. But sooner or later, that house of cards must crumble.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, David.

Clinical Psychology and Secular Therapy with Dr. Caleb W. Lack – Session 3

December 23, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Caleb W. Lack Ph.D., Professor at the University of Central Oklahoma, speaks about clinical psychology and the misconceptions about secular therapy.

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 about clinical psychology and secular therapy. Learn more about him [here](#).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are common misunderstandings about secular therapy?

Dr. Caleb Lack: I think that many people, especially the religious, would hear “secular therapy” and think that it would only be something that a non-believer would engage in. In fact, all of the evidence-based therapies that we have for mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and the like are “secular”, or developed without the use of supposedly supernatural aids and interventions. Almost all therapists who are religious (as opposed to “religious therapists”) use secular therapy in their practice. In other words, they are not using prayer, or exorcism, or invoking some religious concepts to heal a person of their mental health problems. Instead, they are using our “secular” therapy techniques.

Jacobsen: Is secular therapy more effective than prayer, ritual, attendance in places of worship, AA, and 12-step for recovery and improvement of general wellbeing?

Lack: That's a good question that's difficult to answer. We know, for instance, that regular meditative practices can provide a huge boost to well-being, as can regular social interactions. If your meditative practice is prayer and your regular social interactions are church-based, there's nothing wrong with that at all. You're likely to be healthier than someone who doesn't do those things. However, you're not more likely to be healthier than someone who regularly engages in mindfulness exercises and engages in regular outings with their bowling club or board game playing friends. In other words, it's the type of things you do (e.g., positive social interactions), not whether they are secular or religious in nature.

On the topic of AA and 12-step programs, it's a bit easier to answer, and I actually did a debate on this subject last month. Overall, our most evidence-based treatments for substance abuse and other problematic compulsive behaviour (which is what AA and the 12-steps focus on) are all secular in nature. Self-help group-based programs like SMART Recovery or Moderation Management don't use any religious overtones or practices. Despite this, they show much better outcomes than AA, especially when paired with individualised therapy such as motivational interviewing or cognitive-behavioural therapy.

Jacobsen: How does clinical psychology provide complementary tools for secular therapy, assuming different domains given different titles for them?

Lack: Related to what I mentioned before, all evidence-based therapies are secular in nature. That doesn't mean that clinical psychologists like myself who aren't religious can't work with people who are, or that clinical psychologists who are religious don't work with those who are not. There's a significant amount of research taking place that looks at how we can adapt particular evidence-based therapies to those of particular faiths. I'm actually leading a clinical round table at a major national conference later this year on that topic, and we have panellists speaking about how CBT can be most effectively used with patients who are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and non-religious.

What our clinical outcome research does is inform us what the most effective techniques are to help a person who has a particular form of psychopathology or a specific behavioural, cognitive, or emotional difficulty. Once we have those basic understandings down, we can then work on developing modifications of those for other groups, whether by age, developmental level, racial/ethnic background, or religious belief.

Jacobsen: If someone believes in a god, does any evidence exist to support better mental well-being in the clinical psychology literature? If any, is this outweighed by any opposing literature? Or is the evidence pretty neutral for belief or non-belief?

Lack: There's actually large amounts of literature examining this very issue! Most of the early work appeared to show that being religious was a protective factor, meaning that it helped your overall well-being to stay higher (like [this major review article](#)). However, more recent work has dug deeper into this area, and has found that it's not actually the "religious belief" that's providing this boost. Instead, newer research has [found no differences between the religious and non-religious](#). Other studies that have compared mental health outcomes point to [the strength of a belief system](#), regardless of if it is religious or non-religious, as the best predictor of positive mental health. It actually appears that the positive effects of religious belief in early studies is [due to social engagement and being in supportive groups](#), and has nothing to do with religious belief, but instead with the trappings that often accompany it. So, if you're an atheist who has a supportive community you belong to, you're just as well off as a religious person in the same. If you don't have that, you need it! That's why the work that larger national groups such as [Recovering from Religion, Oasis](#), or [Sunday Assembly](#) and local organisations (such as [Oklahoma Atheists](#), where I am) is so important, as it helps build those communities.

Jacobsen: What is the consensus view in the clinical psychology community of those who believe in ghosts and angels, and prayer and speaking in tongues? Are these viewed as coping mechanisms for stress and anxiety, as delusions, as core to mental well-being, and so on?

Lack: Generally speaking, a key component of any definition of someone who is suffering from a mental disorder or psychopathology is that the symptoms they are experiencing have to be causing them distress, or impairing their ability to function in their environment. So, if someone believes in intercessory prayer, speaks in tongues, or other things and it's not causing them problems in their environment, or emotional or cognitive distress, most mental health professionals would say "Okay, that's fine. Come back if they are making you feel scared or worried, or causing conflicts with the people around you."

I will say, though, that some new research coming out of my lab indicates that paranormal beliefs outside of the “typical religious belief” spectrum is related to higher levels of mental health problems, although it’s someone we need to do much more research on.

2017 In Review: Shrinking Space for Freedom of Thought

January 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

With free thought under threat, the space for discourse itself seems to be becoming smaller

Bob Churchill, Communications Director for The International Humanist and Ethical Union speak to Conatus News about the 2017 Freedom of Thought Report.

Bob Churchill is the Communications Director for [The International Humanist and Ethical Union \(IHEU\)](#), Editor of [The Free Thought Report](#). He is also a trustee of [Conway Hall Ethical Society](#) and a trustee of the [Karen Woo Foundation](#).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The new *Freedom of Thought Report (2017)* by the IHEU, looking at discrimination against the non-religious on a global scale... Let's talk about it: What big changes took place since the previous report?

Bob Churchill: There's lots of new information about specific cases. In the [Editorial Introduction](#) we focus on seven key incidents which occurred since the previous year's edition. This includes murders of humanists or atheists in Pakistan, India and the Maldives, and a series of anti-atheist pronouncements by government officials in Malaysia, also a new upsurge in 'blasphemy' hysteria again in Pakistan which saw several secular activists forcibly 'disappeared' and men accused of running atheist social media channels arrested on 'blasphemy' charges. And there were cases in Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Mauritania in which men who have faced 'apostasy' charges have been faced with possible death sentences for being atheists.

In Sudan an extremely brave atheist activist Mohamed Al-Dosogy was forcibly subjected to a psychiatric test before being released, in Saudi a death sentence for apostasy against Ahmad Al-Shamri was upheld, and in Mauritania a writer called Mohamed Cheikh Ould M'kheitir, who's been jailed since 2014 for writing about religious hypocrisy around caste discrimination, looked set to be released in November after his sentence was downgraded to two years, which he's already served, but no – it appears the prosecution is demanding yet another re-trial.

As I say, this is all in the editorial, and there's more information on specific cases in the [country entry for each place](#). Our ratings system for countries is based on big issues, like whether a specific kind of law exists, or whether a particular kind of discrimination occurs, therefore the ratings themselves don't change radically from year to year as you can imagine. But still, there were a few changes in 2017! Most notably was a positive change which is that Denmark scrapped its 'blasphemy' law, which in that country had a potential prison term, which we consider a 'serious' problem! So the rating for Denmark in the category of free expression fell from 'serious' to one place lower. That's happened in a few countries over the past few years including Malta and Iceland.

Jacobsen: What countries remain the worst for the non-religious? What countries left that category?

Churchill: No country left that category this year. We apply boundary conditions to each country across four thematic areas, and each boundary condition has a different severity level.

The worst severity level is ‘grave violations’. In most cases, if a country has a boundary condition in one thematic area at the ‘grave violations’ level then it probably meets another few boundary conditions at the same level, so it’s going to be rare that a country moves out of the position of having at least one of the worst conditions. That would require, for example, a country which currently has a death-for-apostasy law getting rid of it, or a country which currently derives all its laws from religious edicts to stop doing that, and also to stop doing whatever else it’s doing at the same severity level.

In fact, in the six years we’ve been running the report I don’t think any country which met any of our most severe boundary conditions has lost any of those worst conditions. I’d interpret ‘the countries which remain the worst’ as any which meet one or more conditions at the ‘grave violations’ level, which is – if I just consult my list here: Afghanistan, China, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Comoros, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Morocco, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, United Arab Emirates, Yemen.

Jacobsen: What countries remain the best for the non-religious?

Churchill: Very few countries have a clear slate across all four thematic areas of the report, but they do exist: Belgium, Netherlands and Taiwan. Now this isn’t to say that it’s impossible for an atheist to be bullied or persecuted in those countries, of course it is. And we know for example there are some problems with the treatment of atheists living as refugees or seeking asylum in otherwise well-performing European countries, where essentially the lack of a litmus test for atheism is leading authorities to discount the concerns of atheist asylum seekers, or for example putting liberal, non-religious people in detention centers with sometimes very conservative and threatening fellow refugees. That’s a problem we are concerned about. But formally speaking Belgium and the Netherlands in Europe and also Taiwan do very well.

It’s interesting to note that, maybe contrary to the expectations of some, Belgium and Netherlands both have what is called ‘pillar model’ secularism, and Taiwan is similar, although that’s a country entry that we need to expand on. The point is, rather than church-state separation as such, there’s a promotion of equality and state neutrality between religious or ‘lifestance’ groups in these countries, including humanists. So if you’re a separationist-type secularist then this isn’t wholly satisfactory, but in terms of non-discrimination which is what our report focuses on then their equality of treatment is very positive. Interestingly, Norway was heading in that direction, but very recently there’s talk of a new law which would privilege the Church of Norway including giving them a larger slice of public funding than other religious and other lifestance groups, so that’s a rating to watch that could slip back next year!

Jacobsen: What positives and negatives come from the report in the big picture?

Churchill: The most serious concern for any humanist or progressive should be that we live on a planet where over 80 countries have some ‘serious’ or worse problem for the non-religious. In 30 countries – a list which at this moment in history is entirely predominated by Islamic states or countries with predominantly Muslim populations or regions – there’s a detriment to your freedom of thought so severe that we would call it a ‘grave violation’. This includes countries that can take your children off you if you declare your atheism, or where you can be murdered with near impunity and the government will blame the victim for the murder because posting something satirical on Facebook was ‘incitement’, or where the state could hand you a death sentence for ‘apostasy’ just for saying ‘I don’t believe’. Atheists and the non-religious still face

persecution, discrimination and violence in many parts of the world. Image Credit: Huffington Post

These are huge violations. Of course many religious minorities face other kinds of control and suppression, but I think the international community has been overlooking the extremeness and severity with which the non-religious are treated, to the point where they are often almost invisible. When a government shrugs and says ‘there aren’t any atheists here’ that should be as laughable and absurd as when they say ‘there are no gay people here’ or similar. In all but the very smallest of island nations for example, then it is obviously wrong, obviously a symptom that people are socially marginalised, or not free to ask questions or to express themselves.

So I think that should be one of the big take-away messages of the report: that there’s this huge swathe of the planet where many people will openly demonise atheism and non-religious persons, where religious criticism and humanist values are seen, wrongly, as a western imposition or even a plot to destroy culture, and where the non-religious are denied their right to freedom of thought and expression.

There’s a lot that’s negative in the report, but one thing I do try and point out is that the non-religious are not going away. Even in some of the very worst countries, or the countries we’ve focused on in 2017 like Bangladesh, Maldives, Sudan, Pakistan and so on, and I can think also of Egypt and many MENA region countries, the backlash against atheists is often very explicitly linked to the perception of spreading atheism. Again and again the concern is that social media and a globalised world, and also the spread of Jihadi terror, is turning some proportion of the population away from religion, especially the young.

Now, at the same time, some religious identities are hardening, turning more conservative or fundamentalist. But the perception of what they call ‘creeping atheism’ is usually borne out by the statistics: very slowly in most countries the world is secularising. And my personal view – though I recognise I can’t really derive this from the data as such – but I think a lot of the resurgence in anti-atheist rhetoric and even the murders we’re seeing is a backlash against this secularisation. It’s a conservative religious mentality that is losing the argument, that is losing ground as ideas and information find their way to every smartphone and campus, and then they have this violent, oppressive reaction to it.

It’s doubtless not much of a comfort if you live in a country where your life is at risk if you champion humanism or atheism or secularism, and it’s not intended as such, but it is a cause for some hope. The backlash gets more violent because of real progress. And that progress isn’t going to stop I think: the non-religious aren’t just going to go away once they’ve seen behind the curtain! So it’s absolutely vital now that we get the human rights of the non-religious recognised, enshrined, and made an international touchstone issue. That is what we’re trying to do with the report – make it known, put the issue in front of international institutions and ensure that national delegations know that their records will be tarnished if the abuse or ignore the rights of their non-religious citizens.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Bob.

Churchill: Thank you!

Rebecca S. Markert – Legal Director, Freedom From Religion Foundation

January 20, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Rebecca S. Markert is the Legal Director for the Freedom From Religion Foundation. She discusses the association's work and more with Scott Jacobsen.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have formal training in political science and international relations, and earned a Juris Doctor as well. How did you come to find an interest in those particular topics? How have these qualifications assisted in personal life?

Rebecca S. Markert: I was interested in international relations after I spent my senior year of high school as a Rotary Youth Exchange student in Hamburg, Germany. After that year abroad, I became interested in studying German and working in international affairs. During the course of my undergraduate work at Wisconsin, I discovered I really enjoyed my political science coursework. I started taking more of those classes and ended up with a triple major.

I wasn't originally planning on going to law school. I thought I would get my Master's in international affairs, but started working on Capitol Hill and became really interested in domestic issues. Then I worked on a campaign for the U.S. Senate doing compliance work with federal election law and realized how useful a J.D. would be.

These experiences have been incredibly useful in my current job as Legal Director for the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF). Obviously, my legal training helps with FFRF's legal work, but my experience on the hill also helps when we're looking at legislative efforts to dismantle the wall of separation between state and church. Also, my experience working with a diverse constituency helps when working in a membership association.

Jacobsen: How did you find the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Markert: Once I graduated from law school and decided to settle with my husband in Madison, Wisconsin, I started looking for attorney jobs. I was lucky to find that FFRF posted for its first in-house staff attorney the same year I passed the bar in Wisconsin. I applied and the rest is history.

Jacobsen: Why did you choose the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Markert: I loved constitutional law as a law student and was drawn to civil rights or criminal law because of that. Working for FFRF allows me to work in constitutional law every day – something not a lot of other attorneys get to do often if ever in their careers. I work on issues of national importance. It's very exciting to work on issues that have real significance.

Jacobsen: What do you consider some of the more pertinent, bigger goals for the Freedom From Religion Foundation? How can other organizations help? (How have they helped?)

Markert: One of FFRF's main purposes is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between church and state. The biggest goal for FFRF is to keep that wall, as Associate Justice Hugo Black stated, "high and impregnable." The biggest area of complaints about breaches of separation between state and church are in our public schools. This is astonishing given the clear

case law that's existed for decades about what is permissible and what is not in public schools. FFRF prioritizes these cases because of the age of school children affected by religious intrusion in their schools and the rights of the parents to direct their children's religious or irreligious upbringing.

Jacobsen: Your main work is on the First Amendment caseload including areas of public schools, religious symbolism, and electioneering. All about the intrusion of religion in public life, whether overreach or utilization as a political tool to rally votes. What are some of the more notable cases, your work on them, and the eventual outcomes of them?

Markert: Some of the notable cases I worked on are as follows:

In 2013, FFRF along with the ACLU of Ohio sued Jackson City School District in Jackson, Ohio, to remove a portrait of Jesus that hung in the hall of honor at Jackson Middle School for decades. During the course of litigation, the district moved the portrait from the middle school to the high school. This complaint originated with FFRF, and when it came across my desk, I didn't believe that it was true. There was strong precedent in the Sixth Circuit, of which Ohio is part, that found these displays in public schools unconstitutional. I thought it would be a quick victory and could be resolved with a letter of complaint. The superintendent refused to remove the portrait without a court order. Later that year, he got one. The case was victoriously settled with a consent degree on Oct. 4, 2013. The court order mandated permanent removal of the portrait and parties agreed to a financial settlement requiring the school to pay the plaintiffs a combination of damages and legal fees totalling \$95,000.

I also work on a lot of religious display on public property cases, notably cross displays. This year, I was involved with two lawsuits involving crosses on public property. The first was in Santa Clara, California, where a large granite cross was erected in a public park, named Memorial Cross Park. The 14-foot cross apparently commemorated the 1777 Catholic mission that founded the city. The cross was donated in 1953. I wrote to the city requesting removal of the cross in 2012. The city agreed the cross was constitutionally problematic but continually delayed removal. In January 2017, FFRF sued, and the cross was removed quickly and the case settled in March 2017. The city agreed to pay attorneys' fees totaling \$6,500.

The second cross case involved a 25-foot tall cross in Bayview Park in Pensacola, Florida. A cross, in one form or another, has been there since 1941. In 2016, after unsuccessful attempts at getting the City to remove the cross through non-litigation efforts, FFRF along with the American Humanist Association sued the city for its removal. In June of this year, a federal judge agreed with us that it was unconstitutional and ordered the cross's removal. That order stayed pending appeal. The City has now retained the Becket Fund, a religious right legal group, to represent them on appeal. The case is currently pending before the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals, but FFRF is confident the lower court decision will stand.

Jacobsen: You are the President of the Legal Association for Women in Madison, Wisconsin. What is the purpose of the organization?

Markert: The purpose of the Legal Association for Women is "to promote the rights of women in society and advance the interests of women members of the legal profession, to promote equality and social justice for all people, and to improve relations between the legal profession and the public." LAW offers monthly luncheons which include Continuing Legal Education programs, and annual events. You can find out more here: <http://www.lawdane.com/>

Jacobsen: How can citizens donate and become involved in the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Legal Association for Women?

Markert: You can donate or become a member of FFRF at our website: <https://ffrf.org/donate>

Donations to LAW are also welcome and information about those can be found here: <http://www.lawdane.com/#/contact/>

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Rebecca.

Interview with Dan Barker – Former Christian Minister & Co-President, Freedom From Religion Foundation

February 4, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dan Barker is a Former Christian Minister and the current Co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. His new book Free Will Explained is coming out February 6th. Here we ironically talked about everything about him and his work except his upcoming publication.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I want to start from the beginning regarding your participation and finding out about the Freedom From Religion Foundation. How did you find out about it? How did you become involved?

Dan Barker: That process started back in the 1980s. I was a minister for almost 20 years. I changed my mind and became an atheist. Back in 1983, there was no internet. You had to find or buy books, or go to the library. I thought I was the only atheist in the world.

Of course, I knew I wasn't. I read a book called *Wow to the Women: The Bible Tells Me So* by Annie Laurie Gaylor. It talked about how our modern laws are based on the sexism of the Bible to a significant degree. I thought, 'This is fascinating.'

I wrote her a letter. I said I was an ex-minister. Her mother wrote me back. Her mother started this organisation called 'Freedom From Religion Foundation' (FFRF) in the 1970s. It went national in 1978. So, in 1984, after they got my letter, Anne Gaylor, who is the principal founder, said, 'That is a good story. Why don't you write us an article?'

So, I did. I wrote an article for the FFRF. The producers of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* thought it was a good article and so invited us on their TV show. So, that is how I found out about it. Three years later, I went to work for the Freedom From Religion Foundation as a PR director.

Dan Barker. Image Credit: FFRF.com

Jacobsen: Off-tape, we were talking about some of the recent victories for the organisations. For the United States, what are some of the more recent ones?

Barker: Among our recent victories, we have had several court victories in 2017. The housing allowance is a wide-reaching victory because it reaches every single *clergy* in the United States, including ministers, priests, and rabbis.

Anyone considered the IRS Code calls a 'Minister of the Gospel.' When they wrote that back in the 1950s, they were thinking of Christian ministers. They said, 'We want to reward our ministers for fighting godlessness,' which is the phrase they used.

They meant any clergy in the United States. I am sure rabbis are surprised to be considered Ministers of the Gospel. I am sure they are happy to take the break. Any clergy who gets a salary or an income from their church allows them to exclude their housing from their reportable income.

It drastically lowers the amount of taxes they are required to pay. There is a law in history for why they did this. When I was a Christian minister in California, I was able to take advantage of that housing allowance tax break.

But now that I work for another non-profit, churches are just other non-profits. In the IRS Code, they are 501(c)3 non-profits, like a charity or a museum or whatever. Now, I work for another non-profit, Freedom From Religion Foundation, which is challenging the idea of God and is fighting for keeping religion and church separate.

I no longer *get that break*. It seems unfair that the government is taking sides, playing favourites with people who have one particular religious viewpoint. In other words, there is a God and ordained clergy and excluding those of us who don't agree.

It took us three lawsuits to do it back in 2009. We started in California. We pulled out. Then we filed out again, and we won back in 2013. But the Appeals Court did not overturn the merits of our victory in Federal Court. The Appeals Court ducked the issue by saying, 'You don't have the standing to sue.'

One we were told what we need to do to get standing to sue, it took a few years to get it. We got what is called 'injury.' The IRS turned us down when we asked for a refund. The IRS said, 'No, you don't get it. You are not a minister.'

We go back to court. We won again on the same grounds or merits. We are waiting to see. We assume the US Government will appeal the law and we'll go back to Chicago in the 7th Circuit of Appeals.

Then this time we decide the case on the merits and not on the standing. This is a big deal. It means every priest or minister who has been taking advantage of this sizeable tax break will no longer have it. It means they will have to pay their ministers more.

Of course, they don't want to do that when it comes down to money. You think they would do that, and this is not related to our lawsuit, if the ministers are in touch with this all-powerful God who answers their prayers and provides their needs.

Why do they have to go begging for tax dollars?

Jacobsen: [Laughing]

Barker: Why don't they prove how mighty this God is and pay their priests and ministers a livable wage rather than having to admit, 'Whoops! We can't cut it without the taxes?'

Even Benjamin Franklin said, 'When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and, when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support, so that its Professors are obliged to call for the help of the Civil Power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of it being a bad one.'

Jacobsen: [Laughing] Speaking more generally, what are some of the activist activities – political, economic, or otherwise – that you are aware of that are ongoing for a potentially big win for the formally non-religious in America?

Barker: We're seeing some mopping up of blasphemy laws. We used to have some in our states. Free speech and blasphemy are now becoming a good solid win. Although you see in Ireland they still have it on the books. It is embarrassing.

It is embarrassing because Pakistan has blasphemy laws and they are pointing to Ireland saying ‘See, a Western country has blasphemy laws, so we can too.’ Ireland is embarrassed because they are being used as an example.

But I guess, I am not entirely sure of the extent. In general, to address the question of course, the freedom to speak and of conscience. In many countries of the world, you can be jailed or killed for disagreeing with the powers that be.

That often has to do with religion and the subsequent lack of freedom of conscience around the world. In the Western world, we tend to have that. The sociologists tend to point that out. Phil Zuckerman says that the countries with better standards of living, more functional, equality for women, and a working wage with all needs met then religion goes down – *way down* – when the people are happy.

So, you look at the Nordic countries, most notably Denmark. Zuckerman points out that about 4% of the Danes say that they believe in God. It is tiny, but about 50% or roughly half of the Danes will still consider themselves *cultural* Christians.

They will get married in a church and have funerals in a church, but they don’t believe in God. It is like North American Jews. Of those that I know, most have it as an ethnic, cultural heritage thing. They don’t believe in God.

They just love their culture. When we see any country in the world where the standard of living is going up for whatever reason, then religious devotion goes down, which leads people like Phil Zuckerman and others to suggest – and this looks like a good suggestion – that religion is viable only in countries that are dysfunctional, where things are bad and there is a lot of misery.

You see in a lot of the developing world where religion is growing. It would be similar to wanting to win the lottery. Your life is miserable. You are hoping for some way out of it. Religion gives them some hope, ‘I am going on to a better life someday. My needs will be met because my life is terrible right now.’

In the global scene, the more equality for women that we can achieve and the more we can take of care each other’s needs then the country has less religion. I think healthcare is one of those needs and many of these countries doing well have universal healthcare and countries like America are envious or jealous of them.

When we went to Scotland, and Annie Laurie had to go to the hospital in an ambulance, they didn’t ask a thing. Think about how much that would cost in the United States here.

Jacobsen: You are looking at the social benefits and community benefits that come from religion in light of that fact that people live in impoverished conditions. Countries without a lot of standards or minimum standards that we take for granted that they don’t have, but the local church might provide – either through community or a hope in the hereafter, even though there is no evidence.

Barker: Yes.

One of the many billboards put up by Freedom from Religion Foundation. Image Credit: Freedom from Religion Foundation

Jacobsen: I do want to note that you do write music. You wrote as a clergy person, as a minister. You also write music outside of it. So, can you plug some of more secular pieces?

Barker: Yes, the Freedom From Religion Foundation has produced four CDs. There are three CDs, and one of them is a 2-CD set. It is more than 50 songs called Freethought Songs for atheism, secularism, or scepticism.

About half of those songs are traditional such as the old German anthem called *Die Gedanken Sind Frie*. Joe Hill's song *Pie in the Sky* and John Lennon's *Imagine*. The songs we know are general freethought songs. The other half are songs that I wrote.

They go way back to the 1980s when I left the ministry, such as the earlier ones like *Can't Win with Original Sin*.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Barker: Another is the *Friendly Neighbourhood Atheist*. It is kind of like a Saturday morning Mister Rogers children's show, like 'What is Atheism?' A song called *Lucifer's Lament*. Lucifer is complaining that he can't get his work done because of all of these acts of God.

Then some positive things like *The World Is My Country* based on the words of Thomas Paine. *Life is Good*, life is unbelievably good. As an unbeliever, it is unbelievably good. It is like a gospel song with non-gospel lyrics.

What was particularly fun for me, a well-known Broadway composer named Charles Strouse who wrote the musical *Annie*. He wrote the musical *Bye Bye Bird*. He is in his mid-80s now. He and I wrote a song together, which was a blast.

This was one of the rare times where all I did was the lyrics. I sent him some lyrics and he set them to music. We called it *Poor Little Me*. I arranged a lot of the lyrics of Yip Harburg to music. Yip Harburg was the composer or the lyricist who wrote *Somewhere the Rainbow*, and *It is Only a Paper Moon*.

He sent me some poetry, and I sent music to them. The poetry is nice. I hope my music is beautiful as well. I also set to music the works of Robert G. Ingersoll who is the 19th-century orator. He just really wrote and spoke with just beautiful prose.

One of his recitations was called *Love*. It was the basic recognition of human love and family. You don't need a God or religion to have love. Those are a few of the songs on those albums. If you are a musician, you want to do music.

It is what you do. I take atheism and agnosticism and scepticism. I take them as positives and worth celebrating and singing about. It is not like we get together and hold hands, which is very embarrassing and very few atheists want to do that.

We are all musical creatures and love that. I love continuing to use music for a good purpose

Jacobsen: I have one last question, which would be of interest to the readers and of central interest to the Freedom From Religion Foundation. How can people become involved through the provision of skills or talents, donations, or simply becoming a member?

Barker: All of that. We are almost at 30,000 members now. All members have different talents, resources, time, and money. We know students are usually impoverished. So, we actually allow students to come to our conventions for free.

We even have scholarships for students. We have them at different levels. We know students are busy too. Historically, it turns out. The kind of people who join groups like ours. Our group is entirely discretionary. You don't have to join it.

Our members are often retirees – 1/3 of FFRF members are now retired. They have the time, interest and resources to join. It looks like nonbelievers are an older group but, actually, in the country, about 35% of Americans under 30 are thoroughly non-religious.

But they don't join groups like ours. We have student essay contests. We have four national student essay contests. The 1st prize is \$3,000 and then \$2,000 and \$1,000. We have awarded a lot of money to students over the years. There is a high school seniors contest, a college student contest, a grad student contest, and students of colour or minority student contest.

A lot of students entered them. It is amazing. You tend to think blacks and Latinos are believers, but they are not and have broken away and are thinking for themselves. Also, we have the 'Out Of The Closet' billboard campaign with your message and face on it.

We post it and then you can put it on social media. We also have unafraid of burning in hell billboard.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Barker: You put your face on a Devil's mask thing. That comes from Ronald Reagan's son doing an ad for us. Rachel Maddow had it on her show. It was Ron Reagan who is an unabashed atheist, who is not afraid of burning in hell.

That is catching on, especially in Halloween seasons. That is free. Many of our online offerings are free, especially to students including our new unpleasant God website. It is unpleasantgod.ffrf.org.

Where you can show everybody what the God of the Bible is like, you can look up misogyny and the verses. You can look up jealous and genocidal, and infanticidal. Then you can share that. You can show people. You can click share and show it on your Facebook or whatever. If anybody has any legal expertise, we make complaints all over the country.

We make complaints in schools all over the country. Sometimes, we need local counsel. An attorney on the ground at that location. We have people at that site that can help you do whatever you want. They can do the minimal filing stuff. They can even work with us on drafting the briefs and help us to make arguments. We have those resources and that kind of people.

If anybody has extra cheese, that is useful. You can go to the website ffrf.org and look at 'Get Involved.' We have chapters all over the country. You can look up if there is a chapter in your area. The chapters deal more with the local issues. Our Portland chapters, for example, deal with the Portland public schools.

North Carolina chapter deals with North Carolina issues. Then they can communicate and compare notes and share resources and find out how best to solve the local problems. There are a lot of ways.

Another thing that is helpful is a group putting us in the will. If we have been around long enough, about 40 years, it can be a nice way for a person to live on after they die. Your inheritance can go to a group that keeps fighting for you after you're gone.

It is bittersweet. We get these things from people who are dead. They died, but that is what they wanted. They wanted to keep that fight against fundamentalist religion.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dan.

Q&A on Philosophy with Dr Stephen Law – Session 3

February 6, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Jacobsen: In the first session, we discussed faith schools in the United Kingdom (UK) and critical thinking education, and in the second session we discussed religious education in the UK and the critiques of philosophy. You mentioned the threat of purported authorities from religions and did mention the atheist community-party, which leads to the next thought for me. Many religious philosophies turned fundamentalist can become dangerous, delusional, and tyrannical. However, and, at the same time, what about the philosophies of national ideologies including National Socialist fascism in older Germany or some communist tyrannies? Are these deadlier and threatening than religions turned ideologies to you?

Dr Stephen Law: More deadly or threatening? Well, Hitler, Pol Pot, Mao, and Stalin each achieved a far higher body count than the Holy Inquisition, so in one obvious sense, they were more deadly. I am not sure what we can extrapolate from this though.

It is worth reminding ourselves that Nazism was not, as many suppose, an atheist philosophy. Hitler and the Nazi's anti-Semitism was religious, creationist, and anti-Darwinian. The Nazis drew on Biblical sources in justifying their views about race (for an interesting, evidence-led perspective on this see [here](#))

Nazi attitudes to the Jews were not foisted on unwitting German people, but were already widespread. Anti-Semitism was rampant, with deep roots in Christian thinking, both Protestant and Catholic. In 1936, the Primate of Poland issued a letter to be read from every Catholic pulpit in the country – a letter that, while opposing violence against Jews, said the following:

“It is a fact that the Jews are fighting against the Catholic Church, persisting in free-thinking, and are the vanguard of godlessness, Bolshevism and subversion. It is a fact that the Jewish influence on morality is pernicious and that their publishing houses disseminate pornography. It is a fact that Jews deceive, levy interest, and are pimps. It is a fact that the religious and ethical influence of the Jewish young people on Polish young people is a negative one.”

Anti-Semitism was also deeply embedded in the Protestant Churches. Daniel Goldenhagen, in his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, reports that one Protestant Church publication would, in

the words of a contemporary observer, “Again and again describe the Jews with great zeal as a foreign body of which the German people must rid itself, as a dangerous adversary against whom one must wage a struggle to the last extreme . . . Dissent was rare . . . One churchman recalls in his memoirs that anti-Semitism was so widespread in clerical circles that “explicit objection [to anti-Semitism] could not be ventured.”

What all these horrific regimes – Hitler’s, Pol Pot’s, Mao’s and Stalin’s – had in common was not atheism, but authoritarianism. All were *profoundly opposed to free-thought*. All brutally suppressed dissent. If we want to avoid such moral catastrophes in future, I believe our best bet is not the promotion of religion – which can be brutally authoritarian too – but the promotion of free-thought amongst the citizenry and political secularism that protects the freedom of all to practice or criticise religion as they wish. Philosopher Jonathan Glover notes:

“If you look at the people who shelter Jews under the Nazis, you find numerous things about them. One is that they tended to have a different kind of upbringing from the average person, they tended to be brought up in a non-authoritarian way, brought up to have sympathy with other people and to discuss things rather than just do what they were told.”

I think this should be our recipe for raising new citizens.

Jacobsen: Even if pupils are, as per the minimum standard recommendations from Session 2, encouraged to think for themselves, especially on religion, and exposed to a wide range of views, will this necessarily be practised? For example, could the seriously motivated and devout work to subvert the best intentions of these minimum standards?

Law: Of course. In my book *The War For Children’s Minds* I argued for certain *minimum* standards regarding moral and religious education that all schools – religious or not – should meet because I thought that the introduction of such standards is practically achievable in the short term. However, they are just minimum standards. Note that I think all schools should ensure that pupils are exposed to a variety of views about religion – including atheist and humanist views – from those who hold those views. This at least would be a counter to the kind of strawman representations of atheism and humanism that might otherwise be presented in the classroom.

Jacobsen: If we take the current, most widely accepted epistemologies in philosophy, and if we take the modern incarnation of the scientific method, what seems like the probable future of epistemology and science?

Law: Greater insight into the workings of the universe, better technology, and so on. However, I am no utopian. I am not that optimistic about the future of humanity. Humanists such as myself are often accused of naive thinking on which, once all embrace science and reason, a Brave New World will open up before us and humanity can look forward to endless peace and contentment. Most of us humanists are not that silly.

Jacobsen: Thank you once more, Dr Law, it’s a continued pleasure.

Jewellery for Atheists? How the Invisible Pink Unicorn is Challenging Stigma

February 6, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Maija and Tim Ahrentløy, founders of Invisible Pink Unicorn, speak to Conatus News about atheism and starting a jewellery business targeted at atheists.

The classic Invisible Pink Unicorn (IPU) symbol was designed by Tim Ahrentløy in 2003. He published it online and made it free to use, offering free file downloads from the website. Tim then received many emails over the years from people who had either tattooed the symbol on their body, put it on their car as decal, or otherwise incorporated it in their lives.

He made a gallery with the images on the website. Throughout the years, many different people and online shops have sold t-shirts, mugs, hats, and other merchandise featuring the symbol. In 2013, 10 years after Tim designed the symbol, he and I spoke about the possibilities of doing more with the symbol.

The idea for handmade fine metal jewellery was thus born.

We redesigned the classic IPU symbol to make it into an elegant jewellery design. Initial production began in 2016 and we aired the online shop late December 2016. The jewellery is represented on invisiblepinkunicorn.com and on Instagram and Facebook as @ipujewelry. The classic IPU symbol is represented on invisiblepinkunicorn.org and on Twitter and Instagram as @ipuspotting. We use the hashtag #dontbeinvisible for both.

Scott Jacobsen: I appreciate you taking the time today to talk about the Invisible Pink Unicorn. You two founded the jewellery shop, Invisible Pink Unicorn. This seems to be a play off on one of the more prominent examples given in the non-believing community, including the orbiting teapot, the flying spaghetti monster, and so on. What was the inspiration for the Invisible Pink Unicorn symbol back in 2003?

Maija Ahrentløy and Tim Ahrentløy: The Invisible Pink Unicorn story was one of the first stories to circulate the Internet newsgroups. It is a story that atheists tell to make a point. When believers use the ‘God did it’ explanation whenever some phenomena are left unexplained by science, atheists reply with a ‘The Invisible Pink Unicorn did it’ to illustrate the lack of explanatory power behind such reasoning.

Tim wanted to create a symbol for atheism and put it out there. So he designed a stylised representation of a unicorn. It is part the mathematical void symbol and part a reference to the Invisible Pink Unicorn story from the newsgroups. Parody is not part of the design or the intent behind the design.

The invisible pink unicorn logo, designed by Tim Ahrentløy in 2003, has become a prominent symbol within the atheist community. Image Credit: The Wits End.

Jacobsen: How has business been over the years?

Ahrentløvs: The commercial part is a new initiative that we began mid 2016. So we are just starting out on the business side of things.

Jacobsen: Invisible Pink Unicorn jewellery is a niche market, I assume. If so, do you expect there to be a long-term growing sales market for it?

Ahrentlòvs: Selling jewellery to atheists must be the definition of a niche market. It will require a lot of patience and effort to grow the business. Selling jewellery is hard. Pitching the idea of wearing your non-belief to atheists is even harder. But we are definitely in it for the long haul.

Jacobsen: What is the purpose of this particular theme for the jewellery? Who else sells similar jewellery?

Ahrentlòvs: The symbol just means ‘Atheism’. We would like the jewellery to say: ‘I’m an atheist, but that does not make me a bad person’. To our knowledge, our combination of idea and execution is rather unique.

Jacobsen: As a symbol for atheism—and this is almost a universal for public figures or organizations—any death threats from the self-proclaimed representatives of the religion of peace or the religion of love for being public advocates or proponents of atheism?

Ahrentlòvs: All is quiet. We hope it will stay that way. After all, our mission is not to dig the trenches any deeper, to stir up yet another controversy, or to hurl insults at believers. In fact, we are actively working very hard NOT to communicate directly to theists at all.

Our business is first and foremost with atheists. Because we have the opportunity to put a friendly face on atheism and make a conscious effort to change the stigma of atheism. If we can help erode harmful sentiments about atheists—one theist at a time—then maybe later on, the atheist and the theist can have a civilised talk about the other stuff too. About science, evidence, epistemology, and why atheists don’t believe in a God.

Jacobsen: What seems like the best argument for atheism to you? Is this a good alternative means of atheist activism, selling symbols through jewellery?

Ahrentlòvs: The jewellery is not about arguments for atheism. We want to be clear about that because we don’t want the jewellery to be associated with that kind of story. We want to leave the arguments for atheism to the atheists themselves. The jewellery is for atheists wanting to show that they are atheists. It is for friendly, everyday, non-activist atheists who also believe that ‘coming out’ could help dispel prejudice about atheists. All we want with the jewellery is to give such an atheist a subtle and unobtrusive way of expressing: ‘I’m an atheist, but that does not make me a bad person.’ When people find out that this person they like and respect is an atheist, it will challenge their negative notions about atheists. It might help them realise that being an atheist doesn’t say anything about who you are as a person.

Jacobsen: Is there a possibility of expanding the market to selling other atheist symbols for you?

Ahrentlòvs: No. We need to focus. But we hope we can inspire others to follow and help us grow this cause and this market.

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

Ahrentlòvs: We just wanted to thank you for your interest and giving us the opportunity to reach more atheists out there. Thank you so much.

Jacobsen: Thank you for time, Maija and Tim.

Religion, Secularism, and US Law: A Chat with Andrew Seidel, FFRF

February 17, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Andrew Seidel, Director of Strategic Response at FFRF, speaks to Conatus News about religion, secularism, and unite.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: FFRF is sometimes criticised for taking on small issues. Why sweat the small things? Are ‘small’ issues used as wedges for larger ones?

Andrew Seidel: I’ve given a whole talk on this topic. Several actually—under different titles, but always something along the lines of ‘Sweat the Small Stuff.’ FFRF sometimes gets flack for taking on small issues, as if it doesn’t matter to fight for the smaller things. But if you don’t fight the small things—the small violations—they are always used to justify larger violations.

This is particularly important in our system because we are in the common law system. So when a court decides an issue, it is going to look at what courts have said before; it looks at small violations and then uses them to uphold larger violations. You can walk through court decisions going back in time and see small violations being used to justify the government endorsing one religion over another or to justify other state-church violations.

‘Small violations [are]used to justify the government endorsing one religion over another or to justify other state-church violations’

Examples of these small violations are often what courts call ceremonial deism. The little things that are ubiquitous to public religion: ‘In God We Trust’ on currency. Saying, ‘Under God’ in the Pledge of Allegiance. Things like that. The Supreme Court saying, ‘God save the United States in this honourable court’ before the sessions. These get trotted out repeatedly to support more significant violations, even governments putting up religious displays or offering a prayer before a legislative session every day.

We are prosecuting a case where a judge has a prayer before his session of court and trotting out these same arguments and saying, ‘We have been doing this for decades and centuries. It is not that different from the United State Supreme Court saying, “God save the United States in this honourable court.”’

I think it is less a wedge strategy than that old story of the frog that slowly gets boiled.

Jacobsen: Better to nip problems in the bud, basically.

Seidel: It always reminds me. James Madison wrote a great line. In Virginia, they proposed a three penny tax that would support Christian preachers. James Madison wrote something called the *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*.

It is the greatest defence of state-church separation that exists from that era. It is 15 or 16 points. In it, Madison wrote that it is ‘proper to take alarm at the first experiment honour liberties.’

Then he goes on to say that the men of the colonies—the free men of the British colonies of America—didn’t wait until all of the violations of their rights had entangled themselves in

precedent and basically become confirmed over long periods of time, making them so much harder to challenge.

That idea is entirely visible in our Supreme Court jurisprudence. One of the biggest cases to come down was in 2005. It was a really bizarre set of cases. There were two separate 10 Commandments monuments. One was in Texas. There were a couple in Kentucky county courthouses. The Supreme Court decided both of those cases 5-4 on the same day. The Kentucky commandment monuments had to come down. The Texas monument could stay up. The one judge who switched his position was Justice Breyer. He changed his position because he said that in the Kentucky cases it was apparent that the county boards intended to promote religion.

The displays were recent and had been challenged as soon as they went up. In Texas, it had been up for something like 60 *years* without being challenged. Obviously, according to Breyer, nobody thought the monument was meant to be religious—that is, nobody thought it was a constitutional violation—so it could stay up. As far as legal reasoning goes, it is as deficient as you can get. It is one of the worst and most illogical reasons and decisions that I have ever seen.

And yet, it is one of the decisions that govern religious displays across the United States now. If they have been up for a while, they get to stay. Which brings us back to the Madison quote. If the Ten Commandments display in Texas had been challenged at the time, Breyer would not have been able to make that decision.

Jacobsen: How do the FFRF and similar organisations—though they may not be as robust as to focus on the legality of things—make arguments on propriety?

Seidel: Just because something is legal does not at all make it appropriate; especially when talking about a representative democracy, religion is the most divisive force mankind has ever developed.

I think if you marry religion to power, especially power in a democracy or a representative republic where the power comes from ‘we the people’, you’re going to see huge swathes of the population alienated.

It can be used as a weapon for many politicians, who use it to pander and divide deliberately. The thing that has always struck me is that it is so unnecessary. There is absolutely no reason to ever have religion in the government in any way, shape, or form.

‘There is absolutely no reason to ever have religion in the government in any way, shape, or form’

To me, the questions always been, ‘Why?’

I think the answer is often simple: to manipulate. Sometimes, it is done deliberately to divide the population. Other times, it is done to motivate the ‘base’, as they call it; other times, it is because the person is a ‘proud believer.’

There is no argument in there that suggests that it is proper—let alone in keeping with the values of inclusiveness and equality that America supposed to hold dear—to marry religious power and governmental power.

One of the things FFRF is fighting to protect is the Johnson Amendment. This is a rule here in the United States that says that tax-exempt nonprofits can’t get involved in partisan politics. I am going to Capitol Hill to keep it in place next week, but we always talk about how important it is.

Not just because it is an important common sense rule, not only to make sure charitable donations go to charitable work and not political campaigns, but also because churches really have the ability to alter elections.

If a preacher says, ‘You’re going to hell if you vote for a particular candidate’, then it is difficult for a true believer in the faith to go against that command. We’re talking about severing the power religion has and the power government has in everyday life.

‘If a preacher says, “You’re going to hell if you vote for a particular candidate”, then it is difficult for a true believer in the faith to go against that command’

Jacobsen: Are there any instances in the history of the United States in which governmental or state legal power was abused to benefit the non-believing community alone in a similar way others have done for a particular religious sect—often Christian—in the United States?

Seidel: It is a good question. I cannot think of a genuine example of that happening. Now, there are a lot of people on the Religious Right here who say that fighting for a secular government is the same thing.

They argue that we are fighting for an *atheist* government. I think it is important to separate those two things or distinguish between them. The example I use to try to explain this to people is coaches at public schools who are praying for their students. We get a lot of complaints about that actually. So imagine, before a game, the team gathers together. In a Christian government, the coach says, ‘Okay, we’re going to pray.’

Now, if the government were endorsing atheism, the coach would be saying, ‘Okay kids, church is stupid. Nobody pray. Go home and burn your Bibles.’ ‘If the government were endorsing atheism, the coach would be saying, “Okay kids, church is stupid. Nobody pray. Go home and burn your Bibles.” ‘

We have never had that. With a secular government, the coach would huddle the team up and simply say, ‘Okay kids, go out and play the best football game you can play. Here is the plan.’ Just doing their job and not referencing religion at all. That’s it. That’s what we’re fighting for. The FFRF does not favour atheism or favour privileging atheism and non-religion above others. We are just fighting for a secular government.

Edward Gibbon, who wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, said, ‘The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.’

Jacobsen: I’ve always liked that quote.

Seidel: I love that quote. It is a rough draft of my book, but I have always liked that one.

Jacobsen: As a footnote to that, you and I can agree that any non-believer who desires some superior status to the religious would likewise receive condemnation because our aim is equality.

Seidel: Yes, that is often lost on people. The FFRF is not fighting for privilege. We are fighting for equality. I think you said it well.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Andrew.

Can Contemporary Economics Gain From A Philosophical Perspective?

February 18, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In the fifth instalment of this Q&A with Conatus News, Dr Alexander Douglas discusses economic philosophy and contemporary economic issues.

Dr Alexander Douglas specialises in the history of philosophy and the philosophy of economics. He is a faculty member at the University of St. Andrews in the School of Philosophical, Anthropological and Film Studies. In this series, we discuss the philosophy of economics, its evolution, and how the discipline of economics should move forward in a world with increasing inequality so that it is more attuned to democracy. Previous sessions of our Q&A can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How is philosophising about economics useful in the development of insights into economics itself?

Dr Alexander Douglas: Many economists doubt that it is. They can argue that they get along just fine without reading any philosophy of economics. And I suppose they do, given their goals. Companies and governments keep on hiring them to give advice and make forecasts. Philosophers can criticise their models for being not scientific enough, or ignore what is of real human value. Anyone can criticise their forecasting record based on whatever external standard they deem appropriate. But the economists can always reply: ‘If we’re so wrong, why are we always consulted?’ I think philosophers of economics ought to think about that question. But doing so would mean moving in the direction of social critique and away from contributing to economics as such.

Joan Robinson claims, in *Freedom and Necessity*, that the task of the social sciences is very different to that of the natural sciences. It is, she says, to provide society with an organ of self-consciousness. I think contemporary economics fails at this task. Economists build models in which the system works a certain way; they plug in values and predict outcomes, and policymakers and others base their decisions on these predictions. What is left out is the amount of social control required to keep the systems working in this theoretically tractable way. Economists rarely discuss this, as far as I know. Nor do they acknowledge the extent to which their models are self-fulfilling prophecies: the systems they describe work the way that they do because decision-makers unconsciously internalise the models that describe them working in that way. A real organ of social self-consciousness would make us aware of all this. If economists don’t provide one, maybe philosophers will have to. “Contemporary economics fails at this task.. of providing society with an organ of self-consciousness.”

Jacobsen: How will the economics of the future change – as the implicit philosophy and descriptions around it change into the future?

Douglas: I’m not sure what the engine of change would be. While economics is heavily criticised in certain portions of the media, economists are still, as I said, routinely hired to produce the analyses which government agencies and businesses use to determine their strategies. The analyses are based on models, the basic types of which were developed in the

1970s. Economists criticise some of the types and promote others. But, from the outside, I don't see a huge amount of *theoretical* innovation; within the economic profession, improvement is just about making the right upgrades to the classic machines.

To me, this theoretical conservatism goes with political conservatism. We theorise how we govern, and vice-versa. Economic modelling is all about predicting and controlling human actions with increasing precision – winning that little bit more margin by tracking us with better algorithms. Politics works to render us algorithmically tractable. The goals work in a positive feedback loop. The more our political institutions can trap our behaviour into predictable patterns, the better the economic models can track us; the better the models track us, the better the institutions can control us. If we refuse to be described in this way, we can refuse to be governed in this way, but we can't successfully refuse the one and not the other.

Jacobsen: Do you think the era of individual economic philosophy is almost dead, where a pluralistic approach becomes ideal because of the complexity of an international economy such as our own?

Douglas: Pluralism sounds nice. But the problem is that different approaches are *non-diversa sed opposita*. They are at odds with each other more than they complement each other.

Take the most fundamental question: how the entire economy, in the most general sense, works. One answer appeals to the idea of a 'dynamic' general equilibrium. Households maximise their utility over an entire lifetime, looking over the menu of goods that exist now and will be produced in the future. Firms decide which goods to produce by optimising a profit function, which is partly determined by the household utility functions. The government tries to minimise losses from inflation and unemployment, and this policy can, as Michael Woodford demonstrated, be derived from household utility functions. Samuel Bowles called this picture 'utopian capitalism'. I think most economists see the real economy as an approximation, though perhaps a distant one, to this utopian picture (some might call it dystopian).

Here is an entirely different picture, which I tried to sketch in my book. Institutions determine the prices, production, and allocation of goods, in a way that is almost entirely independent of household utility. Companies get big enough to hold spare capacity and run operations too complicated for their shareholders to understand. They don't need to worry about profit maximisation. Smaller firms, rather than competing with the market leaders, simply copy their apparently successful strategies. The government, meanwhile, chooses its policy targets by thinking about what will win votes, not what will maximise household utility. And production decisions are primarily determined by central bank policy.

Here is a concrete example of the latter. If you're a bank in the UK, and you issue a mortgage, you can swap the mortgage with the Bank of England for pure cash (or a reserve balance): mortgages are on the Eligible Collateral List. Their placement there was a political choice. If, on the other hand, you issue a loan to an entrepreneur, you can't swap the loan for cash (unless you find someone to buy it), and you're stuck with the loss in case of default. Unsurprisingly, the financial sector is much more interested in lending to house-buyers and aspiring 'property asset managers' than to entrepreneurs in other sectors. And so we get a British economy obsessed with trading in property and doing very little else. Households readily internalise this obsession, but I doubt that it came from them originally. I think this is a pretty clear case of the economy being directed from the top, by political decisions that have nothing to do with maximising household utility.

The first picture is of a traditional free-market economy; the second is of a command economy. I suspect we live in a command economy. For all the rhetoric about free enterprise, the defeat of the Soviet Union by the Western powers was the victory of one sort of command economy over another – one controlled through the monetary system rather than through the industrial system. But whether or not you agree with me depends on which approach to economics you take. I don't think we can avoid this argument by taking some ecumenical approach.

Jacobsen: Does modern economics imply a certain amount of faith in particular axioms? If so, what is the faith? What axioms?

Douglas: Yes, at the broadest level *most* economic theory (including Marxist theory, I should say), implies faith in the existence of a market system, in which capitalists pursue profit by producing at the lowest possible cost the goods that people want. I've never seen much evidence that our system works like that. Certainly its behaviour resembles that model to some degree of approximation, but then it resembles anything to *some* degree of approximation.

Above I tried to sketch out another model – not a mathematical model, but a verbal one – that I think our system resembles a greater degree of approximation. The production and allocation of goods are decided by the executive decisions of committees whose members got there by a combination of inherited privilege and blind chance.

Economists can reply that a verbal 'model' of this sort is unscientific: it is a satirical caricature with no mathematical precision. But then caricatures and models are the same in one way: they flatten reality by emphasising certain features and ignoring many others. Mathematical models can deliver precise predictions, but caricatures can predict outcomes in a different way – more generic, but perhaps more nuanced in a deeper sense. Which is preferable depends on what our ultimate purposes are: what we want our economic theory for. I return to Robinson: if we are after an organ of social self-consciousness, caricature might be preferable to mathematics. But if we want to sustain the status quo at the lowest possible cost, economists are probably getting it about right.

Canada Struggles with Secularism. What Can We Do?

– A chat with Dave McKee, Communist Party of Canada

February 19, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In spite being a secular nation, Canada struggles with promoting secularism, as schools and hospitals are highly influenced by religion. An interview with Dave McKee, Communist Party of Canada, on the country's problems with religiosity in the public sector.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What stereotypes do you often hear about communism in Ontario and Canadian discourse?

Dave McKee: We certainly hear less of the old Cold War stereotypes than we did 15 or 20 years ago. Some of this change is because a lot of time has passed, but I think a lot of it also has to do with an increasing desire for alternative political views that can help explain the increasingly difficult concrete conditions that people face in their daily lives.

That said, there are some stereotypes that occasionally emerge here in Ontario. One is that Communists are a band of authoritarians who want to impose a rigid, mechanical society that is opposed to individual rights. Another stereotype is that the Communist Party is a political movement that is funded by foreign governments. I even had someone ask if, as a communist, I would outlaw pizza!

These statements aren't at all true – the Communist Party of Canada is a “home-grown” movement that has fought for over 95 years to achieve socialism in this country. Our vision of socialism includes the profound extension of democracy into all aspects of political, economic, social, and cultural life.

Probably the most common stereotype, though, is that “communism has failed” and so our movement and Party are condemned to be ineffective. This is simply ahistorical. True, socialism was overthrown in the USSR and Eastern Europe, but any honest assessment of socialism in those countries will clearly reveal the tremendous achievements and vitality of a dynamic system that transformed the lives of millions of people for the better. I would never argue that Soviet socialism was perfect, but it was not a failure – it still stands as the bar against which current and future liberative movements must seek to measure up. The fact that socialist and communist movements are growing all over the world suggests to me that it is capitalism, not communism, which is failing.

Jacobsen: The UK is more secular than Canada. This gives more flexibility for secular activists too. What organizations should young politically-minded students look into?

McKee: In Ontario, where I live, the main arena for secular activists is probably public education. The provincial government funds a Catholic school system, parallel to the public school system, and this situation has come under increasing criticism and opposition. There are several avenues for activists to get involved in this area – local school councils (sometimes called parent councils) are a good option, although they are not specifically focused on this question. Another option is the Campaign for Public Education, a coalition of labour and

community activists, that has worked for many years on issues of equity, funding, and democracy within the public school system.

Another public institution in Canada with lingering religious involvement is hospitals, many of which maintain an association with a particular church or religious order, even though they are publicly funded. The biggest issue for hospitals and healthcare is opposing privatization, so we don't see a sharp, ongoing debate around religion and hospitals. There are moments when it springs up, though, as in the recent arguments over whether Catholic hospitals should offer medically assisted suicide. These same hospitals have, at different times, been the centre of debates around abortion services. In Ontario, one of the key organizations campaigning for public healthcare and hospitals is the Ontario Health Coalition.

For young secular activists who have a Marxist or socialist perspective, a good organization to look into is the Young Communist League (YCL). This is an organization of youth and students that is politically united with the Communist Party, but organizationally independent. The YCL is active on a range of political and social issues, in both domestic and global contexts.

Jacobsen: You have taken stances against the separate publicly-funded school system in Canada. What is the situation now? Is it becoming more secular or less so?

McKee: It's a bit of a tricky issue.

Recent studies show that, over the past 15 years, Catholic school enrolment in Ontario has fallen by around 6%. Through the same period, public school enrolment, in general, has also fallen. We can conclude two things from this: First, the proportion of public school students who are enrolled in Catholic schools is slightly reduced. Second, the proportion of students who are enrolled in private schools has increased—many of these institutions are religious, but information about the proportion is not readily available.

Looking at this, we could say that the publicly-funded system is very slowly becoming more secular, but that there also is a growing religious education sector that is privately funded.

Jacobsen: How did Canada implement this separate publicly-funded school system? What effects did and does this have on the democratic values of the country? What are some warnings for other countries' young people with similar histories regarding their school system, e.g. the faith schools in the UK?

McKee: The whole genesis of Catholic school funding is rather bizarre. It dates back to the “original” constitution of Canada, the British North America Act of 1867 (BNA), which preserved the education rights of certain religious minorities in Upper and Lower Canada (Ontario and Quebec, respectively). At that time, there were concerns among the ruling class, which was English, about the language and religious rights of the Anglophone Protestant minority in francophone Catholic Quebec. These rights were secured through language that pointed to the example of Catholic rights in Ontario, and were preserved. Concretely, Catholics were entitled to a Catholic school in Ontario and Protestants were entitled to a Protestant school in Quebec. This language is so specific to Ontario and Quebec that it is not even entirely clear how binding it is on other provinces in Canada.

Currently, it is generally interpreted as enshrining the right of Catholic schools in Ontario to receive the same public funding as the secular public school system. It is probably the most-used argument against establishing a single secular school system in Ontario.

This is problematic and undemocratic on so many levels. Catholic school funding is based on a constitutional provision that emerged through the desire of English-speaking Canada to protect and maintain its privileged and powerful minority within Quebec. As such, it is a universalized policy that is peculiar to a particular dynamic in Canada – the oppression of the francophone nation by the Anglophone nation. But here we are now, a century and a half later, and some basic questions are being asked: “What about the rights of other religious minorities in Ontario?” “How appropriate is a policy that equates religion with national identity?” “Should religious education be publicly funded at all?” “Since society is dynamic, shouldn’t the constitution reflect and respond to changes over time?” “If an institution is to be publicly funded, should it not also be governed and delivered in a manner that is universally accessible?”

In 1999, the United Nations Human Rights Commission considered the issue of Catholic school funding in Ontario and determined that it was a discriminatory practice. The committee stated that, in order to comply with its legal obligations, Ontario should either stop funding Catholic schools or provide education funding to all religious schools. The government chose to ignore the decision, maintaining a policy and practice at odds with international law.

As you note, the issue of public funding for religious schools is not unique to Ontario or Canada. While there are differences between the situation here and, say, that of faith schools in the UK, the current effect of publicly funded religious education is substantially the same in at least three ways:

1. It preserves the dominance of one religion (in this case, Christianity) over all others;
2. It ensures that religious views generally maintain a high profile within society, far out of proportion with a relatively smaller population of actively religious people; and
3. It continually ascribes a sizeable and broad public role to a specific religious institution, thereby hampering the fully universal provision of public services, which can only be achieved through secular institutions.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dave.

McKee: Thank you!

Humanism: A Basis for Unity and Accountability?

February 21, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Daniela Wakonigg, Assistant Managing Editor of Humanistic Press, talks to Conatus News about the meaning of and threats to humanism.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Tell us a little about your family and personal background. Where did you grow up? What was the environment like with respect to values and/or religious beliefs?

Daniela Wakonigg: I am Austrian and I grew up in Germany, where I still live today. I was an extremely curious child and still am an extremely curious adult. I'm interested in natural and human sciences, arts, and politics. It's actually hard to find a topic I'm not interested in!

I was raised as a Roman Catholic but started to doubt and to think about the big questions of life—Is there a god? What will happen after death?—when I was still in primary school. As I couldn't find answers I decided to study Philosophy and Catholic Theology (and also German Language and Literature, as it appealed to the artistic side in me). I left university with a Master of Arts and as an atheist, after a very lengthy and intense, but unsuccessful, search for convincing reasons to believe in the existence of divine powers.

My personal philosophy involves causing as little harm as possible—to the environment, to my fellow humans, and to non-human animals. I'm also trying to make this world a little better. Fighting for a better world, however, isn't always possible without hurting someone's (religious, political etc.) feelings. But sometimes it's necessary, unfortunately, to hurt someone's feelings in order to prevent things that are far worse.

Jacobsen: When did humanism 'click' for you? When did you decide it was the right path for you?

Wakonigg: After leaving faith, I just didn't want to think about it anymore. I was simply fed up with it. But over the years, I realised that atheists were again and again attacked or simply not regarded in media, in politics, and so on.

One year, media reported about the Easter Sermon of a famous conservative cardinal in Germany in which he attacked nonbelievers. In his view, all the evil in the world was caused by nonbelievers. I was so angry about it that I decided to find out if there were others like me, nonbelievers, who were no longer willing to accept defamations like that.

So I got in touch with different secular societies in Germany and soon became part of the secular movement in Germany myself. And I found out that I am not just an atheist but also a humanist, which means I do not just define myself by my denial in the existence of a god/gods, but also by my belief that humans should be kind and helpful to one another, uniting through our similarities rather than allowing ourselves to become divided by petty differences.

Jacobsen: Now, you are one of the managing editors for Humanistic Press. Why this name? How did it come about and how has Humanistic Press grown over the years? What are the main activities and impacts of Humanistic Press?

Wakonigg: Humanistic Press was founded in 2006. It's based on a registered association made up of different societies and private people who promote secular humanism and freethinking in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The registered association "hpd e.V." is the legal structure that makes our editorial work possible. But our editorial team works independently of the association or its members.

The original idea behind Humanistic Press was to create a press agency that would provide media with secular/humanistic news—just like the Catholic press agency in Germany provides them with news from the Catholic world, and the Protestant press agency in Germany provides them with news from the Protestant world. That's where the name comes from: *Humanistischer Pressedienst* (Humanistic Press Service). But the media simply weren't interested. To them nonbelievers, atheists, and secular humanists, were too small a group to be recognised, although they comprised about 30% of the population even by that time.

So Humanistic Press decided to become a medium itself and started doing what we still do today. We report on the activities and events of different organisations that fight for secular humanism in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. We also report on political, legal, and social issues in those countries from a secular point of view. We offer exclusive stories no other media are interested in—stories about blasphemers, about satirical art that criticizes religions, about people who were mistreated or abused in religious establishments, about state money given to churches and the links between church and state in general.

We focus mainly on German speaking countries, but we also consistently report on topics that concern humanism and atheism around the world.

Jacobsen: What have been some of the more moving, difficult, or rewarding experiences in your time there?

Wakonigg: The most moving experience was and still is meeting secular activists from other countries and listening to their stories. These are people whose wellbeing and even lives are in danger in their home countries just because they are raising their voices for humanism and atheism.

When you are constantly working for the rights of atheists in your own country, you start seeing just the negative parts, the things that are not yet in order. Meeting atheists from other countries makes you become aware again about the benefits nonbelievers already have in Europe compared to other parts of the world.

And it personally gave me an insight: atheism/secular humanism is really a uniting force. I remember meeting secular bloggers from Bangladesh who were seeking asylum in Germany. When I talked to them I immediately felt familiar with them. We had the same way of looking at the world—a science-based way, a way that focuses on the wellbeing of people, on the need for education, women's rights, and human rights more broadly.

Though I had never met someone from Bangladesh before and though we had grown up in completely different countries and cultures, I felt more familiar with them than with a deeply religious Christian in Germany.

Jacobsen: What are the biggest needs of the humanist community?

Wakonigg: Their biggest need is to be heard and to be seen as a growing and already very large group in society, because they are still being ignored by politics and media. But it's up to them to

be heard and seen, by publicly saying that they are atheists, by becoming aware that they are a group and by organising.

Jacobsen: What is the best argument for humanism that you have ever come across?

Wakonigg: Your question actually includes two questions. The first one is: What's the best argument for atheism that you have ever come across? The second is: What's the best argument for humanism that you have ever come across? Because atheism and humanism are not the same. But the second often results from the first. And for both, there are many sound arguments.

To initiate an inquiry into atheism, I recommend exploring questions like: Why do people in different parts of the world believe in different gods? How could some gods have vanished (Greco-Roman gods, for instance) and why do you think yours won't vanish? If you have a problem with the idea that the universe/the Big Bang came out of nothing, why don't you have a problem with the idea that your god came out of nothing?

To me, the most convincing argument for atheism is the amount of suffering in the world. It's an old problem theologians and philosophers call 'theodicy': How can a benevolent tolerate suffering?

For me, all the answers that make room for the existence of God are either cynical or not convincing. This is of course a question for people who grew up with the idea of a loving, merciful god. After finding out that a god like that is logically impossible, it's just a small step to finding out that the idea of any god is rather ridiculous.

Once you absorb the logical improbabilities of a loving Creator, you realise that there is exists only one possible way to make this world a better place. And that is by making it yourself. No god will help you, no god brings meaning into this world. The only one who can do it is yourself and your fellow humans. To me that's a pretty good argument for humanism.

Jacobsen: What turns a believer into a non-believer? Arguments from logic and philosophy, evidence from mainstream science, or experience within traditional religious structures?

Wakonigg: There are different reasons why people become atheists. Some people simply never believed because they weren't indoctrinated with a faith as a child, like most people from the former German Democratic Republic. Then you have people who were heavily indoctrinated with religion as children and who become atheists because they got kind of an overdose.

There are people who had had very emotional, personal experiences with members of a religion, like child abuse. Others simply find out that there are double standards in religions whereby authority figures say holy things and do quite unholy things, which causes them to doubt. Others are naturally more inquisitive and are exposed to different ideas through their reading.

Most of the older atheists I know became atheists either after encountering negative experiences with religious structures or after exploring philosophy and logic. The younger atheists I know are atheists, generally speaking, because they find the explanations of science more convincing than those religion offers.

Jacobsen: What do you consider the main threat to humanism?

Wakonigg: The fear of people to think for themselves.

For some reason people seem to be afraid of fully taking responsibility for themselves and for the world. They want a strong leader who will tell them what's good or bad and what their purpose in life is.

This is what a god essentially provides—structure and security. Within this system, my tribal god is of course always stronger than yours! And if he isn't, he is at least providing me with a place in heaven.

Maybe it's a heritage from our ancestors who used to live in groups with a strong leader.

But if you dare to think and—very importantly—dare to accept the results of your thinking, humanism is just a footstep away.

Jacobsen: What are some of the demographics of the readership at Humanistic Press? (Age, sex, political affiliation, and so on)

Wakonigg: I'm very glad to say that we are being read by people of all ages. 16% of our readers are 18-24, 22% are 25-34, 21% are 35-44, 17% are 45-54, 12% are 55-64 and another 12% are 65 or older.

Roughly 70% of our readers are male and about 30% female. That's not too surprising because around the world more men than women identify as atheists or nonbelievers and you have more men than women working as activists in secular humanism—something that will hopefully change in the future.

The political affiliation of our readers is also pretty much average for 'None's around the world. The majority of 'None's and also of our readers has rather a left wing affiliation and a liberal thinking as far as civil rights are concerned.

About 95% percent of our readers are, unsurprisingly, from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland—German speaking countries. But we do, to our surprise, also have a small amount of readers from countries all over the world, despite the fact that our content is completely in German.

Jacobsen: You can be reached through Facebook, Twitter, and Google+. How else can people become involved, even donate to, Humanistic Press?

Wakonigg: Of course donations are always welcome! Apart from that, everyone is free to become a member of the registered association that makes our journalistic work possible. But the easiest way to become involved is by voluntary writing for hpd or by giving us tips for stories that might be interesting for our readers. You can also write stories or give us tips in English and we will translate them.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Daniela. It was a pleasure.

How will Billy Graham be Remembered?

February 23, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Influential Evangelical pastor Billy Graham (1918-2018), who played an outsized role in American Evangelical Christianity, died Wednesday at the age of 99.

Rev. Billy Graham was one of the most prominent American preachers of the 20th century. He died on February 21, 2018, at the age of 99. In his public preachings, he attracted as many as 130,000 people.

Some argue he preached to more people than any single preacher in the history of the world. Through his preaching, he wanted to renew in people their sense of God. He was involved in the Civil Rights Era movement.

His early preachings were more conservative and political, but through the course of his life, he began to preach in an apolitical style and in content as well. His wife, Ruth, found the hard way that his preaching came before anything else in the world.

Bill travelled frequently to preaching engagements. His evangelizing for Evangelical Christianity in particular, and Christianity in general, spanned for more than six decades.

According to Mark DeMoss who is a spokesperson for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, “It was described by nurse and doctor as a very peaceful passing [...] He was not in any pain, and he wouldn’t have suffered any.”

Dr Lucian Rice of Asheville, who was the personal physician of Graham, stated that “He just wore out.” The funeral procession for “America’s Pastor” has been planned. Graham, prior to death, long suffered from pneumonia, cancer, and other ailments.

US President Donald Trump tweeted, “The GREAT Billy Graham is dead. There was nobody like him! He will be missed by Christians and all religions. A very special man... gave hope and guidance to generations of Americans.”

Rev. Graham evangelised to over 215 million people. He was listed as one of the “Ten Most Admired Men in the World.” Most will remember Graham for appealing to broad numbers of people for his Christian faith. Others have called him “evil.” His son, William Franklin Graham III, is the official successor based on the claims of Graham.

Billy Graham was a controversial figure. It is still debated whether he was ahead of his time in the Civil Rights era or whether his positions were weak and some of his integration rhetoric and behaviour, token.

His stance on homosexuality, however, was infinitely more clear, with the pastor saying the following: “We traffic in homosexuality at the peril of our spiritual welfare” and claiming homosexuality to be a “sinister form of perversion.”

He played a fundamental role in uniting the evangelical factions of the Christian Right.

His own wishes were to be remembered as a preacher. His body will be laid to rest at the United States Capitol.

Fundamentalism and Sex: Guilt, Taboos, and Recovery

February 23, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Iconoclastic, witty, and insightful, Dr. Darrel Ray's works are must-reads. In the following interview, he gives readers an inside look into fundamentalism and its warped view of sex.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You grew up in a Christian fundamentalist family in Wichita, Kansas. From a youth perspective, what's running through a child's mind as they're growing up in this environment?

Dr. Darrel Ray: As you're growing up, you're being taught a whole lot of things, one of which is the language you're speaking or you're going to speak. There aren't any children that sit around thinking, 'I wonder why mom isn't teaching my Chinese, or why am I not learning Zulu.'

Jacobsen: [Laughing] That's right.

Ray: At the same time, you're learning a lot of other things—how to have polite manners at the table, how to treat other people, and what beliefs govern the household.

To a child, language acquisition and religious acquisition are happening at the same time and they are not going to question why they are not being taught Catholicism or Buddhism. They accept their parents' beliefs at this age.

In a hunter-gatherer society—from which we're only separated by a few thousand years—children are genetically and biologically wired to listen to their parents.

If there's a lion out there that can eat you, you'd better listen to your parents when they say, 'Don't go into that bush over there, because there's tigers and lions that might eat you.'

If Mom and Dad turn around the next day and say, 'Don't go into that bush over there because there are demons that will send you to Hell,' how does a child know the difference?

Jacobsen: They don't.

Ray: They can't. So, by age 10, kids have programmed all those kinds of ideas without the ability to critically analyse them. Once they're embedded in your brain, they're embedded deeply and, often, permanently.

Notions like Hell can profoundly scare a child who goes to a Pentecostal meeting where eternal damnation is described in explicit detail.

It can easily trigger responses that are no different than those triggered by the threat of a lion. Your brain is going to respond to that threat, whether it's the threat of Hell or the threat of a lion eating you.

I work, we work, with a lot of people who are dealing with the fear of Hell. They're atheists, but they were raised in families like the Westboro Baptist Church.

Even as adults, they still wake up in a cold sweat at night from their nightmares. We know now that's probably related to post traumatic stress disorder.

In fact, Dr. Marlene Winnell, pioneer psychologist over in the Bay Area, renamed it ‘religious trauma syndrome’ because she could see from her work that the post-traumatic stress of somebody coming back from a war zone in Afghanistan looks a lot like the stress people had being raised in religious environments from early on. That’s a long answer to a short question.

Jacobsen: Tell me a little more about Recovering from Religion.

Ray: We help people deal with the consequences and trauma of leaving religion. Let’s say a 40-year-old with 2 children now recognises that everything he was taught is a bunch of phooey, what does he do now?

He has already raised his kids religious. His wife is still religious. Who does he turn to? He certainly can’t go talk to his minister. I started Recovering from Religion in 2009 and we’ve since grown phenomenally.

We now have a hotline somebody can call and say exactly what they feel. We get calls from religious people. We get parents. Parents, for example, will call us and say ‘We love our child, they say they’re an atheist now and we found you on the Internet. We want to respect our child, but we don’t know how to deal with it because we’re Catholic or we’re Jewish or we’re Buddhist.’

We have small group meetings all over the world. People meet about once a month, talk to each other about recovering issues. We have many other programs.

But the short answer is we’re helping people deal with the trauma and consequences of leaving religion.

Jacobsen: What personality factors or variables play into the rate at which someone can recover? Is the level of general intelligence, or the degree to which someone can adhere strongly to engaging in executive function behaviour, a factor? Grit?

Ray: I write extensively about that in my book, *The God Virus*. It has little to do with intelligence. That’s not say to intelligence doesn’t have anything to do with it. There are five major personality components in human beings. Four of those components do not correlate at all with religiosity.

The fifth one, however, does—curiosity, and openness to new experience. The research seems to show that the less curious you are, the less open you are to new experience, the more likely you are to be infected with religious notions of any kind.

On the other hand, children who are raised by parents who are religious, but who are open to curiosity, are going to be constantly asking ‘Why?’

It’s hard to infect that kid or keep them infected because they keep asking the wrong questions. The other child, the one who’s not open to new experience and who isn’t particularly curious, they don’t ask those questions in the first place.

Generally people go through a phase, anywhere from two to three years, where they deal with that dissonance, that conflict between emotions that say, ‘There is a hell,’ or emotions that say, ‘God is watching me all the time.’

Logic says, ‘That’s crazy.’ But it takes quite a while—sometimes a lifetime. Like I said, I got people dealing with it who have been nonreligious for decades.

I don't think there's a formula. With *Recovering from Religion*, we take people where they are. Obviously, we don't give them personality tests or IQ tests or anything. But IQ does correlate with curiosity and a willingness to have new experiences. There are the phenomena that the more educated you are, the less religious you're likely to be. 94 percent of all the top scientists in the United States are atheists.

Jacobsen: You use the term 'infected' when talking about children. Does that come from Richard Dawkins' use of the words 'viruses' and 'infections' to describe religions?

Ray: My book *The God Virus* was largely inspired by an essay he wrote back in 1989 called "Viruses of the Mind." This metaphor has been around since he wrote his book *The Selfish Gene* back in 1976.

Dawkins is a biologist. Daniel Dennett is a philosopher. Sam Harris is a neurologist. None, however, is a psychologist. Nobody is looking at it from an anthropological, sociological, or psychological point of view.

So, I basically stole Dawkins' notion of a mind virus and applied it specifically to religion. He quite approved of it. I met Richard several times and he likes the book, *The God Virus*, likes its specific application, from a psychological perspective.

Jacobsen: Who have been your unexpected, even religious, allies with *Recovering from Religion* and the Secular Therapy Project?

Ray: With *Recovery from Religion*, we are appreciative of Unitarians. While they may be somewhat religious, they can be secular too.

Secular Jewish organisations have also been good allies. Other groups include the Satanic Temple and Flying Spaghetti Monster. People like that love us. Those are all groups that we have some alliances with, that we cooperate with.

The LGBTQ community is one of our biggest allies, and vice versa. So many people in the LGBTQ community have been disfellowshipped or thrown out or in some way, ostracised by their families and their community.

As a result, other gay church members start asking questions. How many gay music directors and choir directors get exposed and kicked out of their church because they are gay? Now, they're looking for a community, looking for a place to land. We're one of those places that's easy to find on the Internet.

When they find us, they're on their way out, or somebody outed them and now they're searching for answers to questions. We are here for them. If they want to stay Catholic or whatever, all we do is listen and help them find solutions. We aren't in the business of de-conversion.

The beautiful thing is that in 2009 there was no organisation to call.

The only person you'd probably talk to maybe were psychologists. And you certainly wouldn't talk to your minister. Now, we are here. We have an enormous resource page on our website. We have hundreds and hundreds of links and resources for people in every walk of life, and from every religion. We're expanding rapidly as we speak. That's the first answer

As for the Secular Therapy Project, there are real people out there, real psychologists, real social workers who still believe you can pray the gay away. There are psychologists who went to

seminary and learned that homosexuality is a sin, being a lesbian is a sin, being trans is a sin, and so on.

They believe this and they practice it. In their practice, they still use Jesus to heal people. It is crazy and dangerous. If a person comes into a practice and says, 'I'm depressed' and the psychologist says, 'You're depressed because you're an atheist. You're depressed because you turned your back on Jesus,' that certainly doesn't help the depression. That's what we faced, and I faced that in 2010, and 2011. After my book *The God Virus* came out, people who had never heard of me said, 'Help me find a good psychologist. The last psychologist I went to sent me back to church, or the last psychologist I went to said I need to get Jesus.'

'If a person comes into a practice and says, "I'm depressed" and the psychologist says, "You're depressed because you're an atheist. You're depressed because you turned your back on Jesus," that certainly doesn't help the depression'

I started looking and it's impossible to find a secular therapist—no therapist admits they're an atheist.

The notion of a Christian counsellor has ballooned in popularity over the last 20 years. Entire programs have been developed around Christian counselling. Some of them are Biblical Christian counselling.

There's no science behind this stuff and yet these people are getting insurance money. They're licensed. They're certified in various states. So, I realised that I'm going to have to do something about this.

I started the Secular Therapy Project in 2012 and got a website and database developed. Now, people around the country, and around the world, are coming to us. We just opened our database to the international community. Now a therapist in South Africa, Germany or any other country, can register with us.

We have four highly qualified therapists on our vetting team. If you were a social worker and you wanted to become a part of our database, you would apply. You'd have to prove two things to us. One, that you're secular. We need evidence of that. We look at what groups you belong to or descriptions on your webpage. Second, you need to prove to us that you use evidence-based methods and are licensed, if appropriate, in your area.

So, once we've established you're bona fide, we let you into the database. Then if I'm searching for a therapist who is secular, I can go into the database. I can register for free. All of this for free—free to the therapist, free to the client.

I can find out if there's anybody in my zip code or anywhere close to my zip code, like a Match.com between therapists and clients. But it maintains confidentiality and anonymity for the client and for the therapist.

Jacobsen: What is the perception of atheists in the larger society?

Ray: Atheists are the most hated 'religious' minority in the United States, even more so than Muslims. It's funny, but that's what the few trusted religious surveys have shown for quite a few years now.

Jacobsen: How has religion infiltrated what should be otherwise evidence-based institutions?

Ray: In the United States is, places like Liberty University or Regents University, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson's institutions respectively, and other institutions, like George Fox University, are all fundamentalist colleges and universities.

They have created new programs for family therapy. They are religious institutions teaching family therapy or psychotherapy methods and requiring people to adhere to their theological perspectives throughout their training.

For example, at Brigham Young University, a Mormon Institution, if you are a Ph.D. or Master's level candidate, you would have to sign a statement saying you will not masturbate and you won't have sex outside of marriage.

These folks graduate from that college and go out into the world of practice. What are they going to teach people? How are they going to get over their own hang ups around masturbation and help somebody who's having a lot of sexual guilt?

Jacobsen: Is sex addiction a real thing? Why do religions, especially Abrahamic ones, try to restrict and direct the sexual activity of young people, especially the women?

Ray: I believe sex addiction is a religious construct. It is not a psychological or scientific construct. In fact, the definition of hypersexuality has changed precisely because it is so difficult to define. Is somebody masturbating 10 times a day hypersexual? If it doesn't interfere with his life or her life, then they are not hypersexual. In the Catholic worldview, however, masturbating even once makes you a sex addict.

All patriarchal religions have discovered over the centuries that the best way to control people is through their sex and sexuality. I use the term 'guilt cycle' in my book *The God Virus*.

Religions teach you, from an early age, that sex is bad, that masturbation is bad. If you do it, then you're going to hell: Jesus is watching you.

There's a voyeuristic God out there who wants to see everything you do and is going to condemn you. I often tell Christians that if you're a believer, and you have sex, then you have a threesome with Jesus. He's watching you the whole time.

Patriarchal religions teach you that your own body is your enemy. Look at the story of Adam and Eve.

Women are temptresses and they succumb to temptation. This is present in many religions, not only Christianity. Control of women's sexuality is a top priority. It starts early on with girls being taught about the religious concept of virginity.

Virginity is not a biological concept. At all. It's a religious concept. So, what we do is we teach girls that virginity is precious, God owns your virginity; in other words, you do not own your own body, and losing your virginity is a dangerous thing.

You must guard it carefully. Of course, on the opposite side, it assumes that boys are out to get your virginity; that you must protect yourself; that you keep your legs together with an aspirin between them.

All these messages are present purity culture, especially among fundamentalists, but it pervades our whole culture. And when we have people going into our schools right now teaching abstinence only, it is not only unproductive, but most of the messages are guilt messages aimed at girls.

The guilt cycle is further perpetuated when kids explore their sexuality through masturbation and feel compelled to confess. Mitt Romney, when he was bishop of the Mormon church, most likely had to listen to 12-year-old kids telling him if they masturbated.

Then that kid is handed an 8-page piece of literature, from which I quote in my book *Sex and God*, that uses euphemisms to condemn masturbation, 'Don't tamper with the factory.'

Your genitals are a factory for creating sperm (in the case of a boy). It's going to do its thing and you shouldn't mess with it. Don't touch your genitals. And Mitt Romney was giving this thing to people.

Jacobsen: What's the most bizarre sexual taboo that you've come across in your research on sex and religion?

Ray: Oh, that's an easy question to answer. Most Christians say to secularists, 'You want to be secular because you want to act like an animal. You want to have all the sex you can.' Let me tell you something.

There are almost no animals on this planet that can have sex whenever they want to. Humans, bonobo apes, chimps, and dolphins can have sex whenever they want to.

But my dog only mates when she's ready to procreate. That insect that's getting ready to hatch out of its larva this spring is only going to have sex to procreate.

Most animals in this planet only have sex to procreate. In other words, when the Pope tells you to have sex only to procreate, he's telling you to have sex like an animal. He's telling you to have sex like an animal because most animals only have procreative sex. We and the few species I just named, can have sex whenever we want.

As a human, I have sex whenever I want to, and masturbation is a big part of being human. When the Pope says nuns cannot have sex their entire lives, that to me is one of the most perverted sexual things you can ask a person to do.

Jacobsen: Do most people who become nuns or priests self-select or is there reinforcement or encouragement at work?

Ray: They're somewhat self-selected at an early age before their hormones start flowing. Many, many priests tell me that they committed their life to God when they were only 12- or 13-years-old.

Self-selection does play a role, though. About one percent of the population probably meets the criteria of being asexual. I am guessing that priests and nuns are more likely to be asexual than the general population.

Jacobsen: What are the criteria for asexuality?

Ray: If you are asexual, you have no interest in sex at all. Maybe 1% of the population is asexual.

Jacobsen: That's a lot of people.

Ray: There is probably a large percentage of that population that is situationally asexual. People have told me after they got divorced that they had no interest in sex for three years. Then suddenly their sex life comes back, their libido comes back.

If that one percent of people, however, are self-selecting to become priests, then they have a huge advantage. They're not interested in sex and never will be interested in sex. So, they're going to make great priests. But the problem with that is they're also going to be great priests standing up in front of everybody else and saying, 'You can't masturbate. You can't have sex.' It's easy for them to say!

I have no interest in *Game of Thrones* but I don't dictate that preference to others.

The fact is that most of those priests are not asexual, though.

I've interviewed so many priests. They commit themselves to the church at 12 or 13, often at the behest of their parents because Catholics love to have a boy in the family who's a priest. That gives them lots of status in the Catholic community. And so, the kid at 12 or 13, under parental pressure and family pressure, goes to an all-boys seminary and in the all-boys seminary, there's a lot of homosexual activity going on.

These boys are discovering their sexuality at that time, even as they're going through their celibate and abstinence-only indoctrination. They are being programmed to sexually respond in that environment. That's a big part of where the pedophile priest issue comes from. My own research and that of others has verified this.

It is the way they're being trained as boys, because our brains are designed to look for what is the appropriate sexual behaviour and sexual object in our culture.

That's why what is attractive and beautiful in one culture is not attractive and beautiful in another culture, because the brain has been programmed for that cultural expectation.

An insect or a bird knows exactly who to mate with. We don't. We must learn that. If your brain is turned on to learning who to mate with when you're 13, 14, 15, and you're in an all-boys seminary, or all girl's nunnery, and you look around, all you see are boys, or all you see are girls, your brain is going to imprint in that environment.

Your brain thinks you should focus your mating behaviour on the kind of sex objects present at that time in your brain's development. It's done at a biological and neurological level.

Every culture seems to have a body type that is more prevalent. An extreme example is something called 'steatopygia' in Africa. Women with gigantic bottoms.

Now, why do women in certain tribes of Africa have this? Whereas you go to Wales and you look at women there, who, on average, have much larger breasts than women in other places? Then in Asia, women are very petite in both departments. So, you must ask the question, 'Why is there such a massive difference in body types across cultures?' And part of that has to do with what we're talking about. We literally are breeding ourselves.

There is sexual selection going on right within our own species and different cultures highlight what is sexually attractive in their culture. Then those people tend to breed more successfully. Their offspring tend to carry those characteristics generation after generation.

It's fascinating to know we're doing to ourselves what we do with cattle and what we do with dogs. We're self-breeding. And it's because the brain is programmed to look around and say, "What is attractive? What is attractive in my culture?"

Males and females, starting from around 12 to 13 years of age, have their brains programmed to ask, 'What is the right thing in this culture?' Once they've locked in on that, then that becomes their sexual focus, probably for the rest of their lives.

It is especially true of men. The research shows that men fetishize much more quickly and completely and for much longer than women do. So, if a man has a breast fetish, he locks in on that. He's probably going to have a breast fetish for the rest of his life.

Jacobsen: What are some universally attractive characteristics?

Ray: I'm not sure I can answer that. Humans are the most sexually flexible animals on the planet. There's almost no other species nearly as sexually flexible as ours. There's a good book called *Sexual Fluidity*. It came out about 5 years ago.

It's a long term study of women and shows how women's sexual behaviour changes rather dramatically over a lifetime. A woman who may describe herself as straight in her teens may describe herself as bisexual in her 20s and lesbian in her 30s then back to straight in her 40s.

It's amazing how fluid women's sexuality is. Men do not seem to be nearly as fluid, but they are still fluid within that window of time that I've spoken about when the brain is being programmed.

Humans want variety, constant variety. That's partially what drives our consumerist society. We're always looking for the new thing; we always want the latest technology, the newest car, a different colour or shade of lipstick or whatever.

It's the same thing that drives our sexuality. One of the problems with religious sexuality is its strict prohibition of fluidity of any kind.

The fact is, there's no human society on this planet that's monogamous. There's never been a time in human history that was monogamous. I give talks about this all the time. I ask my audience. Let's say there are 400 people in the room.

I'd say, 'How many of you know someone who is monogamous?' And I bet half the hands will raise up. Now, I say, 'If it's not you, how would you know?' And almost all the hands go down. People lie about their sexual experience, especially women, because sexual experiences are shamed in our culture. Women are shamed for being sexual.

The one size fits all religious straitjacket works for people who have a low sex drive, low level of curiosity, who are asexual, or someone who buys into the religious stuff about staying married to your spouse for the rest of your life.

The rest of us, we don't want to have deal with that. That's why the divorce rate is so high. The divorce rate is higher among the most religious. The more religious you are, then the more likely you are to be divorced.

Jacobsen: Do religious people tend to experience more guilt with regards to sex?

Ray: Oh, there's a lot of shame and guilt that they don't know how to deal with. So, they act it out and that leads to divorce.

You might look at David Barash and Judith Lipton's book, it's a great book called *The Myth of Monogamy*.

Or read Dr. Marty Klein's essay called "You're Addicted to What?" Or you might also be interested in Dr. Marty Klein's book called *America's War on Sex*. It's an interesting look at politics and statistics and practices of America and sexuality.

And of course, if you're interested in the sex part of it, go look at my book, *Sex and God: How Religion Distorts Sexuality*. There's a lot of people starting to write about it. The reason I wrote both of my most recent books was because I wasn't seeing anybody talking about this stuff, especially sex.

Nobody wants to challenge the religious notions about sexuality in our culture. And nobody wants to challenge therapists that are using nonscientific approaches to therapy that cause more problems.

The first rule of medicine is 'do no harm' and yet psychotherapists out there are exacerbating the psychological problems that people are having that were initially caused by religion.

As a therapist, my colleagues verify this. 80 percent, probably more, are dealing with sex problems directly related to religious training.

Jacobsen: Are there any aspects of religion that you find admirable?

Ray: Religion can bring people together as a community. But this is not unique to religion. Humans are social creatures. We want community.

We want a place where our children can be taught, where they can be safe. And churches claim to do that for people. Unfortunately, once you get in the church, then your children are going to be taught things you probably don't want them to be taught.

Where's the secular person going to go? Too many secular people say, 'I went back to church because I wanted a community. I don't believe a word that minister is saying.' But the problem is you're putting your children through Sunday school where they're being taught some nasty stuff.

God created genocide, killed everybody on the planet through this cute little story about Noah's Ark or another cute little story like murdering all the children for making fun of a prophet.

Sunday Assembly is a secular movement out of England. It's sputtered a bit, but it's working in some places. Oasis started about 3 years ago. It's bringing secular community together as well. It's a weekly meeting on Sunday morning at 11 o'clock where mostly atheists, secularists, and humanists, all come together and have a blast listening to a lecture on an interesting topic, hearing some good music.

There is childcare, which is really important. All churches have childcare. We've got childcare. The minute you add childcare to the formula, your population doubles or triples. It's amazing to see how many people come to these things.

We're getting 200 people showing up every Sunday. Houston is getting 150 people showing up every Sunday. Now, it sounds crazy and people say it sounds like an atheist church. Oh, no, it's community, like the Rotary Club is a community

Nobody calls them a church. Our focus is on education, science, and philosophy. We have great speakers, people who challenge your thinking process about stuff like death. What does death mean to an atheist?

We have presentations on polyamory. Now, what church is going to let you talk about swinging or polyamory?

Jacobsen: Not many.

Ray: You would be shocked at the number of polyamorous in the atheist community. About 30 percent of our group in Oasis is poly or poly friendly. The fact is, there's probably poly people in churches too.

They couldn't say it. Or they'd get thrown it. Does that answer your question?

Jacobsen: That does, and I'm out of them. So, thank you much for your time, Darrel.

Ray: My pleasure.

Andrew Copson: Humanism and Secularism in Modern Society

February 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK and President of IHEU, talks to Conatus News about humanism and secularism in modern society.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I wanted to talk about humanism: the hows and whys, the theoretical and practical. To begin, what is humanism properly defined in its most general sense?

Andrew Copson: In English, since the mid-nineteenth century, when it first appeared as a word, ‘humanism’ has had two main meanings. One is to refer to the cultural milieu of Renaissance Europe (which we now more often call ‘Renaissance humanism’); the second is to refer to a non-religious approach to questions of value, meaning, and truth which emphasises the role of humanity in these areas of life rather than the role of any deity. This ‘humanism’ is the one which has inspired the setting up of humanist organisations and the development, by humanist thinkers and activists, of the more fully worked out approach to life or worldview that we refer to with the word ‘humanism’ today.

Jacobsen: As you are based in the U.K., and you have leadership roles within the U.K. for humanism, how do you mobilise British humanists outside of a faith-based framework?

Copson: I don’t know if it’s that different. Humanists, like anyone else, are motivated to action by their beliefs. Undoubtedly, humanist organisations and leaders don’t have the god-backed power to instruct their fellow believers to do this or that, but then that doesn’t work out well for religious leaders either. I think that leadership in a humanist context is about being clear in public forums about our values and beliefs and the living out and modelling them in practice too. If people agree with your reasoning and warm to your manner, they will consider doing as you suggest.

Jacobsen: Who do you consider the founder of humanistic values, at the individual and societal level?

Copson: Throughout recorded history and around the world there have been humanists, and this is not surprising as humanist beliefs and values can be arrived anywhere by anyone with reason and empathy. There have probably always been such people. The first people who expressed at least some humanist views that we know about and who left their thoughts for us in writing are people like Mengzi in China 2,300 years ago, followers of the Charvaka school in India 2,500 years ago, and thinkers of the Greek and Roman world of 2,500 to 1,800 years ago. None of the societies in which these views were expressed could be described as humanist – they were diverse societies in which there were many schools of thought – but they were undoubtedly more humanistic than, for example, the Christian states of medieval Europe. It was in part the rediscovery and reception of these humanistic thinkers that kickstarted the humanistic trends that have transformed the world and made it modern.

Jacobsen: Who do you consider the founder of modern humanism as a fully fledged alternate, explicit life philosophy?

Copson: There is no doubt that the most apparent English speaking framer of humanism in the specific sense of a defined worldview rather than a general social and intellectual trend is one of my predecessors as Chief Executive of Humanists UK – Harold Blackham. In the early twentieth century, he enlisted great thinkers and reformers to give form to this ‘humanism’ both in the UK and internationally as the first Secretary General of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. He was joined in this internationally by the Dutch thinker and activist Jaap van Praag, who I would also want to name in any humanist hall of founders.

Jacobsen: From the perspective of humanists, what are perennial threats to their free practice of belief and living out humanism?

Copson: The biggest threats to humanists have always been those of culture, tradition, religion and ideology. All of these forces, especially when allied to political or state power, restrict the scope for freethinking and the dynamic challenging of authority through our reason, which is the hallmark of the humanist approach. Racism, xenophobia, and nationalism, which all attempt to reduce the types of people entitled to our empathy and moral concern, are the second group of continuing threats to our life stance.

Jacobsen: You represent the young and the old. If there is survey data, empirical information in other words, what are the general concerns of young humanists?

Copson: Survey data don’t seem to suggest that there are significant differences between older and younger humanists. What they have in common is a preference for liberal and tolerant social policies. Younger people tend to be less reluctant to question and critique the beliefs of religious believers in their cohort than older people were or are. I think this is an extension of their greater commitment to tolerance, but I also think it is something of a concern, as it is so important for every generation to be critically-minded to face the perennial threats that target human reason and empathy.

Jacobsen: Tied to the previous question, even without firm empirical data, what are, or at least seem to be, the issues for older cohorts of humanists?

Copson: Older humanists in the UK tend to be surprised that there are still issues around religion and politics in UK society. They grew up in a context where religion was fading from the public agenda and now – primarily due to immigration – it is back on that agenda. So older people tend to be very concerned that the liberal social gains that there have seen secured in their lifetime – around liberal education, the human rights of children, the secularisation of social policy – may be reversed and that this will worsen the lives of their children and grandchildren. If I had to pick one policy issue that concerns them, I think assisted dying would be it. Older people have to deal with a very particular situation that few older people in the history of our species have faced. Modern medicine has preserved their lives and health beyond imagination, but the new problem this raises is how to bring a dignified end to individual human existence when worthwhile life is over. Older humanists don’t see why their freedom of choice and their human dignity should be compromised in the way that religious lobbies and opponents of choice have successfully kept it as being.

French Embassy in Burkina Faso attacked by jihadist terrorists

March 4, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

A terrorist attack on the French Embassy in Burkina Faso on Friday, March 3, believed to be targeting the anti-terror force G5-Sahel has killed dozens.

A jihadist terror attack on the French Embassy in Burkina Faso claimed dozens of lives on Friday, March 3. There were two attacks, with one on the French Embassy in Burkina Faso and an assault on the military headquarters of Burkina Faso, which was a meeting for regional anti-jihadist forces talks. These coordinated attacks mark an ongoing struggle of West African nations to contain the continual onslaught of jihadist terrorism.

According to the Burkina Faso government, the attack on the military was a suicide car bombing. A planned meeting of the G5 Sahel regional anti-terrorism force may have been the target of the terrorist attack. There were officials from Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger present, as they are the countries represented in the G5. These five countries have launched a joint military force to combat the growing threat of jihadists in the southern Saharan region. 80 people were wounded, and eight members of the Armed Forces were killed in the combined body and injury count of the combined, coordinated attacks on Burkina Faso, according to Security Minister Clement Sawadogo. The eight attackers of the combined Jihadist attacks were shot dead.

President Roch Marc Christian Kabore stated, "Our country was once again the target of dark forces." According to witnesses, five men who are armed got out of the car and opened fire on people passing by before they began to head towards the French Embassy.

The G5 forces will be comprised of approximately 5,000 soldiers, which will be fully operational by the end of March. The French army will back these forces with additional deployments of soldiers. France has so far deployed 4,000 troops to support the G5 joint force.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) declared that some of its members were involved in the terrorist attacks. France 24 said, "Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Murabitoun group, which was led by the one-eyed Algerian jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar."

Burkina Faso's Information Minister, Remis Fulgance Dandjinou described the essence of the attack as having "strong overtones of terrorism."

There has been an interim United Nations report by the AFP that has warned about the growing threat of jihadist ideology and the hottest terrorism. The various insurgencies in the region have caused thousands of deaths in addition to making tens of thousands of people flee their homes. This has continued to deal harsh "blows" to the economy of some of the poorest people in the world.

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Tear Gas and Arrests Follow Turkish Women's Rights Protests

March 6, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

On March 4, Turkish protesters were on the streets of Ankara, Turkey, for the advancement of women's rights and were met with arrests and tear gas.

At a gathering ahead of International Women's Day, which is on March 8, the marchers ignored calls to disperse their protests. This was not taken well by the riot police, as the protests were dealt with force. The force included the arrest of several women protesters and tear gas being fired at the crowds.

15 protesters, all women, were detained, according to The Japan Times. 1,500 women organised in Istanbul in Bakirkoy district on the European section of the society alone. It was a joint protest against the government of Turkey and its leadership's decisions, especially those of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has been a subject of continual controversy nationally and internationally on a variety of topics and decisions, and actions.

Hurriyet Daily News reported that the rioters were mostly from the Ankara Women's Platform (AWP), a non-governmental organisation devoted to the promotion of women's rights. These were women's rights campaigners and activists who were met with tear gas and arrested after refusing to disperse on the demands of the riot police.

One banner raised by the marcher's said, "We are getting stronger in solidarity."

The AWP was protesting the opposition to the Turkish military campaign in Syria. President Erdogan considers these people terrorists in Turkey.

One woman in talking to the AFP said, "There is a war on our border. We cannot remain indifferent." Protests by women rights activists and campaigners are not new in Turkey. There is a noble and honourable tradition that deserves international praise. There was a protest as recent as last summer over dress codes in Turkey

This is the continuance of resistance to the restrictions of and violence of the current leadership of the country.

Could Research into Synesthesia Lead to a Better Understanding of Autism?

March 7, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

It appears that synesthesia may be the result of abnormal brain connections, as in the case of other conditions, such as autism.

Science Magazine reported on the new research on synesthesia, the ability to directly perceive and experience multiple senses at once, where one of the five base senses are cross-wired. What does this mean in practical terms?

A person with the synesthesia will hear the colour blue and taste G sharp. It amounts to a “mingling of the senses” and sounds eerily like “colorless green ideas sleep furiously.”

It is estimated to affect only as little as 3 to 5 percent of the general population. There are different types of synesthesia, too, with grapheme-colour synesthesia, in which numbers and letters become associated with particular colors, as the most commonly studied.

University of Amsterdam researcher Romke Rouw found the results very exciting. A number of genes might predispose individuals for synesthesia. Further research may provide a window into other disorders such as autism.

It appears that synesthesia may be the result of abnormal brain connections, as in the case of other conditions, such as autism. According to Rouw’s analysis, the abnormal brain connections are tied to hyperconnectivity, where the hyperconnectivity influences the brain and so the sensation perception of the synesthete.

Psychologists and neuroscientists were unwilling to research synesthesia for decades. Some even denied its existence. It was highly difficult to study because of the subjective nature of the unusual, and involuntary, condition.

Mutations, which could be tracked in families, may serve to shed light upon the condition. Simon Fisher at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands used whole-exome sequencing to find the gene variants responsible for the condition.

This type of gene-sequencing technique only targets DNA meant to encode proteins. Fisher gather genomes from four or five synesthetes, and one non-synesthete, covering three generations from each family researched.

The synesthetes had color-sound synesthesia. 37 genes predicted the family members who would and would not have the inherited synesthesia that causes cross-talk between color and sound in experience. No genetic variant appeared to be shared in the three families studied with no single synesthete gene or gene set assumed to be present based on the new research.

6 of the variants were related to genes associated with the development of connections between neurons and axons. These variants were shown to be active in the auditory and visual cortices.

It has been suggested in previous research that synesthetes have a higher number of connections between brain regions. With this research evidence, it would appear to be supported with

hyperconnectivity as the principle and the regions of the brain as the marker for the type of synesthesia.

Rouw cautions, “In the end, replication is going to be key.” That is, there needs to be more research, as research scientists are commonly known to say with good reason, which means the preliminary findings here are a good means through which to further the research into synesthesia and support some hypotheses more than others to carve out the empirical truth of the matter.

Price concluded, “If the findings pan out, studying neuronal connections in synesthesia could be a boon to autism researchers. Many people with autism spectrum disorder also have an enhanced sensitivity to stimuli such as sounds or touch, and there’s mounting evidence that abnormal brain connections—more in some regions, fewer in others—might play a significant role.”

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Global Secular Humanist Movement: A Reality in the Near Future?

March 8, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Faisal Saeed Al Mutar, founder of Ideas Beyond Borders and the Global Secular Humanist Movement speaks to Conatus News about secularism in the Middle East.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are some initiatives you're hoping to lay out for 2018 with the Global Secular Humanist Movement?

Faisal Saeed Al Mutar: Global Secular Humanist Movement has been undergoing multiple evolutions. During the Arab Spring in the middle of 2009 and then 2010, I saw potential for a movement that would unite secularists globally. I wanted to share the message of activists within the Arab world, a message I felt deserved a larger audience, to the world.

Initially, I thought I was the only one who thought that way. Then the page grew to 350,000 people. Often, when there is a significant terrorist attack, we hear the question, "Who are the secularists in the region?"

The goal for 2018 is to highlight the incredibly important work of people who are on the frontline fighting extremism in the region. Also, we want to expand beyond Islamic extremism.

We want to speak out against the far Right and the extremists on the Left. We want it to be more of a hub for many of these writers, journalists, and activists the world over – for them to be able to express themselves.

For the Arab world, we have the program called ASAP – Arab Secular Assistance Project – which is part of Ideas Beyond Borders but frequently shared on GSHM Channels. The goal is to introduce progressive Arab voices to the world by translating their material into English and other languages as well.

The goal is to promote the freedom fighters, especially secular freedom fighter in a way that would help the general public as well as policymakers.

We can amplify their voices in the struggle against authoritarians and Islamists. That is the goal of the Global Secular Humanist Movement. The goal is to get their stories viral.

Jacobsen: Who have been some of the more prominent writers to come out of that outlet?

Mutar: Over the past three years, I have worked more as an agent to activists within the Arab world. The goal was not to publish people inside the Global Secular Humanist Platforms but, rather, to publish them on multiple news platforms like The Daily Beast and CNN.

Then we share their articles on the Global Secular Humanist Movements. Of the more prominent cases we have worked on have been those of the Bengali bloggers. They have endured horrendous atrocities in the region, and many of them lost their lives, but we have been publishing their work.

We have been able to publish them on English-language outlets, such as the aforementioned. An organisation I worked for was the hub in spreading these voices as well as figures like Raif

Badawi, Secular Iranians, Saudi and women's rights activists like Manal Sharif, and people like Waleed Al-Husseini from Palestine. He was in prison for ten years for his non-belief.

It became a platform for activists to get to know each other as well. Many friendships are the product of that page! We share articles and spark conversations and use videos, all to highlight the work of these brave activists.

Jacobsen: With Ideas Beyond Borders, what are some initiatives you hope will bring about change in 2018?

Mutar: Our major initiative now is to translate books related to science, humanism, critical thinking, Enlightenment values, and so on, from English to Arabic. What we are doing is getting the legal licenses from these authors, people like Steven Pinker, Sam Harris, and many others to get their books translated into Arabic.

The goal is to do the actual translation, and over the time we will be building partnerships across the Arab speaking world with many social media pages. Now, we are building ones with TV and radio stations, where we promote and make small videos that discuss some of these writings.

We call this the House of Wisdom. In the 13th century in Baghdad, there was a Caliph called the Mamun. They used to translate books from other languages – mostly Latin and Greek – into Arabic.

Our program is called House of Wisdom or Bayt al-Hikma 2.0. We are doing the digital version of what the Caliph did the 13th century. We are doing it digitally because it can more easily be accessible.

We are aiming to distribute these books for free. Getting licenses and such requires money, but we are hoping to make this information as accessible as possible to mainly young Arab-speaking audiences.

Many initiatives originating in the Arab world have aimed to do this. The only difference or the major difference is that I am aiming to do it in a more legal or sustainable way. For example, The God Delusion has been downloaded 15 million times across the Arab world.

The issue is that some of these publishing companies have a problem with that because this is copyrighted material. We are trying to do it legally and sustainably, as opposed to relying on various translators in their basements.

I am inspired by these translators who are living under dangerous circumstances in Baghdad or Syria and disseminating that knowledge. For us, Ideas Beyond Borders is where the idea came from; it is a bridge between the Arab speaking and the English speaking world. This project has never been realised in the West, which is kind of saddening.

It gives Ideas Beyond Borders a niche market. That will be the primary program. But we do have other programs that will be implemented this year. One of them is the “positive counter-extremism messaging.”

The goal is that when there is a terrorist attack like Orlando or something like that, the news media focuses on how bad the state of the world is. What I think is missing, what I think terrorists want to achieve, is to make things hopeless for people to achieve anything. Positive counter-extremism messaging, where we can highlight the positive things happening and the

projects and ways people can donate to initiatives that are working to build that counter-narrative.

The positive counter-message would be “look at this LGBT conference happening in Tunisia, here is how to get involved with them.” When the terrorists try to say “give up and it is all meaningless,” we can counter with “no, there is life and reason to hope.”

One message will be a Global Secular Humanist Movement and Ideas Beyond Borders merger, where we highlight progressive Arab voices, translate their books, and build a database. If a journalist or writer like yourself wants to interview people in Syria with a secular and liberal perspective, we will be your go-to people.

We can tell you that we have forged relationships with people. Here is a translation of their work so you can have a backstory of what they do. We can introduce these folks into the world. Also, we are trying to build an art program that matches that as well.

One of the things conservative and ultra-conservative versions of Islam are trying to achieve is to destroy art and music and literature and philosophy. As you know, the Middle East and even South Asia and these other countries have a rich history when it comes to art and music.

We are trying to digitise that art, which itself builds a counter-narrative to the Far Right who are trying to say, “Those people from there are savages without culture and art.”

Also, it is a form of a counter-narrative to Islamists who say the culture is a homogenous Islamic one. We are working with an amazing professor. Her name is Sadif Jaffer. We are looking to build that once we get that proposal into a program with steps, as well as acquire the funding for it.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Faisal.

Mutar: Sure, thank you!

Mina Ahadi: Abuse of Women's Rights in Iran Calls for a New Revolution

March 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Stephanie Wimmers (Translator)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Mina, what is your family background regarding religion, geography, culture, language, and education?

Mina Ahadi: I was born in Abhar, a little town in Iran. My mother tongue was Turkish but we learnt and spoke Persian in school. My father was active in the Tudeh party in Iran, but he died when I was 4 years old. He was a teacher. My family was Muslim and traditional. My grandfather, my mother's father, was an atheist.

Jacobsen: Was there a family background in activism?

Ahadi: Politics was always a subject. My father and uncle were in Iran's communist party, Tudeh, and the student movement was very strong back then in Iran and I witnessed all of that.

Jacobsen: You were born in 1956. So, you have experience with the world and its changes over several decades. What have been some most impactful, even emotionally moving, moments in world history that you have personally been a part of? What about simply witness to by your judgment?

Ahadi: The Iranian revolution in 1979 was a very important and big emotional event. I was an activist back then and have seen and learnt a lot, afterwards I read a lot about revolutions in other countries.

Jacobsen: You are a member of the Central Committee and Politburo of the Worker-Communist Party of Iran. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

Ahadi: I work with the Communist Worker's Party of Iran. We are trying to reach younger generations in Iran and have done and achieved a lot up to this point. I'm in contact with women in Iran with whom we talk about women's rights violations and gender apartheid in Iran. With the Party's committee, we have campaigned against stoning in Iran and have saved many women and men. I've done a lot myself against executions in Iran and aided a movement against executions, too. We're trying to help the secular and modern movement in Iran and we would like to topple the Islamic regime with another revolution. The party is very important on that level.

Jacobsen: What are the main targeted objectives of the Worker-Communist Party of Iran in the far future?

Ahadi: In Iran, we would like to topple the Islamic regime and build up a democratic and human-rights oriented regime instead. We want to get rid of all Islamic laws and sharia law, we want freedom of speech, and for equality and liberty to be guaranteed for everyone. Every person should be free and happy, and that's doable with the options of modern science and communication. We think Iran has a large women's rights movement, workers' movement and also anti-religious movement, and after the Islamic regime, we will be able to show all the world

how, with the help of social media and communication, you can build a direct system that helps people every day to talk and decide about their lives and how their society functions.

Jacobsen: Faith, in many ways, can be seen as a virus, and an oppressive one in general, with some positives such as hope and community-building. Although, this can be seen as false hope, and community can be built in other ways. How does faith enter the law? How is this tangled up with religion?

Ahadi: Faith and religion is a result of fear and powerlessness of people. Religion nowadays, especially Islam and political Islam, has shown the ugly face of religion, and many people, especially women and teenagers, are against those religions, even in so-called Islamic countries. Religion and faith get weaker the more people live better and get enlightened. I believe that freedom of speech should be a right for everyone in the future. Religion has to be a private matter and stay private. Religion should disappear from the state's matters and from schools. But, everyone who does have a religion should have to option to practice it, religious organisations should work like NGO organisations, and in it should be possible to criticise religion without fear, and enlightenment work and prosperity and freedom helps people to gain even more distance from faith.

Jacobsen: What has been successful in reducing the incidence of religious and faith influence on the law?

Ahadi: Religion has a huge influence on laws in Islam. Sharia is the Islamic law and everything gets defined against women's rights and human rights, in general. When religion manifests in law, us women lose all our rights, homosexuals lose their rights, and children and people of other faiths have no rights either.

Jacobsen: How can women, and everyone else, benefit from one secular law for all that especially respects women's reproductive rights?

Ahadi: Secularism is a very important step for women's rights, and also for all humans. A secular system means the government is neutral and no religion is allowed to interfere with the system. Religion shouldn't be in the school curriculum and children shouldn't wear hijabs in school either, no religious signs in the workplace, so also no hijab in the workplace. Secularism is a guarantee that religions cannot split people in the world of work, and that is especially important today.

Jacobsen: Your husband was executed, on the anniversary of you two as a couple. How did this affect you? What emotions arose? Any messages for those enduring that level of pain and coping?

Ahadi: Yes, my husband was murdered on our anniversary, and that was very difficult for me as a young woman. At the end of May 1980, we had guests in our house and I and my husband spoke about those people in Kurdish dress that were at our house, and I told my husband I was tired and that we would talk about this issue the next day. The next day, I was at work, and when I came home I saw the religious police in our flat and I did not go home because it was very dangerous for me, too. After one month I read in the newspaper that my husband and all our guests from Kurdistan had been executed. I cried all night, and cannot forget about it – that your loved one is taken away and executed is very painful and incredibly bitter. Maybe that's why I have fought against execution my entire life.

Jacobsen: Do you ever heal completely? If not, how much do you heal? How do you use this to motivate change for the betterment of all – based on the loss of a true love?

Ahadi: I have never gotten away from this tragedy. Every year at the end of June, the anniversary of the execution, I fall into depression. I have never had an opportunity to work through this grief, but with much strength I have helped other people to not be executed. The fight against the death penalty is an important part of my life and my work, and that's very well known in Iran.

Jacobsen: Why is capital punishment a bad thing, an evil? How does the International Committee Against Executions help show this and prevent capital punishment as a norm? When is capital punishment permissible?

Ahadi: The death penalty is barbaric and inhumane. No government or individual should be allowed to take another person's life, no one must do such a thing to anyone. I think humanity should abolish this barbarism. I am trying to organise a campaign in Iran against the death penalty, by giving these people a face. I work with pictures of those people and conduct interviews with those affected in prison. I am trying to work with various TV and radio shows to publish interviews and reports of the life stories of those affected, and I do more work on women's stories. For example, we have organised very big campaigns about Nazanin Fatehi or Ryhane Jabbari, and also about Sina Dehghan, an ex-Muslim, people who have or will be executed in Iran, and multiple others, and we have saved many, but also conducted educational enlightenment work against the death penalty.

Jacobsen: You are a co-founder of the German Central Council of Ex-Muslims. What was the impetus for its foundation? Why are ex-Muslims so persecuted to the point of death threats and outright murder in secular countries?

Ahadi: The central council of ex-Muslims was founded in 2007. I said back then that we were 4 million foreigners in Germany, and suddenly we all got labelled as 'Muslims'. The German government arranged the Islam Conference with Islamic organisations and then sold it as integration. I saw that when someone in Denmark made a caricature of Mohammed, the German television showed a man from the Islamic organisation of the Central Council of Muslims who said all Muslims were offended. So, we were against that kind of politics and founded the ZDE (Central Council of Ex-Muslims) because we needed a different voice and a different set of politics.

Four million people came to Germany for freedom and a better life, not for more religious indoctrination or more influence of Islamic organisations. We are an organisation that is for a headscarf ban in the workplace, and for a ban of headscarves on children. We are against religious classes in school, the wearing of the hijab and the building of more mosques, and we are for integration with modern culture and women's rights-oriented politics.

Apostasy in Islamic countries is taboo and ex-Muslims can be executed in some countries. We want to show that freedom from religion is a basic human right and must not be punished. In a secular country that also mustn't be punished with death threats. I have received death threats in Germany multiple times and also have to have personal security.

Jacobsen: How can people help what Maryam Namazie calls the "minority within the minority"? Also, women have less status and finances and, therefore, the capability to move away from religion, in general. What can empower women more, and girls too?

Ahadi: First off, it has to be said that we are dealing with a political Islam that is very aggressive and brutal in the 21st century. Stoning and honour killings and human rights violations in Islamic countries is not our culture, but barbarism from the side of political Islam. But you also have to acknowledge that Islam as a religion is misogynistic and has influenced our culture for centuries, so we are dealing with a complex subject. We have to explain enlightenment worldwide, and the reason is that it has helped people and these aren't just Western values but human rights and have to be accepted and implemented everywhere. Women's rights are human rights and universal rights, and primarily, Islamic laws and sharia have to be abolished. The headscarf is a symbol of political Islam and has to be banned worldwide, and women in Iran or other countries should be helped against the forced wearing of the headscarf.

Jacobsen: What seems like the main issue in the ex-Muslim community now? What about the Muslim community?

Ahadi: Being an ex-Muslim in Islamic countries is not easy, but there are more ex-Muslims today. Being an ex-Muslim in Iran or Pakistan or Saudi Arabia means that a person is for secularism and for women's rights and modern culture. Many ex-Muslims cannot stay in their country of origin and are refugees at the moment, we help refugees and also ex-Muslims that are in prison and have been given the death sentence. For ex-Muslims, it is important now to make religion a private matter in the system in our countries, and to get rid of Sharia laws. For Muslims, I have to say religion is a matter of succession, it is inherited. So I have coincidentally been born into a Muslim family, and so I become a Muslim – and many Muslims are cultural Muslims and live completely normally, and don't agree with Sharia or Islamists, and that also has to be seen. In Islamic countries, many Muslims are victims of these barbaric regimes, and are also opposed to it.

Jacobsen: How can we best fight political Islam and apostasy laws?

Ahadi: You have to see on a global basis which problems we are talking about. We are talking about political problems that have to do with western governments and their politics. In 1979, in Iran, we had a revolution for a better life, and Islamists have only gained power there with the help of USA, and that's important. I would like to say that it wasn't that people had become any more religious and that was why the Islamists had come into power, no, Islamists have come into power with the help of Islamic and western governments, and now Islam and Islamism is a very important political tendency. We have to work against political Islam, and first and foremost help people in Iran and other countries who are against Islamic governments. We have to fight women's rights violations and not play everything down as just being culture. I'm very critical towards traditions of the Left that define Islamism and political Islam as a genuine fight of oppressed people against imperialism. No, political Islam stands for the taking of power by reactionary governments and has to be fought. We also have to be against apostasy laws and against the death penalty for apostasy and help these people.

Jacobsen: Who is Nazanin Fatehi? How did you help her?

Ahadi: Nazanin Fatehi is in Iran and I heard she has married and is living normally. Nazan was 16 years old when she was out with other young girls in Karaj when she was attacked by some young men. Those men wanted to rape Nazanin and she went at them with a knife. She got arrested and got sentenced to death. There was another Nazanin in Canada, Nazanin Afshin Jam, who wanted to save Nazanin – she made contact with me and I helped her find Nazanin in the Iranian prisons, and together we did a very important campaign and saved Nazanin, that was a

big discussion, also about women's rights and death penalty for minors and everything. I am very happy about this fight we have won, and there is a book about this achievement.

Jacobsen: You have been living under police protection. This is common for publicly outspoken ex-Muslims, especially well-spoken, articulate, and thoughtful ones. As the chairwoman of the Central Council of Ex-Muslims, what has been your main challenge?

Ahadi: Yeah, I had six bodyguards for a long time, and also now when I do public events, I have personal security. That's a problem in Europe as well. When we criticise Islam or show ourselves as ex-Muslims, we have to fear for our lives. But I wasn't afraid and I also always say I'm not scared of Islamists either because I've known those monsters from the start and fought against those monsters. I am a woman who fights against misogynistic laws and culture. I criticise Islam and all other religions, and unfortunately, that's dangerous today. I also get labelled as a racist by some left wingers in Germany, and that is also a problem. I want to appear worldwide for secular societies and freedom and women's rights, and my work is enlightenment work and I also want to help refugees and especially women who fled those countries.

Jacobsen: You won the Secularist of the Year from the UK National Secular Society. How does this feel? What additional responsibilities to the community come with this?

Ahadi: It was an honour for me and I was very happy about it. What I do and say now is not in the direction of European governments, and in Europe my work is not acknowledged as integration work, therefore women like me and especially women who are communists do not get any recognition or prizes. In Germany, women who call themselves Muslim and advertise for a moderate Islam get prizes every day... but at least this was my first prize now in the UK and worldwide and it was very good because that way, we can show that our work is recognised and we gain more attention. For me it was very important what Richard Dawkins said there, he said that he always thought that women in Islamic countries will rise up and do something against Islamists, and Mina Ahadi is an important person against misogynistic laws.

Jacobsen: You have two daughters. What world do you hope for them to have into the near and far future? How does this vision extend to all girls, young women, and women?

Ahadi: I have two daughters who are very important to me. I wish for my children for a life free of any form of discrimination or violence. I wish for my children to be free from any form of interference of religion, to enjoy their life. A world without war and exploitation, without reactionary culture and I wish for the millions of girls or women today for better lives, and want to help my daughters and all those other people.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved and see more of your work in the future?

Ahadi: We are a small group and have received no money from the government or other institutions up to now. However, ex-Muslims are a movement now and we help several people who need help each day, or who fight for freedom and secularism in Islamic countries. I think we have to see this movement and those bloggers or writers who, with much trouble, help do enlightenment work in Islamic countries. We need money, television or other communication platforms, and professional help.

Jacobsen: What are the upcoming presentations and ideas that you want to explore in the near future?

Ahadi: I want to invite all ex-Muslims in Europe to organise a congress. We need to show ourselves and everyone needs to see that we're doing very important humanist work. I want to organise a large symposium over the hijab and would like to present our fight against the headscarf there first. My generation in Iran in 1978 was on the streets, we were thousands of women and we said that women's rights aren't eastern or western, but universal, and in the Iran of current times, young people have made a call to go out on Wednesdays without a hijab, and they go out on the streets without the headscarf, and they get insulted by those in power in Iran. I want to show this movement in all Islamic countries. I also want to organise a conference with bloggers from Islamic countries and show that thousands are on social media every day and criticise religion and Islam.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Ahadi: I thank you very much and hope our voice gets heard even more and our activities will be recognised worldwide, and we aren't victims anymore, but an alternative for a better future, and rebellious women who have a vision and also a lot of experience, and so far, we have achieved a lot as well.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Mina, honour and pleasure.

How The World Celebrated International Women's Day

March 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

International Women's Day, instituted to commemorate women and their achievements, saw protests, marches and vigorous activism all around the world

On International Women's Day Spanish women went on strike in protest against gender inequality, in what some have been calling a "feminist strike." It was not a marginal event, but a historic act involving millions of protesters.

One teacher present at a picket line in Madrid, Concha Noverges, told Reuters, "I lived under the dictatorship, I lived under democracy and we haven't made much headway... A lot remains to be done and we, in the education sector, have a big role to play."

The strike lasted for 24-hours and involved an estimated 5.3 million people, according to the major Spanish unions. The march and protest were echoed in other countries, and follow on the heels of the #MeToo movements campaigning for the reduction and eventual elimination of sexual violence and harassment in workplace settings.

Two important people showed up to the event alongside the protestors – the mayors of Madrid and Barcelona, Manuela Carmena and Ada Colau.

"As people in public positions, we have the duty to mobilise on behalf of those who can't go on strike. This is the century of women and of feminism; we've raised our voices and we won't stop. No more violence, discrimination or pay gap," *The Guardian* reported Colau as saying.

As Elisabetta Povoledo and others reported at length in their article in the *New York Times*, the strike was simply one of the bigger branches of a worldwide movement of people showing up in protest and solidarity favour of women's liberation and empowerment.

Women also marched in London. The March4Women last Sunday marked the 100th anniversary of women earning the right to vote in the United Kingdom, making this another historic event. It was the sixth annual march of Care International.

Several major celebrities took part in the march, including Bianca Jagger, Anne-Marie Duff and Natalie Imbruglia. Biffy Clyro and Michael Sheen also joined London's mayor Sadiq Khan.

Khan said, "It is an honour to walk in the footsteps of the women and men who fought for women's suffrage, retracing their protest route from Parliament to Trafalgar Square."

Famed actor Michael Sheen said he would take a pay cut to make a point about equal pay, and stated "I think it's absolutely imperative that no matter what the industry, no matter what the profession, that people should be paid the same for doing the same work. That's just a given."

The protesters called for an end to violence in the workplace and gender discrimination, many wearing sashes bearing the words "deeds not words."

The Gulf News stated that thousands were present at the protest, with *Refinery29* putting the number at upwards of 10,000, which has been taken by some as an uptick in the intensity of the demands for various kinds of gender equality.

“I think we are living in a world where there are some dinosaurs that are trying to take us back. And there are those that are moving together, trying to say ‘that’s not the way we want this world to look’,” Helen Pankhurst, great-granddaughter of suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, said.

“Moving us forward, we should be looking at issues around inequality and naming prejudice and all sorts of forms of entitlement, that just shouldn’t be part of the scene of the 21st century,” she added.

The march started in Millbank’s Old Palace Yard and finished in Trafalgar Square with important speeches on the history of women’s right to vote, where women’s rights campaigners spoke in the same place leading up to the *Representation of the People Act* of 1918.

Women who owned property, through the act, were able to vote if over the age of 30. This eventually paved the way for universal women’s suffrage.

Outside of the west, it looks like voices for women’s empowerment were just as passionate, with *The Associated Press* reporting, “Demonstrators filled the streets in several Asian cities, including Manila, Seoul and New Delhi. Clad in pink and purple shirts, activists in Manila lambasted Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, calling him among the worst violator of women’s rights in Asia. Human rights groups have condemned Duterte’s sexist remarks, including a suggestion that troops shoot female communist rebels in the genitals.”

The global solidarity movement focused around *International Women’s Day* continues to grow, and was coordinated and executed highly successfully, which should be a boon to those hoping to change gender dynamics in and out of the workplace.

Student Walkout over Gun Violence Threatened with Disciplinary Action

March 17, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Students who take part in a walkout to protest gun violence in America could be faced with disciplinary action by their schools.

Demonstrations against gun violence have been ongoing after the mass school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

In the wake of the tragedy, March For Our Lives was founded in reaction to the issue of gun violence, which has affected many schools.

According to the March For Our Lives website, the tally on the marches around the world in protest against gun violence, especially those in schools, comes to 766 at the time of reporting.

There is an interactive map of the international protests, mostly occurring in the Western Hemisphere and in particular North America, staged on March 14.

Mass murderer 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz sat in court while thousands of high school students took part in the walkout.

The Cruz shooting was one of at least 14 at a public school in 2018 alone, coming to 3 shootings every two weeks. Some have described this as a generation raised on gun violence.

Several Republican politicians made accusations against students taking part in the hundreds of protests against gun violence in National Walkout Day. They claim that the students are political pawns in a Liberal cause.

One Charleston Democratic senator chastised the Republican leaders who made the allegations. South Carolina Governor, Henry McMaster, said that the walkouts over gun violence are shameful. In full, he stated:

This is a tricky move, I believe, by a left-wing group, from the information I've seen, to use these children as a tool to further their own means... It sounds like a protest to me. It's not a memorial, it's certainly not a prayer service, it's a political statement by a left-wing group and it's shameful.

What we should all do and what these students should do — I imagine a lot of them intend to do — is to pray and to hope for the families of those who were slain.

It is a First Amendment right of the students to peacefully assemble and protest. The schools that impeded the protests could face consequences. On the other hand, some students may face penalties for missing class.

Vera Eidelman, a fellow at the American Civil Liberties Union, said that some schools may punish the students who take part in the walkout — for missing class.

Eidelman further explained, “But what the school can't do is discipline students more harshly because they are walking out to express a political view or because school administrators don't support the views behind the protest.”

There have been a variety of reactions to the National Walkout Day from support, to denouncement, to lambasting those who spoke out against the students and the walkout, to the students actually being punished for the walkouts.

One case was at Harney Middle School in Las Vegas, Nevada. 60 students are being required to take part in RPCs, or Required Parent Conferences, and were not being allowed to return to class on Wednesday.

Students in Metro Atlanta were disciplined for their participation in the walkouts. Those at Lindenhurst High are being forced to stay afterschool. The largest school district in South Carolina said that it would discipline upwards of 530 students for taking part in the walkouts.

Many students across the United States were given the choice to either walk out and face disciplinary action or stay in class. Some students were allegedly administered corporal punishment for taking part in the walkout.

The full consequences of the National Walkout Day, March For Our Lives, disciplinary action, and the court case for Cruz, are still unfolding.

Women in Colombia Address Conflict-Associated Sexual Abuse

March 17, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The United Nations Refugee Agency reported on Colombian women and their work to combat sexual abuse. Michelle Begue stated that women in Columbia are working through the court system to find justice in sexual abuse and rape cases.

Leonor Galeano and her 12-year-old daughter, for instance, had to flee their homes during fighting between the FARC rebels and the government.

When Galeano and her daughter settled into a new house in Southern Columbia, she befriended a local official. The official, without Galeano's knowledge, raped her daughter several times.

Galeano's daughter became pregnant. "Because we are displaced, people believe that we are worthless, that we don't have the same rights," Galeano stated.

In the half-century old armed conflict in Columbia, stories like these are common. 7.4 million people have been extirpated from the borders of their country. Mothers and daughters, like Leonor and her child, comprise the more than half of the displaced population.

Women and children are particularly vulnerable in these circumstances. People are concerned about the daily needs of survival, and lack social and familial support networks. This makes refugees of conflict, especially women and children, vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

"There is a deep relation between sexual violence and displacement... But sexual violence isn't just a cause for displacement," said Adri Villa, a community-based protection assistant at the United Nations Refugee Agency. "It sometimes occurs during and after displacement, once they have settled in their new home."

No specific information exists on the total number of children and women victims of sexual violence in the 50+ year conflict in Columbia, but this is linked to a deeper problem: the lack of any official registry.

Individual citizens lack knowledge of their rights, resources, and connections to do anything about it. To combat this, women's protection collectives have been forming independently.

One is in Putumayo province in the south. It is an umbrella of 66 groups which are advocating and enforcing the rights of women. This has proven difficult in a scenario in which "tens of thousands of displaced women [are] among nearly 146,000 victims of the armed conflict in the region bordering Ecuador."

"The problem of sexual violence... is most prevalent among families who have been forcibly displaced, because they are in a state of greater vulnerability," said Muriel Fatima, the President of the Life Weavers Women's Alliance.

Life Weavers is a pilot project for peace in Columbia. The organisation gives empowerment workshops and counselling to women affected by sexual violence and abuse in the region.

As the Life Weavers Women's Alliance has allied with the United Nations Refugee Agency, there has been an increased chance for the women survivors of rape and sexual violence to be

able to fight for justice in a court system. This is largely due to generous financial resources from the UNHCR.

The UNHCR has been keeping its commitments and promises by doing so. In 2016, there was a peace agreement reached between the FARC rebels and the government. This has temporarily ended the hostilities between the two warring groups.

“I am thankful because with the help of the alliance and UNHCR I have survived,” Leonor Galeano said, “I consider myself a survivor, because I have moved forward.”

BBC Appeals To The UN To Protect Its Iran-Based Staff From Harassment

March 18, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The BBC has appealed to the United Nations to protect the rights of its Iran-based journalists, who allegedly face harassment and intimidation.

BBC News has appealed to the United Nations to protect its journalists' rights in Iran.

The complaints to the United Nations follow years of allegations of harassment and persecution by the Iranian authorities of journalists as well as their families. In 2017, the complaints had intensified compared to previous years.

The Iranian authorities opened a criminal investigation against BBC Persian Service journalists. Their alleged crime was opposition to the national security of Iran. The BBC World Service owns the foreign language services and received funds from the Foreign Office until 2014.

These facts have been questionable to the Iranian authorities. The BBC has listed a number of complaints about Iran, including arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists' family members, passport confiscations, bans on travel and especially out of Iran, and the surveillance of the journalists' families and the journalists themselves.

All of them connected to even further spreading of defamation and fake news. The targets, interestingly, have been female journalists. Tony Hall, Director General of the BBC, explained:

...because our own attempts to persuade the Iranian authorities to end their harassment have been completely ignored...

...In fact, during the past nine years, the collective punishment of BBC Persian Service journalists and their families has worsened. This is not just about the BBC – we are not the only media organisation to have been harassed or forced to compromise when dealing with Iran.

In truth, this story is much wider: it is a story about fundamental human rights. We are now asking the community of nations at the UN to support the BBC and uphold the right to freedom of expression.

The Deputy General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, Jeremy Dear, explained that the Iranian journalists, for several years, have been suffering and forced into exile and hiding to escape punishments, even being caught and arrested, jailed and then given intimidation, routine harassment, and violence.

“Iranians now increasingly turn to the international media to find out what is happening in their own country,” Dear said, “Targeting family members in Iran in an attempt to silence journalists working in London must be stopped. The international community must act now.”

David Kaye and Asma Jahangir, United Nations Special Rapporteurs, received an urgent appeal from the BBC World Service last October. The appeal noted that the corporation's journalists would address the Human Rights Council in a session in Geneva this week with a call for United Nations member states to act to protect the rights of BBC staff to report freely.

The Enlightenment, Humanism and Morality with Dr Stephen Law

April 2, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In Part 4 of this interview series, Dr Stephen Law speaks to Conatus News about the Enlightenment, Humanism, Morality and more.

Scott Jacobsen: New data and analysis make arguments for humanism and positive progress based on Enlightenment values and scientific discovery easier now. Some of the most prominent humanists, including Professor Steven Pinker in *Enlightenment Now* (2018) make arguments of these forms. Do these arguments seem valid and more reliable than in previous centuries to you? What are their strengths and weaknesses?

Dr Stephen Law: It's an empirical question whether the post-Enlightenment world is getting better in various respects. I have not read Pinker's book or looked at much of the research, so not well-placed to comment on that. I am aware of the fact that you will likely get differing answers depending on exactly which question you ask of the available data, of course.

My interest in the Enlightenment has tended to focus particularly on those who want to blame the Enlightenment for various ills.

There are some post-modern thinkers who do this – who blame the Enlightenment for the Holocaust, for example. Lyotard is one of them. There are also religiously conservative thinkers who blame the Enlightenment for the Holocaust. Journalist Melanie Philips does so quite explicitly, and I seem to remember historian Michael Burleigh made a TV programme which also made that argument. Here's Philips:

The Enlightenment gave us freedom and liberal values, but it also gave us ... The Holocaust.

Philosopher John Gray says about Count Joseph de Maistre, a staunch defender of the Church and Pope and one of the Enlightenment's most vigorous critics, that:

[w]hen he represents reason and analysis as corrosive and destructive, solvents of custom and allegiance that cannot replace the bonds of sentiment and tradition which they weaken and demolish, he illuminates, better perhaps than any subsequent writer, the absurdity of the Enlightenment faith [for such it undoubtedly was] that human society can have a rational foundation. If to reason is to question, then questioning will have no end, until it has wrought the dissolution of the civilization that gave it birth.

So someone like Pinker, or me, who thinks that reason and the Enlightenment value of thinking independently and for oneself should lie at the heart of raising good citizens will come under attack from two different directions. We are criticised by post-modern thinkers who think that this elevation of reason turns it into a highly oppressive authority. We are also criticised by religious conservatives who blame the kind of independent critical thinking espoused by Enlightenment thinkers for undermining traditional sources of authority, promoting relativism, and unravelling the social and ethical fabric.

Neither of these critiques is correct, of course.

Jacobsen: Continuing from the previous question, how does the humanist framework provide a way in which to think about ethics practically, especially with all of the technology involved at every level of decision-making now?

Law: That is an enormous question. Humanism does not really offer a specific philosophical ethical theory. Some humanists are utilitarians; some are not, some humanists are moral realists, some are not. One thing humanists do have in common is a rejection of the thought that some special texts or people must be deferred to because they are sources of divine guidance.

Hume was probably right that science reveals only what is the case, not what one ought to do, and one cannot rationally support an ought conclusion using only 'is' premises. So science alone cannot answer moral questions. Many humanists accept that (not all – Sam Harris disagrees, for example). However, that still leaves a great deal of scope for science to inform our moral thinking. If I believe women should not get the vote because I believe dim people should not get the vote and that women are dim, my moral position can be demolished scientifically, because it's based in part on a false empirical claim: women are dim.

Almost everyone agrees that, whether or not science alone can justify moral positions, it can be hugely helpful with moral judgements. Almost everyone agrees morality has at least *something* to do with human flourishing in this life. And it's an empirical matter what helps humans flourish in this life, so scientific investigation of what helps us flourish will be very valuable, morally speaking. What we *think* will help us flourish often turns out to be incorrect.

Jacobsen: With these positive gains in the scientific world and the expansion of the moral sphere, what new values that are now fringe considerations in ethical decisions will in the coming decades become mainstream and even central in moral choices?

Law: Well one obvious candidate is genetic enhancement – designer babies. As the technology develops, we will have some hard decisions to make. I was also recently involved in discussion with John Danaher about robot sex. That is already a thing, apparently (robotic sex dolls are on sale). That also raises lots of interesting questions about human relationships, freedom, the law, etc.

In my opinion, what should now come to the fore, but probably won't, is class. We are all acutely aware that racism, sexism, homophobia are forms of discrimination that hurt our fellow human beings badly. "I'd suggest a form of discrimination that hurts our life prospects at least as much as these other forms is class discrimination: classism if you like."

Of course, this is controversial. Currently, more on the right are beginning to voice publicly what many think privately – that the lower classes are genetically inferior, and that this is overwhelmingly what explains their lack of social mobility. Whether this is true is an empirical matter, of course.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr Law.

Dr Stephen Law is Reader in Philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London. He is also the editor of THINK: Philosophy for Everyone, a journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy (published by Cambridge University Press). Stephen has published numerous books on philosophy, including The Philosophy Gym: 25 Short Adventures in Thinking (on which an Oxford University online course has since been based) and The Philosophy Files (aimed at children 12+). Stephen is a Fellow of The Royal Society of Arts. Our prior article, [here](#), and main interview, [here](#), and sessions in this series [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Liberal Islam and Migrant Integration with Seyran Ateş

April 13, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Seyran Ateş, a lawyer and feminist activist, speaks with Conatus News about law, faith, feminism, and integrating migrants in Western societies.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: To begin, what was your background in faith and feminism? Insofar as I know, you are of Kurdish descent.

Seyran Ateş: My mother is Turkish. My father is Kurdish. He died in 2014. My family background is Sunni. I was 6 when I came to Berlin, so I grew up there. Faith or religion was not a primary or daily issue.

My parents used to leave everybody alone with their religious beliefs. They were liberal on this point. I always believed in God. I was never an activist or something like that. I had the chance to see that Islam is a pluralist religion.

Turkey was at this time much more open, modern and plural when it came to religion. The pressure on the people was perhaps because there was no democracy, but never because of religion when I was growing up.

For that reason, faith was never something that I had to run away from or something public. It was interior and individual. Even as a child, I believed in a merciful God full of love. That is the background of my childhood.

Jacobsen: You studied criminal and family law at the University of Berlin.

Ateş: I started studying law in 1983 at the age of 20. I worked parallel to my studies as a social worker in a centre for women. We helped women who were victims of domestic violence and other [forms of abuse].

We taught them to read and write in German, and helped them with their daily life. This is what I did when I was 20. At the age of 21, in the third semester of my study, I was shot there by a man of Turkish origin.

The woman, who was one of our clients, was there that day. She was sitting close. I was translating. She died when he shot the two of us. That experience was bad, but important for my life. Those people are willing to kill women because [the women] are fighting for their rights.

I stopped studying because of my health situation. I was unable to use my left arm. I finished my studies in 1997 and then started my office as a lawyer.

Jacobsen: That ties into your work as a feminist working for equal rights for women and girls, and in particular Muslim women and girls – also work in civil rights.

Ateş: I started identifying as a feminist at the age of 15. I lived in a conservative and traditional family. To see gender apartheid that early, for that reason, maybe [the reason] I became a feminist.

Jacobsen: A violent Islamic reactionary attacked another woman and yourself. Does this reflect the experience of other Muslim feminists and other women Muslim civil rights activists?

Ateş: When it comes to violence against women, I would say it a little different. We have violence against women in every culture and religion, but we have to look at each religion individually.

Especially and unfortunately, in the Islamic countries and especially here in Europe in the Muslim communities, you can find 10 or 20 percent higher rates of violence against women. When you find violence, sometimes, it is much harder to talk about the origin of it, living here.

There is a timetable difference between the societies. That is what I worked out, from more than 30 years' experience as a feminist.

Jacobsen: You have been critical of an immigrant Muslim society within Germany that reflects an even more conservative view than its counterpart in Turkey. You also wrote a book called *Islam Needs a Sexual Revolution*. On those two points of contact, I note a non-conservative orientation within the faith from you. What are your areas of critique of the former organisation and propositions for a sexual revolution in the latter example?

Ateş: My critique is not only against the immigrant Muslim society; it is a critique of Muslim culture all over the world. When it comes to the migrants, you can see they are living in Western and modern countries, but they do not want to integrate themselves into the modern values and lifestyles of these nations.

They are coming from Turkey or these other countries and not developing. The migrants are used to building parallel societies, where they are not willing to integrate themselves into the wider community.

On the other side, the country treats them like guests or like foreigners who should one day go back to their home country. That schism is one point that we have to talk about when it comes to problems of integration.

But [Germany expecting immigrants to return home] should not be an excuse for [Muslim immigrants] not accepting gender equality or democracy. So, my critiques against the Muslim societies are that they do not accept that sexuality is an important point, and that we have to talk and debate and discuss this issue.

The answer is that sexuality is such an important thing for the Muslim communities. That they are singing about it the whole day, but it is forbidden to do?

It is recommended in every field. Every time men and women come together, they think that they will have sex together. It is an overlap.

Jacobsen: You went into hiding in 2008 based on threats against you. What were some of the threats? What was a pivotal moment in that process of hiding?

Ateş: I got the death threats in 2006 and 2009, and also now after opening the mosque. It was not only in 2008 because you said in 2008. I got many death threats because of that. I decided not to work anymore in this field. I stopped for three or four years and then started as a lawyer for a bit in 2012.

Jacobsen: Then you started the Ibn Rushd Goethe Moschee Berlin. What was the inspiration for the title and the orientation of the mosque?

Ateş: Ibn Rushd was a man of enlightenment and a bridge builder between orient and occident. As well, Goethe was the first European who had a different view about Islam compared to others like Voltaire and other contemporary writers who mostly explain Islam as a sick religion [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ateş: It was based on the sexually overactive Prophet. It explained Islam as more like a sect rather than a religion. Goethe was not satisfied with this picture of Islam. Also, he read lots of books from poets. He was extremely interested in the harmony and poetry of Islam, the language and the poetry.

For this reason, I decided one name from the Occident and one name from the Orient. You could ask why I as a feminist do not take a woman's name. But as a feminist, I can note that some men have done some great things for humans, like Ibn Rushd and Goethe, [who acted] as bridge makers.

Ibn Rushd is one of the most important reformers of Islam. I love his books, reform ideas, and how he explains us, the Quran, and Islam.

Jacobsen: This is the first liberal mosque in Germany.

Ateş: It is the first open for the public, yes. There are other groups, liberal Muslims and Muslim forums, working in the same style – coming together in the same manner. But there is no other place called mosque or liberal mosque.

Jacobsen: The Egyptian Fatwa Council has condemned this at Al Azhar University in Egypt, which is a major university.

Ateş: Not only Egypt but Turkey and Iran also, the Iranian centre from Humboldt, which, as I say, it was a *fatwa*. We never get it as a paper [Laughing].

We do not get any papers. I am not shocked. We were not shocked. They were so *fast*. They never wrote a *fatwa* against the Islamic State or against the terrorists who kill people in the name of Islam.

It is interesting. It was, for me, again, proof that we have to fight against these so-called authorities in Islamic theology, who call themselves the biggest and most important university in the Islamic world.

They did nothing. It has nothing to do with theology. It was political, personal.

Jacobsen: If you take most faiths at a glance and look at the leaders, and if you look at the leaders, most tend to be men. Why is this?

Ateş: It is the patriarchal structure all over the world. It was the same with violence against women and with the religions. Women are always fighting for more rights, not only in society but also in religions and institutions that work wherever.

We always have to fight and say, “We have the same value as humans.” It is the same game. The hardline leaders of religion used to be always men. In most languages, “God” is explained as a man.

Jacobsen: Now, looking forward to the future, what are some projects that you have coming down the pike? What are you hoping to do with them?

Ateş: I have big dreams and visions [Laughing].

One of my dreams is to have a liberal mosque in every European capital and a more prominent place for our mosque here in Berlin, and to be much more connected to liberal Muslims all over the world – and try to be accepted as a part of Muslim society and Islam.

I also have the dream and the wish that Western countries — and especially Left-wing people — [would stop] confusing me when they discuss the issues of Islam, e.g. the headscarf and how Muslim men treat women. They are incredibly tolerant when it comes to Muslims, but they are never as tolerant of the men in their societies. They would never accept so much violence and pressure on women as they accept in Muslim cultures and communities.

It is so sad that it comes from the Left, as I come from the Left and am a feminist. To discuss all of these issues with Left-wing people who call them the good guys makes me tired somehow. The point is that we have to check what is a practice against human rights, what is acceptable, and accepted by our constitutions and rights.

There should be no difference between culture and religion, to call something against women's rights and forbid it. There should not be a cultural bonus.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Seyran.

Atheist Woman Fleeing Persecution in Tunisia Seeks Refuge in Germany

April 20, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Trabelsi Zeineb is a bisexual atheist woman fleeing hostility and potential persecution from neighbours and family in Tunisia, seeking refuge in Germany.

Trabelsi Zeineb grew up in a highly religious family in the Tunis suburbs. Her father is a prominent member of the Party of El-Nahda. She spent her early life in this highly religious household. Religious enough that she felt the sting of restrictions and double standards against women. This was simply life in Tunisia for her.

Trabelsi was forced to wear the veil, forced to pray, forced to fast, and only allowed to leave the house to study, which was under the control of her brother or male guardian.

Zeineb lived without rights for a long time as girl, a woman, in a highly religious Islamic home. Then the revolution came, which gave her a chance to get away from her patriarchal household in suburbanite Tunis.

She began to fight for individual rights, for her rights as a non-believer and woman. It was a breath of freedom. She came out as a bisexual at this time as well. However, once her family found out about her bisexuality and atheism, they rejected her. She was threatened by family and neighbours.

In 2013, she got married. Her ex-husband, she reports, mistreated her. She described life with the ex-husband, the few months, as "hell." After a few months, they got divorced.

She then began to formulate a plan to get out, get anywhere, for a new life: Europe was the obvious choice.

On the 1st of October, 2017, Zeineb got a tourist visa for 15 days to spend a week in Spain. From there, she went to Germany in order to apply for asylum. The German authorities rejected her.

I asked Trabelsi about the treatment of sexual minorities and atheists within Tunisia. She said, "The situation in Tunisia is unstable and we are being threatened because we are minorities."

"We are threatened with death from the family and the community. And we do not find our right when we want to resort to the judiciary Germany may refuse asylum," Zeineb explained, "because it considers Tunisia a state of rights and freedoms after the revolution. If they refuse asylum, they will return to Tunisia and face renewed death threats from my family."

Zeineb is concerned about being potentially returned to Tunisia because, if she does then, she will potentially face penalties for being a bisexual and an atheist in a country with a culture against sexual minorities and unbelievers.

"Arabe Article 226 provides for imprisonment for any person who infringes on good morals and public morals. Article 230 of the Tunisian Penal Code provides for the perpetrator of homosexuality or manslaughter to be sentenced to three years' imprisonment," Zeineb said.

She noted that she risks even her family simply killing her. The future is unknown for her, as she is meeting with German authorities today, on April the 20th.

Sceptic Amardeo Sarma on Humanism and Rationalism in the West

April 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Amardeo Sarma at the 2012 World Skeptic's Conference in Berlin. Sarma, an engineer by trade, is head of the German Skeptics Group and a founder of [Skeptiker](#).

German sceptic Amardeo Sarma discusses critically analysing entrenched belief systems, including religion and a shockingly fervent homeopathic movement.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was there a family background in humanism or rationalism for you?

Amardeo Sarma: No, because both my parents were moderately religious. In fact, to give you an example, when I grew up, my father was a Hindu, I am half Indian, my mother is Christian, German. When I was growing up, my dad was liberal in that sense.

He said you can become whatever you like. If you want to be a Hindu or a Christian, fine. Even if you want to be a Muslim, that's fine because we lived in India where there were a lot of Muslims. But then I do not think he reckoned with me deciding to be nothing.

In a way, I became a sceptic before I became an atheist or humanist. That's because of my reading. I used to read a lot of books when I was a kid. When I was 16, 17, I came across a number of books such as Charles Berlitz: *The Bermuda Triangle* or other of his books.

I found them quite fascinating. One of the books that got me thinking was a book by Larry Kusche, who wrote *Bermuda Triangle Solved*, and I found it fantastic for somebody to take pains to go into everything and find out that a lot of the claims are wrong.

That got me into scepticism and at some stage I stopped buying into the diffused beliefs that I had before. So, the quick answer to your question is no, there is no family background of it.

Jacobsen: Your parents did not reconcile with you having non-belief?

Sarma: Well, they did in the sense that they accepted it. I do not think they were particularly happy, but they did not make a fuss about it.

Jacobsen: For other friends growing up around where you lived, was it different?

Sarma: Yeah, it was different because most of them stayed religious. My brother had a similar path even though he's not so engaged in the sceptical movement as I am. He was one of the founders along with me, but he hasn't been active. He's been a sceptic even before me and he's also a non-believer, or whatever you would call that.

Jacobsen: There is plenty of names, irreligious, nones, non-believers, etc.

Sarma: I am not an atheist in the sense that I do not go around preaching non-belief. I am an atheist in the sense that I do not believe in God or any superior being, which is not the same as positively stating that there is no God. It is up to the believers to prove their case that there is a God, not mine to prove that there isn't. Also, atheism is not my motivation. Being a sceptic is,

and that means promoting science and critical thinking, which is what I have been doing for over 30 years.

Jacobsen: And as the leader of the German Sceptics Group, what are some of your tasks and responsibilities that you take on board?

Sarma: I have been responsible for the overall strategy and direction we are going and what topics we choose, as well as making sure that the organization grows. There is a lot of administration as well.

We are quite happy that the last 30 years the organization has had steady growth. We now have more than 1600 members. Additionally, about two and a half thousand people subscribe to the magazine *Skeptiker*. It is growing steadily. So I try to make sure that the sceptics' organization is on the right path and keeps growing.

Specifically, I have been involved in some topics as well. In the past, it is being homeopathy and the methods of science: how to do investigations, how to do tests. In the earlier stages of the organization, in the 90s, I organized and designed tests together with James Randi, so that was quite an experience at the time.

So at the moment, I have been looking more into things like climate change and global warming as well, so that's been one of the new topics. We hope to be taking up broader science issues that are part of the public discussion.

Jacobsen: How is German culture in regards to scepticism? What is its attitude towards it? What is the level of critical thinking too?

Sarma: On face value, everybody says, "Yes, science is good and critical thinking is good," but when it comes to topics like homeopathy and other forms of alternative medicine, people are not into critical thinking in that sense.

Compared to the US and Canada, there is not as much of a pro-science sentiment in general in the public. It is more difficult to get across that point of view, even though people on face value are in favor of science and critical thinking. Of course, everybody thinks critical thinking is a good thing.

But they seem to look at critical thinking not as scientifically investigating these claims, but being critical about things. Being critical means denying whether something is true or not. It is difficult to get across that we need more than that: Both claims and criticism need evidence and we should not forget that we cannot ignore the rest of the body of scientific knowledge.

But we've been making some progress especially as far as homeopathy is concerned. We've been able to turn the tide here in Germany. If you look at the reports in the newspapers and some of the magazines, the tone has changed.

Whereas 10 or 20 years ago, many of the reports on homeopathy would be positive, pro-homeopathy, now not just us but many journalists or bloggers have been writing much more critically about homeopathy. Also, sales of homeopathic medicines are down for the first time and medical doctors are getting more reluctant to promote homeopathy.

This is a hard task, but shows you can change things if you bring convincing arguments forward. We are also grateful to the rest of the global scientific and sceptical community that has been effective of late and that has been a huge asset.

And also it is important to be sympathetic in the way your scepticism comes across. Be nice and do not attack people, attack ideas. Make sure you're firm in your position or scientific standpoint but not trying to insult others, which there is always a tendency for some sceptics to do.

Jacobsen: Also, do you think, because of the nature of these beliefs, that there is a hypersensitivity on the part of – not necessarily practitioners – but believers in the practitioners when discussing these issues?

Sarma: Yes, much so. In particular, in the case of alternative medicine and homeopathy for example, it seems to be almost easier to discuss with a believer in God or a Christian and be critical about the Bible and things like that than to discuss with somebody who is a believer in homeopathy [Laughing].

Apparently people, I do not know about them in the US and in the Americas, but in Europe, theologians and believers have gotten used to being criticized and they still get along with you. Even atheists get invited to church or events organized by the Church to get the other point of view.

They are much more open to critical thinking, even from the point of view of atheists than many believers in homeopathy are. At least they mostly do not yell at you. On the other hand, I have had cases where even friends get up and leave when you start discussing homeopathy critically.

Again the short answer is yes; people are sensitive. Belief in things like homeopathy can be as strong or even much stronger than belief in God. They are held much more strongly, with much more resistance to criticism.

Jacobsen: You mentioned *Skeptiker*.

Sarma: *Skeptiker*, yes.

Jacobsen: The name answers itself.

Sarma: That's a magazine. We started publishing that in 1987, so it has been 30 years now since we started. In the beginning, it was a small magazine but that's grown now. It is now comparable to any other published magazine. We publish it 4 times a year and the contents are good.

Jacobsen: Not biased on the matter at all?

Sarma: [Laughing] No, not at all. But we get good feedback from other sceptic groups in other countries when they compare it to their own magazines. They say the way it is done up and the topics we address, that it is quite good.

Jacobsen: What are some of your ongoing activities outside of the magazine and work in combatting things like homeopathy and dowsing in Germany through the sceptics group?

Sarma: To give you an example, at the end of every year, we evaluate the predictions of astrologers and soothsayers. We collect, at the beginning of the year, whatever has been forecast to happen. At the end of the year, we show what happened and that's quite sobering.

At the end you see that the predictions turn out to be wrong most of the time of course. The results are as you would expect by chance. If you would do random predictions, you'd probably end up with a better score than the astrologers because some of the predictions they make are basically impossible.

For example, one of the predictions they made was there is going to be a landing on Mars next year. To make this happen, the spacecraft should have already started. So, some of the predictions they made are completely impossible and they couldn't ever turn out to be correct unless somebody had sent out a Mars mission in secret or something like that.

But apparently this does not affect the astrologers much. They continue to make their predictions even if they are also faced with our criticism at the end of it. Apparently it is advertising for them. They get attention and they do not care if it turns out or wrong at the end of the year.

Fighting For Secularism with PJ Slinger – Editor, Freedom From Religion Foundation

April 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

PJ Slinger, the editor for the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), speaks to Conatus News about his work and activism.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become involved in the non-religious movement?

PJ Slinger: It wasn't until I started at FFRF in 2015 that I "*became involved.*" Before that, I was a vocal proponent of nontheism, whether it was in discussions with friends face-to-face or, later, on Facebook with "*friends.*" It got to the point that anytime I was in a conversation and religion came up, people would immediately look to me, like, "*Ooh, what do you think about that?*"

Jacobsen: What about the Freedom From Religion Foundation? What intrigued you about its activities?

Slinger: I hadn't heard of FFRF until I moved back to Madison, Wisconsin in the year 2000. (I had lived in Minnesota for about a decade before that, after graduating college from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a degree in journalism.) I got a job at The Capital Times newspaper (where I held various roles throughout my 15 years there), which had a subscription to Freethought Today, the 10-times-a-year newspaper of FFRF. So I glanced through it and found myself drawn to FFRF because it was so in line with my thoughts. I would always look forward to the day that would arrive, and eventually, the newspaper's editor would just put it directly on my desk when it came in the mail.

At that point, I was less interested in the activism part of what FFRF stood for than the nontheism aspect. I always found a lot of interesting articles and comments that helped me in my discussions with others.

But I also soon learned that fighting for state-church separation was part and parcel of being a freethinker. Before that, I was ambivalent about, say, a Christian cross being on public property. I figured, what's the big deal? But then I came to the logical conclusion that allowing these small transgressions was no different allowing larger state-church violations. I realised that the small-scale violations were wrong for the same reasons as the bigger ones and that it wasn't a matter of degree. If it was a First Amendment violation, big or small, it needed to be rectified.

Jacobsen: How did you become involved in the work and activism there?

Slinger: A bit of luck, I suppose. While working at The Capital Times, each reporter and editor (of which I was at the time of this story) was required to interview a prominent or interesting person from the community for an in-depth Q&A. On this particular occasion, I chose Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of FFRF. She came into the newspaper office, and we sat down and talked about FFRF's activities, the new multi-million-dollar building expansion that was happening and where she saw FFRF heading in the future. As we concluded the interview, we discussed FFRF in general, and I brought up Bill Dunn, who at that time was editor of Freethought Today. I had worked with Bill at The Capital Times before he left for FFRF. Annie Laurie then mentioned that he was getting close to retiring and that they would be looking for a

new editor. My eyes grew wide, no doubt! About 18 months later, The Capital Times offered buyouts (a sign of the times in the newspaper business, unfortunately) and I took it, completely forgetting about a potential job at FFRF. About a week later, I got a call from Annie Laurie, asking me to come in for an interview. I couldn't have been happier!

Jacobsen: What have been some of your more recent activities through the organisation?

Slinger: As editor of Freethought Today, I work mostly behind the scenes. Part of my job is to promote, in the paper, the great things FFRF is doing in our battle to keep church and state separate. It's on me to give our members (33,000 of them!) something that keeps them informed of everything we do at FFRF, give them articles of interest relating to nontheism or church-state issues, and entertain them with cartoons, photos and other items relevant to our mission. I feel it's a good mix of serious news, information and fun.

It's amazing how much content there is on a monthly basis. We publish 24 pages, but that number could easily be higher.

Jacobsen: As someone raised Methodist but being an atheist nearly your whole life, you have also spent time as a copy editor, sportswriter and online editor for *The Capital Times*. How does this inform your work through FFRF and help with the advancement of the secular movements and the church-state separation communities?

Slinger: I feel fortunate to have worked at The Capital Times, a progressive newspaper, where things like state-church separation are important. It's there that I began to understand minority communities, be they racial, gender, economic or religious. As an atheist, I saw the similarities among those communities in how and why the majorities held power and what was needed to break those cycles of control. While choosing to be an atheist is considerably different than being born black or LGBTQ, just being part of the minority (for now) nonreligious community has helped me understand and empathise with those groups.

Jacobsen: What is the next big step for the FFRF in its battles with those who have tendencies toward the theocratic rather than the democratic?

Slinger: Well, that's a loaded question! We are currently in a time of great unease about the future of state-church separation. With the administration we currently have in the White House and the beyond-strange Christian evangelical backing of it, it seems as if we are losing ground day by day, even as FFRF continues to pile up victories in our legal battles. It's clear that in our current political climate, religion — specifically Christianity — holds a more prominent position in governmental decisions and outcomes. More and more states are spending time and money to have things like "In God We Trust" banners put in schools, rather than tackling the real issues that confront public education. There is no shortage of these kinds of things happening all over the country.

But part of me remains optimistic, based on the studies and reports that show the number of nonreligious people in America is growing at a rapid rate, mostly because of the younger generations. I am hopeful that as time progresses, reason and logic will be used as determining factors in governmental decisions rather than religious platitudes.

I feel that the ultimate goal for FFRF is not to have to exist at all. Unfortunately, it appears our work is only becoming more necessary. So FFRF has to keep pressuring politicians to keep religion out of government, and if we have to go to court to do it, well, that's what we do. But it's an uphill climb.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion based on the conversation today?

Slinger: I'd like to invite anyone who has an interest in helping FFRF fight these battles to join our organisation. We are a five-star nonprofit that uses your membership dues (only \$40 a year!) wisely and judiciously. It's a great way to support the upholding of our First Amendment.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Mr Slinger.

France: The Inability of a Secular State to Protect Secularists

May 16, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Despite living in one of the most secular countries worldwide, ex-Muslim secularists in France still face hate speech, death threats, and an idle government.

Waleed Al-Husseini founded the Council of Ex-Muslims of France. He escaped the Palestinian Authority after torture and imprisonment in Palestine, fleeing to Jordan and then France. He is an ex-Muslim and an atheist. We have published interviews in Canadian Atheist ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), The Good Men Project ([here](#)), Humanist Voices ([here](#)), and Conatus News ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Here is an educational interview on ex-Muslims in France.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Ex-Muslims in France are in a more secular culture. There is a different sense of secularism in the culture there too, as France can be described as one of the most secular countries in the world, at least constitutionally. Ex-Muslims probably welcome the transition from Muslim home life to a more secular culture. What is French secularism like for many ex-Muslims?

Waleed Al-Husseini: For us, secularism in France; it's the most important. We like it. We are trying to defend it and go forward with it; we don't like those who try to reduce or remove it. We do not want to move the dial back, especially with Islamism. Those who use it to spread their non-secular values.

That is why we were against Macron, the French President when he said that French society is not a secular country while the state is secular. The state is the only secular institution. We were against him too when he went to talk to Church officials asking them to become part of and more active in political life.

All these things are taking secularism back, away from us. We don't like this because it opens a big door for Islamism to come, infiltrating more and more into the country. "French secularism", and every kind of secularism, actually, means religion is out of politics. That is something we need. We are fed up with religion. All these wars that are taking place worldwide take place in the name of religion.

Secularism came after 400 years of war so we can understand the meaning of it and how much it is important. French secularism, or *Laïcité*, is what we all need in this world.

Jacobsen: How do ex-Muslims manage the transition into the more secular life in France?

Al-Husseini: Many of us have this value and found it to be the best, so it's so easy for us to be in this life. People dream of it for a very long time. That is why life in France has never been different than our internal values. It's just sometimes with extremes things do not work that good.

It's important to us to feel welcome in France and to feel that our secular way of life can be accepted. Because the extremist Muslims, Christians or Jewish people will never accept our

values. To be more direct, especially Muslim extremists are our big problem. We live our life easily in the secular life, but we still take care of our safety.

Jacobsen: Can ex-Muslims feel bullied and harassed by some Muslim communities and enclaves in France?

Al-Husseini: This is one of our main problems, not only from Islamism but even from random Muslims who will recognise ex-Muslims. They will insult or try to beat us, like what happened to me many times when I tried to voice my opinion regarding my values.

The worst threats for us coming from some leaders of Muslim associations or imams as many of them ask their followers and disciples to kill us and that we deserve to die. The religious leaders say that we are traitors.

This type of hate speech against us makes us easy targets for Muslims. The more they speak means that we actually have effect in society, but it also means that death threats and dangers are rising.

Jacobsen: How can the French government better protect the rights and livelihood of the French Ex-Muslim population?

Al-Husseini: It is complicated here, but at least they can stop the hate speech against us by arresting those who do it. They can be stricter against these type of imams and leaders who make these unwarranted and hateful assertions.

The French government has a lot to do in general, even in fighting terrorists and fundamentalism. But what should be fast should be to stop and actually halt political Islam, or Islamism, and even ban it.

Islam should be just private relations. That is what should happen everywhere. Religion is a private matter, and everyone should be able to condemn it and, more importantly, it should take no part in politics.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Waleed.

Q&A on the Philosophy of Economics with Dr. Alexander Douglas – Session 6

June 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

A myopic and short-term view of economic goals fails to create sustainable institutions or incentives

Dr. Alexander Douglas specialises in the history of philosophy and the philosophy of economics. He is a faculty member at the University of St. Andrews in the School of Philosophical, Anthropological and Film Studies. In this series, we discuss the philosophy of economics, its evolution, and how the discipline of economics should move forward in a world with increasing inequality so that it is more attuned to democracy. Previous sessions can be found here in part 1, part 2, part 3, part 4, and part 5.

Scott Jacobsen: Let's move into your new research, as those who have followed the previous sessions know, you have an expertise in the philosophy of economics. Dr. Stephen Law recommended you. How else can social sciences differentiate from and inform society in contrast to the natural sciences?

Dr. Alexander Douglas: I class psychology as a natural science rather than a social science. I think psychological research can serve many important social functions – for example educating us out of moral prejudices, but this is not what you're asking about.

Social sciences can be what Joan Robinson called “an organ of self-consciousness” because they can expose the origins of our social institutions. This can lead us to see them in a different light. And then, sometimes, they exercise less control over us.

For example, René Girard, whom I admire very much, went as far as he possibly could in identifying *scapegoating* as the hidden mechanism that underlies many of our institutions and social practices. He found that art, theatre, worship, criminal trials, marriage – there are many more examples – have their origin in scapegoating rituals. This is in stark contrast to the more rationalistic functional explanations given by other social scientists.

While I have no expertise to pronounce on whether or not he was right, I admire his work because it inspires us to take a second look at our institutions, to see that they really are what we think they are. It was crucial for Girard that once we recognise a practice as a scapegoating practice, we can no longer commit to it. Scapegoating only works when those participating in it think they're doing something else, i.e., prosecuting a deserving criminal.

This is, perhaps, an example of what Joan Robinson was talking about. When we become self-conscious in our institutions, they stop working on us. In political economy, when we start to see that what we have been institutionalised to think of as a market composed of individual exchanges might be in fact something quite different, we begin to wriggle loose from an ideology that controls much of our social life. Likewise, with many other social practices and institutionalised forms of life.

In future work, I plan to look at early modern theories of society, particularly those of Spinoza, Hobbes, and some of their contemporaries.

Spinoza was the most philosophically radical thinker of the Early Modern period, at least in Western Europe. He challenged the theological prejudices of his day while retaining the grand and sweeping cast of mind of a religious thinker.

Jacobsen: You have a deep interest and have published research on Spinoza. Who was Spinoza? Does his work inform your own on the philosophy of economics?

Douglas: Spinoza was the most philosophically radical thinker of the Early Modern period, at least in Western Europe. He challenged the theological prejudices of his day while retaining the grand and sweeping cast of mind of a religious thinker. He believed in the power of pure reason with a conviction seldom found elsewhere in Europe, outside of the period of ‘Idealist’ philosophy.

His work informs my views on everything, including on the philosophy of economics. One thing I’ve been interested in lately is the treatment of *time inconsistency* in economic models. A time-inconsistent policy is, roughly, one that determines what it is best to do *now* versus what it is best to do in *the future*. The inconsistency arises from what was previously ‘the future’ eventually becoming ‘now’, in which case the same policy delivers a different result inconsistent with the first. Spinoza was one of the first philosophers, to my knowledge, to consider time-inconsistency. The last few propositions of Part Four of his masterpiece, *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*, discuss how a crucial component of rationality is the avoidance of time-inconsistency.

Spinoza also deals with the social aspects of human desire, in a way that I find more insightful than the standard liberal tradition. Spinoza notices how insecure we often are in our desires: we’re really very unsure about what we want. One effect of this is that we both model our desires on those we seem to observe in others and aim at being emulated in our desires. Having others around us wanting certain things confirms our belief that we really want those things. This plays havoc with the transactions that economists treat as basic and standard. Exchange, for example, is profoundly complicated by the tendency of desires to converge on certain goods rather than being spread stably across diverse goods.

This is, I believe, part of the explanation of why one of Spinoza’s chief influences, Hobbes did not believe that any stable allocation of goods could temper the tendency to rivalrous violence in the ‘state of nature’. This insight puzzled his contemporaries, but Spinoza’s psychological account fills in some crucial details. Here I take inspiration from the work of Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, who have looked from this angle at Hobbes, Adam Smith, and other supposed founding figures in the liberal tradition.

Jacobsen: Spinoza had an interest in Ibn Khaldoun, who was the father of trickle-down economics. Why did Spinoza have this interest? What is behind the philosophy of trickle-down economics in past and the present?

Douglas: I don’t know of any evidence that Spinoza read Ibn Khaldoun. I’m not sure Khaldoun was very well known in Western Europe until after Spinoza’s time. But Spinoza was more connected, via the Hebrew tradition, to the medieval Arabic literature than many of his contemporaries.

I don’t really know much about the history of trickle-down economics. Arthur Laffer wrote [an article](#) on his famous ‘curve’, showing some historical precedents for the central idea. The Laffer Curve is, roughly, the idea that increasing tax rates up to some point increases overall revenue to

the Exchequer, but increasing it past that point decreases overall revenue due to a detrimental effect on national income. It's often cited as a prime example of an economic idea with very little practical importance, due to the strength of its assumptions and its abstraction from complicating issues.

Spinoza has very little to say about taxation as such. In the *Political Treatise* (ch.6, §12) he argues that during peacetime there should be no taxation, though all land and housing should be publicly owned and then leased from the government. In this sense, he can be interpreted as an early proponent of the Land Value Tax famously promoted by Henry George in the nineteenth century. But trickle-down economics doesn't seem to me to appear anywhere in his writings.

The Laffer Curve is, roughly, the idea that increasing tax rates up to some point increases overall revenue to the Exchequer, but increasing it past that point decreases overall revenue due to a detrimental effect on national income.

Jacobsen: Were there any social and cultural values – including freedom of speech – that Spinoza supported in order for the economic flourishing of society?

Douglas: It's almost the other way around for Spinoza. He argues that commercial relations foster peaceful cooperation among people so that they can bind together under a common law and sovereign power. For him, the best guarantee of free speech is a powerful sovereign authority, subject to the democratic control of the citizens, which acts to protect freedom of speech from the soft power of religious and private institutions. So long as the citizens know what is good for them, they will insist upon the sovereign power acting in this way.

Commercial relations support the stability of the state, and thus the authority of the sovereign power, which is the protector of freedom of speech and other rights of citizens. Commerce is important because it keeps the citizens interested in each other's welfare; "everyone defends the cause of another just so far as he believes that in this way he makes his own situation more stable" (*Political Treatise*, ch.7, §8). And there's a positive feedback loop since, as Spinoza argues in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, support for free speech and other civic rights ends up strengthening the sovereign authority and the rule of law.

On the other hand, Spinoza is well aware that economic institutions can often work to divide people rather than bringing them together. In the *Political Treatise* he has a few suggestions for ensuring that the institutions work in the right way; also in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* he speaks favourably of the Biblical debt jubilee. But, as I've argued in a [recent paper](#) ("Spinoza, money, and desire"), there is always a risk, on Spinoza's theory, that our economic institutions will foster socially destructive passions rather than working in more pro-social ways.

Universal Pharmacare Coverage: Perspective from the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences

June 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Universal Pharmacare coverage would be a substantial net benefit to Canadian society

There are few downsides to a Universal Pharmacare programme, as Professor Gordon Guyatt, university professor and Fellow of the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences points out.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Who does or would benefit from universal pharmacare coverage? I ask these questions because of the conversation in Canada at the moment. Canada has a national healthcare program, but not a national pharmacare program, unlike other comparable developed countries.

Professor Gordon Guyatt: The answer is most of the Canadian population will benefit from universal pharmacare coverage.

Jacobsen: Who would benefit the most from universal pharmacare coverage?

Guyatt: Who benefits most will be people who are poor, who are not on social assistance, who are under 65, and who cannot currently afford their drugs, these people have *real* health problems because they are unable to afford their drugs.

Jacobsen: How many people does this include?

Guyatt: It is in the order of 15-20% of Canadians. They will be the biggest beneficiaries. The next group who would benefit would be people who can afford their drugs, but who are currently paying for their drugs either through private drug plans or paying out of pocket.

The reason that they will be beneficiaries is because a national pharmacare program will make them pay somewhat more in taxes, but they will be paying much less overall than at present.

The net benefit in terms of their take-home will be appreciably greater. That is, the amount they have in their pockets at the end of paying for their taxes or drug costs will be more. Those people will be the beneficiaries. A little less of a beneficiary will be someone, like me, where part of the benefits program of the job is a drug program.

I have to pay a bit out of pocket, but some personal drug costs are paid for by my employer. That is, they are in part paid for through the benefits package of the job. I might benefit somewhat less than others, but I will still be better off than others who do not have the program.

You might say, of the potential national pharmacare program: it is not in their interest at all. It is the very wealthy who have no problem currently paying for their drugs and who pay a higher tax rate than other people. A national pharmacare program is of no benefit to them.

The very wealthy can afford their drugs with no problem at the moment. Their higher taxes might be a wash or even a net loss. That would be the one group who would not benefit. The very wealthy would not benefit from a national pharmacare program in Canada.

Put it this way. If you were to grade the benefits, then the scale would be from the poor who cannot afford their drugs who would get substantial benefits.

This would include substantial benefits for most Canadians – middle-income Canadians – who will be paying more taxes, but will be saving substantially on drug costs. Then, at the other end of the sliding scale, the least benefit would be for the wealthy.

What is not, unfortunately common knowledge that there are going to be very large savings for Canadians with a national drug program. I do not think that is common knowledge, and it is important for the general population to be aware of this.

Jacobsen: Why do you think this is the case?

Guyatt: Control of the media. The wealthy, the ones who have the least to gain and would benefit the least from a national pharmacare program both in terms of decreased cost and equity have a disproportionate influence on what people hear and see on television, and read in newspapers and other media outlets, then the benefits of a national pharmacare program – might be more well-known among Canadians. That is something that has to be remedied.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time once more, Professor Guyatt.

Professor Gordon Guyatt, MD, MSc, FRCP, OC is a Distinguished University Professor in the Department of Health Research Methods, Evidence and Impact and Medicine at McMaster University. He is a Fellow of the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences.

We conducted an extensive interview before: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). We have other interviews in [Canadian Atheist](#) ([here](#) and [here](#)), [Conatus News](#) ([here](#)), [Humanist Voices](#), and [The Good Men Project](#). [Here](#) we talk about national pharmacare.

What Really Drives Populism? A Conversation with Dr. Frank Mols

June 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Your work has focused on a specific paradox between the acquisition of wealth and the “hardening” of attitudes or stances on issues. What does this mean? How is wealth defined in this work and the hardening of attitudes here?

Dr Frank Mols: For many decades, the debate about populism and far-right voting has been informed by three (to date unchallenged) assumptions:

- (1) Populist, far-right parties thrive in times of economic crisis (when unemployment surges and people are ‘doing it tough financially’)*
- (2) Populist, far-right parties thrive when there is a sudden peak in immigration and/or asylum-seeking*
- (3) Populist/far-right parties tend to be more popular among low-income earners (low socio-economic groups) and particularly uneducated white males*

Our book examines all three assumptions (by looking at long-term election results in many different countries) and finds no correlation and no evidence for the first two assumptions: in fact, populist far-right parties have been remarkably successful in times of economic prosperity, low unemployment, and low levels of immigration, and often not successful at all in times of economic downturn and peaks in immigration. In other words, while the first two assumptions are widespread and often treated as self-evident, the evidence is simply non-existent.

The third assumption is only partially accurate. Our research shows that populist parties attract two kinds of voters, namely low-income earners who do it tough financially (who experience Relative Deprivation), and those on above-average incomes (who experience Relative Gratification). The former fit the existing stereotype (poor, working class) but the latter (who often remain in the closet) often outnumber the former. Hence we see that, paradoxically, Trump voters earned more than average, not less than average (Rothwell-Diego Rosell, 2016) and that Brexit ‘Leave’ voters were more likely to identify as middle-class rather than working class (Dorling 2016). The overall picture of two kinds of voters being attracted to populist parties produces what can be described as a V-curve pattern in populist support and voting.

When we were half-way into writing the book, we discovered that similar counterintuitive findings had been reported in the charitable giving and development aid literature. There too we see that low-income earners are more generous than high-income earners. We wrote a chapter about this in our book, and together the chapters of our book point to what we think is a fascinating trend: wealth and affluence are typically associated with heightened anxiety, fear of falling, sense of entitlement, and harsher attitudes towards the less well-off (immigrants, asylum-seekers, welfare recipients).

We did many lab experiments, to delve deeper into the psychology of affluence, and we encountered many more counterintuitive effects. For example, in an experiment in which we made students feel either certain or uncertain about their job prospects after graduating, it was

those we felt more confident in their job prospects who were most supportive of measures to curb immigration. I could go on and on, but the counterintuitive findings of these experiments are all reported in the book.

Jacobsen: The common sense, face value, expectation for the increase in wealth would be a liberalisation of attitudes. However, the data and analysis of the trends represent a more nuanced set of findings. What happens? Why?

Mols: The standard explanation of why Relative Deprivation leads to populist voting is well-known (deprivation leading to frustration, aggression, lashing out and scapegoating third parties) – there is no need to revisit or question this side of the V-curve. However, the link between Relative Gratification and populist voting is less well understood, and in our book we propose a number of hypotheses, including ‘sense of entitlement’, ‘fear of falling or slipping back’, ‘fear one’s wealth is a bubble’. Rather than to argue it is one or the other, we propose that future research ought to examine this more carefully

In our more recent research, we also analyze the link between inequality (e.g. using indicators like the Gini Coefficients) and populist voting, and here too we see that there is no simple causal relation between actual levels of inequality and support for populist anti-immigration messages. Rather, at times real inequality is very high, without this translating into support for anti-immigration measures, and at times inequality is very low, and support for anti-immigration messages is high. Indeed, yet another (wealth) paradox!

Jacobsen: Within the frame of reference of the increase in wealth and the hardening of attitudes, what does this imply for advanced economies and pluralistic liberal democracies found in North America and Western Europe?

Mols: Populist parties use a narrative that pits the ‘virtuous people’ against the ‘malicious elite’, and the key message is that the malicious elite have rigged the system and taking advantage of ordinary hard-working citizens. They often go to extremes and use age-old conspiracy theories to create a declinist zeitgeist, and to persuade voters society is at the brink of collapse. This is a real challenge for liberal democracy, as citizens may lose faith in experts and their policy expertise. As public policy researchers will be able to attest, evidence-based policy making is difficult to achieve at the best of times, but under these circumstances ‘evidence’ and evidence-based policy making will become almost impossible.

Jacobsen: What is your assessment of the trends in the increase in wealth plus the hardening of attitudes of the public?

Mols: We all know the expression ‘Wealth doesn’t buy happiness’, and many of us will believe that this is true. Yet, relatively few of us live life accordingly, and most of us (including myself) are somehow caught up in our material and other aspirations. On the one hand, this is positive, because without this drive humankind would not have made the progress we have achieved. However, it is a double-edged sword, because it is this aspirational side in us that makes us vulnerable to greed, harshness, cheating, anti-social behavior and so on.

To appreciate all this, one could begin with research into happiness. We have had more or less continuous growth in material wealth and health since WWII, yet our happiness levels are the same as in the immediate post-WWII years. This phenomenon is known as Easterlin’s paradox. Also, UK researchers examining happiness among millionaires found that millionaires continue to worry about their financial future. As for the hardening attitudes, research by Postmes &

Smith (2009) has shown that wealthier people tend to self-stereotype as ‘cold but competent’, and research by Piff and colleagues (2012) has shown that more affluent people are more likely to engage in anti-social behaviour (cheating, ignoring road rules, etc). In other words, we know from existing research that wealth is associated with the hardening of attitudes and loss of compassion for the less well-off, and it is hence not all that surprising to find that more affluent voters are often drawn to parties proposing harsher immigration and asylum policies.

Jacobsen: What are some books or articles that, people can look further into, in order to further grasp the subtleties of this and similar trends in economics and public opinion?

Mols: One way to ease into this intriguing subject is to read Alain de Botton’s book ‘Status Anxiety’. One of the key messages of this book is that meritocracy has two faces. On the one hand, meritocracy enables hard-working individuals to climb the ladder and to make it to the top (i.e. upward social mobility is possible), and most of us will see this as positive. However, the shadow side is that a person’s (good or bad) fortunes become viewed as a reflection of the individual’s ability or inability to “pull themselves up by the bootstraps”.

So, a rich person is considered to be rich because they worked hard and earned it, not because they were lucky to be born in a wealthy family, and a person who is poor is viewed as not having tried hard enough, rather than being unlucky and being born/raised in suboptimal circumstances. In other words, in a meritocracy, poverty is equated with *personal* failure, and this explains why people in meritocratic societies are not only more prone to become anxious and stressed (since slipping back towards poverty will be viewed as a personal failure), but also more motivated to become protective of their wealth and to view newcomers as a threat. In a society where social class is fixed (e.g. India, or Victorian England) this stress is absent because a person’s class and fortunes are predetermined by birth, and people will hence not fret as much about their status in society.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Mols.

Dr Frank Mols is a Lecturer in the School of Political Science and International Studies at The University of Queensland. He is the author of The Wealth Paradox: Economic Prosperity and the Hardening of Attitudes.

Ramin Hossein Panahi – Kurdish Dissident In Iran To Die Today

June 22, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

As young Kurdish Iranian dissident Ramin Hossein Panahi heads to his death, a look at the desperate efforts, locally and internationally to save him.

According to the *Iran Human Rights Monitor*, there has been a call to Iran from the United Nations (UN) human rights experts. The call is for an annulment of the death sentence for the Iranian Kurd Ramin Hossein Panahi, who is 24-years-old. There is reportage on Panahi being executed after the end of the month of Ramadan. It was originally set for May 3, but was postponed.

Iran Human Rights Monitor stated that the request for a judicial review has been rejected by the Iranian Supreme Court in late May. Now, the death sentence was referred to the office responsible for completion of the penalty.

The UN human rights experts stated, “The Iranian authorities must now halt the execution of Mr. Panahi and annul the death sentence against him.” This follows one appeal made by Agnes Callamard, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. Callamard explained the concerns about Panahi being given an unfair trial or not being given a fair trial.

In fact, Panahi was put into detention and then “mistreated and tortured.” Callamard continued, “While acknowledging the postponement of the sentence in May, we regret that Iran seems intent on executing Mr. Panahi, disregarding previous calls to annul the death sentence, and ensure he is given a fair trial.”

In Erbil, Kurdistan region, there have been protests. The protesters released a statement based on their disagreements and frustrations with the case, treatment, and death penalty for their Kurdish fellow in Iran at the moment.

The protestors’ statement stated the purpose for the protests in Kerbil, as follows:

Today we have gathered here to protest and call on the UN to put tough pressure on halting the verdict of the execution of Ramin Hossein Panahi, as in a so-called court and in an unjust way an execution verdict was issued to him and it could be implemented at any time and on any date... All the preparations have been made to carry out the execution.

With the denial of access to medical care and a lawyer, being held incommunicado, and the poor handling of the case with the torture of Panahi, too, UN experts and human rights campaigners echoed many of the same sentiments.

“The experts also stressed their concern that the charges against Mr. Panahi did not meet international standards, which specify that the death penalty must be limited to cases of intentional killing,” the Iran Human Rights Monitor explained, “Mr. Panahi was arrested in June last year for alleged membership of the Kurdish nationalist group Komala. He was convicted of taking up arms against the State, and sentenced to death by a Revolutionary Court in January 2018.”

Science and Faith: Is There Really a Conflict? – A Conversation with Professor Tom McLeish

June 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Science and faith are often seen as battling each other for dominance. Is it possible for them to coexist?

Professor Tom McLeish, B.A., Ph.D., is Professor of Natural Philosophy in the Department of Physics and works at the Center for Medieval Studies and the Humanities Research Centre at The University of York.

Scott Douglas Jacobson: Where do you stand on the perceived conflict between science and faith?

Professor Tom McLeish, B.A., Ph.D.: I stand on the extreme non-conflict end of the spectrum. I am off-spectrum because I don't recognize the question of conflict as a real one, in this sense. I am a scientist. I am a theoretical physicist. I am a Christian. Occasionally, I preach at my local church – but all these things are of one life, not two in conflict.

I have some theological training as well. When I am asked, "How do you reconcile your science with your effects?" it sounds to me like the question, "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" There is no good answer to this.

The question presumes a whole mindset. I am not there. The question of conflict doesn't even mean anything.

Jacobsen: So, we shift that conversation to where those questions become meaningless. It is like people trying to resolve some paradox in philosophy between being and non-being. It shifts the question.

McLeish: How do you resolve a conflict between your religious faith and your gardening? You grow tomatoes. Then you believe this extraordinary stuff about God creating the tomatoes and the gardener and you. Do these conflict? Well, no, they don't.

Because your story, if I am talking to someone who is a Christian or a Jew, is not a made-up story. It is a real story. It is a true story. It has a beginning and a middle and an end. You are reading it somewhere. You are in it, with lots of other people.

Also, you believe you are here for a purpose. You might think, "Tomatoes are purposeless. Nonetheless, here you are doing your gardening. The reason there is no conflict is that your gardening rests within your largest story."

Science is from God. So, I see science not as a threat to faith, if you like, or a threat to belief in God. I see science as a gift from God. God is a rather particular, rather advanced, way in which we know the universe in which we find ourselves.

Jacobsen: When it comes to formal argumentation for a god, in particular, a Christian God, what arguments do you find more appealing or convincing?

McLeish: So, I haven't always been a Christian any more than I haven't always believed in quantum mechanics either. So, if science is evidence-based, based on reason and experience, then to a large extent, faith must be as well.

Faith is supposed to be believing in ten impossible things before breakfast. Or maybe six. Of course, it isn't like that to me. It doesn't feel like that to me. The sense of religious commitment feels like being in the middle of a scientific project.

This is how it works: you have a strong hypothesis that looks very possible, but the only way to test it is to get inside it and start experimenting. So, if that is not a direct answer to your question, it puts it in context. Living the life and thought of a Christian is a bit like doing a large experiment.

On the other hand, you want the truth. Let's look at four or five categories of things that make me suspicious that theism should be taken seriously. So, the fundamental issue is ontology. Why should there be things? Why should anything exist?

In an atheist's worldview, that is a non-question. You will never know why things exist. They exist, live with it. But it is entirely legitimate to ask about the reason that things exist. The ground of all being, if you like. The second, we find mind and structure in the universe wherever we look. It is rather extraordinary, the deeper we look in the atom, the furthest out to the furthest galaxies. Or into the structures of life, we see structures, anticipate structures that can be grasped by our own minds yet are not simply echoes of our own minds.

We're finding ourselves stretched. Quantum mechanics, whatever it is. Even Feynman says no one understands it! It is a feature of the physical world that we did not expect to find, but we have the mental equipment to begin to approach it. That is miraculous in the old sense of the world. It makes me wonder absolutely. The third reason is an odd one; not many people quote reasons for believing in God as this, as normally it is a problem for them. But for me, the existence of evil is a strong pointer towards God rather than away.

To the objection that there cannot be a great God out there, in the face of terrible, evil things, I say, "What did you say? How do you know that evil? How is it that one of our human observations is wanting to point to things that are irreducibly bad, horrors that we want to be unrepeatable? Particularly after the 20th century?"

That is almost like observing the Big Bang. Looking at worldviews that are honest about evil was one of the reasons that attracted me to Christianity in particular. Because it made a realistic account of the existence of non-relative evil.

Another reason I was attracted to Christianity when I began to understand it, was that it is an *anti*-religion in an important sense. Its whole dynamic is completely inverted to all that is 'religious' – rather than humans attempting enlightenment and perfection across a huge divide, God makes the move in the opposite direction. I was rather attracted to that.

Then you have the witness of history. You do have things, documents, individuals through history, the extraordinary creative power of this revolution. The unbelievably humble and never recorded little thousands of miracles a day of people who tell you that they're doing this in obedience to this person.

This person they might call Jesus or might call God.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Professor McLeish.

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