



# Canadian Atheist: Set I

SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

## IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

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

[in-sightjournal.com](http://in-sightjournal.com)

First published in parts by Canadian Atheist,  
Not a member of In-Sight Publishing, 2017-2019  
This edition published in 2019

© 2012-2019 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen. Original appearance in Canadian Atheist.

All rights reserved.

No parts of this collection may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized, in any form, or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented or created, which includes photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher.

Published in Canada by In-Sight Publishing, British Columbia, Canada, 2019  
Distributed by In-Sight Publishing, Langley, British Columbia, Canada

In-Sight Publishing was established in 2014 as a not-for-profit alternative to the large, commercial publishing houses currently dominating the publishing industry.

In-Sight Publishing operates in independent and public interests rather than for private gains, and is committed to publishing, in innovative ways, ways of community, cultural, educational, moral, personal, and social value that are often deemed insufficiently profitable. Thank you for the download of this e-book, your effort, interest, and time support independent publishing purposed for the encouragement of academic freedom, creativity, diverse voices, and independent thought.

### *Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

No official catalogue record for this book.

Jacobsen, Scott Douglas, Author

Canadian Atheist: Set I/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*

# Contents

I	Acknowledgements.....	5
i	Chat with Zachary R.W. Johnson on Atheism and British Columbia .....	6
ii	Brief Chat with George Thindwa on Atheism in Malawi.....	8
iii	Bwambale Robert Musubaho – Kasese Primary School and Bizoha Humanist Center.....	9
iv	Short Chat with Professor Laurence A. Moran.....	12
v	Short Chat with Violine Namyalo – HALEA and UHASSO .....	13
vi	Interview with Kareem Muhssin – Alliance of Former Muslims (Ireland) .....	14
vii	Conversation with A.M. – Ex-Muslim and Blogger, Alliance of Former Muslims (Ireland).....	17
viii	Chat with Takudzwa Mazwienduna on Religion in Zimbabwe.....	21
ix	Talk With Sarah Mills – Assistant Editor and Contributor, Conatus News .....	23
x	Conversation with Terry Murray on Sexual Minorities, Religion, and the UK .....	25
xi	Conversation with Gary McLelland – Chief Executive, International Humanist and Ethical Union .....	30
xii	Conversation with Professor Tina Block on the Secular Northwest .....	33
xiii	Chat with Isaiah Akorita – Head, Media Campaign Team, Atheist Society of Nigeria .....	35
xiv	Reflections on Hempstead’s Secular Humanism.....	36
xv	The Opinion of the People .....	37
xvi	When Political Ideology Eclipses Science: Evidence-Based Decision-Making and Harm Reduction .....	38
xvii	Short Chat with Pirate Jen Takahashi – Administrative Coordinator, Lethbridge Public Interest Research Group (LPIRG) .....	40
xviii	Talk with Dr. Caleb Lack on AA and Secular Therapy.....	41
xix	Protection Through Solidarity.....	43
xx	International Safe Abortion Day .....	45
xxi	Petition E-1264 (DISCRIMINATION): Open for Signatories .....	47
xxii	Answers on Living Without Religion in Tanzania: Chat with Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa’sam) – Founder, Jicho Jipya/Think Anew Tanzania.....	49
xxiii	Irreligiosity in Greek Culture, Angelos Sofocleous.....	52
xxiv	The Calgary Pride Parade with Christine M. Shellska .....	59
xxv	Chat with British Christian Suzie Mason, Ph.D. Candidate, on Christianity and Atheism .....	65
xxvi	Ugandan Kasese Humanist Schools’ Bwambale Robert on His Locale and Work....	67
xxvii	.....	
	Chat with Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy’s (CSSDP) Avery Sapoznikow on Ayahuasca .....	72
xxviii	.....	
	Conversation with Cheri Frazer – Winnipeg Chapter Co-Coordinator, Dying With Dignity .....	75
xxix	“Oh Friar, damned souls use the word banishment to describe hell.” .....	78
xxx	Ian Bushfield, M.Sc., on Humanist Marriages in BC .....	80
xxxi	On the March: Secularization of Canadian Academia.....	82
xxxii	.....	
	Alberta Sex Positive Centre’s Angel Sumka on Alberta .....	84

xxxiii .....	
Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa’sam) – Founder, Jicho Jipya/Think Anew Tanzania: Living With Religion in Tanzania – Other Countries and Struggles .....	86
xxxiv .....	
Meeting with Richard Dawkins and Ex-Muslims – Mohammed Charlie Khadra .....	91
xxxv Interview with Chiedozie Uwakwe on Nigerian Irreligiosity .....	92
xxxvi .....	
Bayo Opadeyi on Leaving Religion in Nigeria .....	94
xxxvii .....	
Moninuola Komolafe on Irreligion: A Personal Narrative of Nigerian Non-Belief ..	95
xxxviii .....	
First Principles Activism .....	97
xxxix .....	
Life and the Possibility of Absolute Finality with Terry Sanderson .....	99
II License and Copyright .....	103

## Acknowledgements

I express gratitude to Mark Gibbs, Zachary R.W. Johnson, George Thindwa, Bwambale Robert Musubaho, Laurence A. Moran, Violine Namyalo, Kareem Muhssin, A.M., Takudzwa Mazwienduna, Sarah Mills, Terry Murray, Gary McLelland, Tina Block, Isaiah Akorita, Jen Takahashi, Caleb Lack, Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam), Angelos Sofocleous, Christine M. Shellska, Suzie Mason, Avery Sapoznikow, Cheri Frazer, Ian Bushfield, Angel Sumka, Mohammed Charlie Khadra, Chiedozie Uwakwe, Bayo Opadeyi, Moninuola Komolafe, and Terry Sanderson. I feel honored to contribute to *Canadian Atheist*.

**Scott**

# Chat with Zachary R.W. Johnson on Atheism and British Columbia

September 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is the state of atheism in British Columbia?**

**Zachary R.W. Johnson:** In BC atheism and agnosticism seem to be quite healthy. A large segment of the province's population is already Atheist and, in fact, I understand it to be the majority of citizens. This trend only seems to be continuing as the number of self proclaimed Atheists is indeed rising. Which I find as a good course for our society to be on.

**Jacobsen: What is bigger threat to equality for atheists?**

**Johnson:** As I see it the biggest threat to equality is between Atheists of differing political views more so than between the religious and irreligious. At the moment, an increase in political dogma is occurring across North America and on both sides of the political spectrum. Atheists, generally being skeptics about religion, shouldn't lose their skepticism within the realm of politics. As dogma comes in more forms than just religion, atheists should be as questioning about their political views and the views of others as they are about religion. Atheists must avoid being in a position where a claim of belief in political ideology can be made against them in a similar way an Atheist can make such a claim against the devout. It is equally as bad for one ideological side to attempt to silence another as it is for the religious to silence the irreligious.

**Jacobsen: Do BC political parties support equality for the irreligious across the board, or are there some who do not support equality for them – in policy or principle, even practice?**

**Johnson:** If asked I'm certain that the various provincial political parties would say they support the irreligious to hold their beliefs. Of course, what's implemented in practice is much more important than rhetoric. But I'm unaware of any genuine favoritism toward the religious in BC. This certainly is a different situation on the federal level, specifically regarding the Conservative Party of Canada. The CPC very much plays to a religious base which exists as a fundamental part of Conservative Party support. As it is so integral to their membership and Party structure, Atheists should be leery towards the Conservative Party if they are to form government again in future elections. This to ensure a Conservative government doesn't act in favor of religious citizens.

**Jacobsen: Do atheists tend to lean younger and more to the 'Left' socially and politically? If so, why is this the case in BC?**

**Johnson:** I don't think this is necessarily the case in British Columbia. The BC Liberal Party, being the more 'right-wing' party, had formed government for 16 years straight. BC's population being majority irreligious, I find it difficult to think that their support is rooted with religious citizens. I think our province has largely moved past the notion of the faithful being more right-wing and Atheist being more left-wing. Although this does seem to be the case on a federal level. Similarly, with youth, I think BC has been majority Atheist for long enough to where older generations share those views. Although by my estimation much of the older generations haven't particularly focused on the idea itself. Instead, it seems specifically questioning religion wasn't

particularly necessary as an area of interest. Unlike the younger generation today, who seem to target religious ideas as subject for criticism.

**Jacobsen: What are some ways religion influences politics? Are these healthy, neutral, or unhealthy for the political discourse?**

**Johnson:** In BC, there seems to be little influence of religion on politics and the general political discourse. This is presumably because of the large number of Atheists who make up the provinces majority in religious belief. Unlike in the United States, it is generally unpopular for politicians to discuss one's religious faith in Canada, especially in BC. We saw this with Premier Clark during the 2013 election when she seemed to second guess speaking with Christian groups about her Anglican faith. This is ultimately positive as religion should always be separated from politics, and in the most permanent way possible.

**Jacobsen: How can the irreligious, broadly speaking, move the dual to – not superiority or tacit chauvinism as is the reverse case with the “Supremacy of God” in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms – equality?**

**Johnson:** Although the Charter does acknowledge the “supremacy of God”, it still applies to the irreligious and indeed all demographic of citizen. The removal or replacement of that statement, while a victory for Atheist equality, would be small and ultimately symbolic. As well, with the mention of God within the national anthem. Atheists can achieve a greater degree of equality through maintaining a healthy skepticism in all areas of thought. Questioning religious dogma is merely the lowest hanging fruit when being skeptical. As its claims of divine knowledge and moral contradictions are obvious. A way to progress social equality is for Atheists to be generally known as citizens who have well thought out perspectives. People who are seen to benefit public discourse and whose identity doesn't necessarily rely on their lack of religious views. In terms of government policy, a public conversation of taxing religious institutions is likely the most important step to take when discussing legislative equality.

# **Brief Chat with George Thindwa on Atheism in Malawi**

**September 2, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is the situation for atheism in Malawi?**

**George Thindwa:** Atheism is relatively very new in Malawi.

**Jacobsen:** How do Malawians view atheism?

**Thindwa:** They are not very conversant about atheism. Many take it as satanic religion.

**Jacobsen:** What is the dominant faith in Malawi?

**Thindwa:** Christianity is the dominant religion at about 85% of Malawians are Christians.

**Jacobsen:** How does this affect economic and social development?

**Thindwa:** It has affected development in a very negative way. In Malawi, we praise for rains if it does not come. We are also fond of praying for all our social and economic problems.

**Jacobsen:** What is your only work for atheism or lack of religion in Malawi?

**Thindwa:** We promote atheism as the best alternative life stance for promotes progress.

Secondly, we have been engaged in the eradication of witchcraft based violence towards children and the elderly. Children and elderly suspected of practicing witchcraft are subjected to a lot of violence and violation of their human rights like being killed, chased away from their homes, having their property destroyed or burnt.

**Jacobsen:** Who is a personal hero in the Malawi for you?

**Thindwa:** Dr. Paul Munyenembe.

**Jacobsen:** For those in North American culture, or Canadian culture, what is something that they do not know but should about Malawi and religion?

**Thindwa:** Religious practices are abusive and promote discrimination in Malawi, i.e., promotion of witchcraft beliefs which end up abusing elderly persons, hatred towards homosexuals and atheists.

**Jacobsen:** What are your hopes for irreligion in the coming years for Malawi?

**Thindwa:** It will take a long time to reach the stage for irreligion in Malawi.

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

**Thindwa:** Thanks, Scott.



# **Bwambale Robert Musubaho – Kasese Primary School and Bizoha Humanist Center**

**September 2, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** In Uganda, you run a humanist primary school. What do you do there?

**Robert Bwambale:** I perform several roles at the primary school ranging from Administrative where I manage, direct the schools.

I do the Supervisory role to ensure everything at the schools is moving in the right direction, most of my close aides are the Head teachers at the schools. I do supervise construction projects to ensure all is done best, to ensure all the building materials are procured, used in their entirety.

I also do a planning role where I plan for the schools to ensure they are in line with our core values, government minimum standard.

I also do networking with like minded organizations and individuals both locally and internationally. I make correspondences of the schools with the international community.

I also do minor teaching on Humanism and offering drill lectures to my teachers about free thought and secularism.

In my write up here, I have mentioned schools because right now I run 3 nursery & primary schools namely:

Kasese Humanist Nursery & Primary school Rukoki

Kasese Humanist Nursery & Primary school, Bizoha Muhokya

Kahendero Humanist Nursery & Primary School

**Jacobsen:** For those in Canadian culture, what is something that they almost certainly would not know about Uganda and religion but should know about it?

**Bwambale:** Uganda is a highly religious country which has a combination of both foreign and indigenous religions.

Foreign religions dominate the local religions.

Uganda is a country which puts god high with its national motto saying “For God and my Country”

Uganda is a country where both state and religion is not separated, this is evident in courts of law, most public schools, hospitals and places of worship, everything done is a mix up of religion and politics all mingled up.

Religious leaders in Uganda are often looked as opinion leaders and are highly respected in our communities, this is because people assume they are more close to god or thought to be morally fit in everything.

Religions in Uganda are well known to be homophobic and tag homosexuality is an abomination and shows no respect to civil liberties, transgender, LGBT as wrong elements in society, by this our country has tried to enact barbaric laws that condemn same sex practices to the point of killing the gays or terminating them from society.

Religions in Uganda has denounced or shown no support for condom use, contraceptives usage, and child family planning services.

Religion is deeply rooted in Uganda schools, most schools around are connected to religious groupings, some owned by religious individuals and in these schools, there is the mandatory teaching of Religious education and what surprises most of us, only Christianity or Islam is the one on the school curriculum. This puts aside indigenous religions plus scores of religions worldwide unattended to.

In Uganda, Muslim religion has a monopoly of butchering animals in abattoirs’.

In Uganda, it’s where we have the Uganda martyrs who are devotees who decided to have their lives terminated for the sake of religion, they were killed on the orders of Kabaka Mwanga who was by then a Muslim and was against Christianity thriving on our soil. The martyrs were burnt at Namugongo and several other places around the country. June 3rd was set aside in Uganda to remember the martyrs.

In Uganda, it’s where we find several men and women of God as they call themselves and many of them have committed several crimes like the burning of believers in Kanungu, pedophile related cases by Reverend Fathers, conjugal affairs of church leaders with their flocks and the rampant child sacrifices geared by witch doctors who are con artists of modern times. The fact that majority of Ugandans believe in this and has made them victims of circumstance.

**Jacobsen: How does religion influence politics there?**

**Bwambale:** Religion influences politics to a high degree, most locals normally rely on what their religious leaders say and they go by that.

If one is of the dominant religions here say Christianity, there are high chances that locals will vote you in.

Most people vote in people basing on their religious lines or affiliations.

Religious leaders have been marked as whistle blowers of some or most politicians; they are so because it becomes easy for them to convince their congregations to support so and so.

**Jacobsen: How prevalent as it is in there? As well, how strong is it as a coalition to fight for equality?**

**Bwambale:** In our quest to fight for equality, we do face several challenges, the ground for equality is not leveled since there are a number of setbacks and this has been caused by several factors:

Homophobia is very high in Uganda; this does not respect minority human rights freedoms of certain individuals whose living is compromised.

Our cultures do still have conservative practices like favoring men to women to go to school, thinking men are heads of families, men are there to marry women and in most cases pay a dowry to the wife’s family, women should not work in offices but only keep in the kitchen.

**Jacobsen: What are your hopes for atheism or lack of religion in general in Uganda in the next 10 years?**

**Bwambale:** I think in the next ten years, a good percentage of Ugandans will have seen the light of the goodness of living a life free from spirits, angels, fables or mythical elements.

I have met scores of people who denounce believing in a higher power and looking at it as a scam or hoax but most of them still fear coming out of the closet due to fear of family ties, work connection or conditions in fear of excommunication from clans.

Most of my hopes are in the youths who form part of today's generation for tomorrow, am glad that most of them welcome humanism, free thought and science and remain optimistic that these vices can help them understand better nature and its beauty, the world around them and what the world might hold for them in the near future.

This, however, calls for intensive enlightenment about Science and what humanity can do and cannot do. Educating the masses both young and old to have a learned and educated society will bring more people to learn who is lying to them and who is speaking the truth.

Our actions as people of non-belief matters a lot, I think we should try and be good and be exemplary in our works, work to the best we can, symbolize good ethics in society and try hard at bringing people from diverse background together, I think by this more people will go to our side and we get a shoot up in numbers in the next 10 years.

# Short Chat with Professor Laurence A. Moran

September 2, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**: What are the better tools to fight creationism?

**Professor Laurence A. Moran**: Education.

**Jacobsen**: What have you found to be the shortest arguments to counter creationist, especially young earth creationist, propaganda?

**Moran**: There are no gods.

**Jacobsen**: What is the current initiative of the creationist movement in Canada and United States to further their Biblical agenda?

**Moran**: Most creationists in Canada are not Young Earth Creationists. The most popular stance these days is some form of Intelligent Design Creationism.

**Jacobsen**: How can Canadians arm themselves against it?

**Moran**: By promoting atheism.

**Jacobsen**: What are some of the early misconceptions about evolution undergraduates have in their first year of education with you?

**Moran**: Most of them don't understand modern evolutionary theory. They think that natural selection is all there is to evolution.

**Jacobsen**: How does the problem of young earth creationism compare with homeopaths, ghost hunters, believers in the powers of crystals, climate change deniers, and those that believe in the devil (and the cure for the non-problem through exorcism)?

**Moran**: Young Earth Creationism is the worst because it's completely at odds with everything we know about the natural world.

**Jacobsen**: If you look at advanced students such as graduate students in biology, what are some misconceptions that even some of them may have about evolutionary theory?

**Moran**: They don't understand Neutral Theory and population genetics.

**Jacobsen**: Where do these anti-science problems stem other than our own evolved information processing flaws?

**Moran**: If you're talking about creationists then the problems come from being taught that science is wrong.

**Jacobsen**: Thank you for your time, Professor Moran.

**Moran**: You're welcome.

# **Short Chat with Violine Namyalo – HALEA and UHASSO**

**September 7, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How much does atheism overlap with humanism to you?**

**Violine Namyalo:** Humanism greatly overlaps with humanism, both philosophies don't believe in the existence of a deity.

**Jacobsen: Does one need to be an atheist to be a humanist?**

**Namyalo:** Because humanism doesn't believe in any god, God or devil just like Atheism does. I think being a humanist is equivalent to being an Atheist.

**Jacobsen: How much influence does theism have on politics in Uganda?**

**Namyalo:** Theism influences a lot of Ugandan politics. This is because most politicians are religious and they make decisions basing on religious guidance.

**Jacobsen: What is an educational initiative, ongoing, to reduce the level of superstition and anti-reason aspects of Ugandan culture?**

**Namyalo:** Humanist schools in Uganda are part of the initiatives ongoing to reduce superstition and anti-reason.

**Jacobsen: Is the trajectory for religion on the decrease, and so irreligion on the increase, in Uganda in the future?**

**Namyalo:** If people allow their minds to openly think, and also apply critical thinking to everything they do, I am sure religion will decrease in the future.

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

# Interview with Kareem Muhssin – Alliance of Former Muslims (Ireland)

September 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What is the state of irreligion in Ireland now?

**Kareem Muhssin:** Well, the influence of the Catholic Church has waned rapidly in recent decades. Lifting the ban on contraception in 1980, legalising divorce in 1996 (despite Mother Teresa's best efforts), legislating for same-sex marriage in 2015 – none of these would be possible if the Catholic Church were as powerful as it once was, though abortion does remain a criminal offence under Irish law.

Now, of course, the Catholic Church will gloat over census figures indicating that most Irish people still identify as Catholic. They know full well, however, that this is in a very lapsed sense. Most Irish Catholics don't go to mass, but merely retain some semblance of belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ and/or vague attachment to Catholic values. Census figures do not reflect the real collapse of Catholic belief in Ireland. Indeed, I don't know a single person of my generation who firmly believes in the Trinity or the Resurrection. Undoubtedly, this decline is due in large part to the horrific revelations of child sexual abuse. This, combined with other horror stories such as the Magdalene Laundries and the Tuam babies, has created a general sense of distrust in the Church, previously seen as a guiding force in Irish society. Inevitably, this distrust has extended to its doctrines: for it is our beliefs that dictate how we behave.

I would love to grant equal weight to the rise of scientific thinking in Irish society, but that would be wishful thinking. Giving up religion does not necessarily mean embracing a secular view of the universe: a great many Irish people are now content to identify as 'spiritual', believing in an undefined Higher Power. Neither does it necessarily mean abandoning dogma: I know plenty of irreligious youths who spout all manner of sanctimonious nonsense about "straight white males" and "alternative medicine". Thus, while the Catholic Church may be on the way out – their last vestige is their stake in public schools and hospitals – the battle for Irish minds is well and truly on. As ex-Muslims, we have a responsibility to ensure that this spiritual void isn't filled by Islam. Thus, we take to social media and blogging to engage with ordinary, decent people on the moral and factual absurdities of the faith.

**Jacobsen:** How does the public see Islam?

**Muhssin:** Without suggesting that Muslims are a race, it is important to note that Ireland is a very ethnically homogeneous country. The first real influx of Muslims into Ireland happened as a result of the Balkans conflict, in the mid-90s. Thus, it is only recently that Islam has become part of everyday Irish discourse. I worry that Irish people are too welcoming in their attitudes to Islam. Undoubtedly, if a terrorist attack were to happen here, there would be many who insist that "we must have done something to deserve it". While this tendency is hardly exclusive to the Irish, given how notorious we are for our hospitality, I fear that it could be especially prevalent.

This mind virus has plagued successive governments in Ireland, who have turned a blind eye to homegrown extremism for the past ten years. In February 2007, when I was seventeen, I attended a youth camp in the Wicklow mountains. The point of this camp was to identify potential jihadist

recruits: they had us dig graves for ourselves, which we would climb into to “get a feel for death”. We were ordered to march across sub-zero ponds, reaching up to our waists, barefoot on jagged rocks. We were made to climb up a mountain in the pitch black of night and to find our own way back.

This camp, and many others like it since, was organised in part by the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland (ICCI), informally known as the Clonskeagh Mosque. The mosque is the largest one in Ireland and essentially functions as a front for the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, the Imam of the mosque, Hussein Halawa, is a senior figure in the organisation. Halawa answers to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, chair of the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), who has openly described the Holocaust as “God’s punishment upon the Jews”. We made a video about the mosque, which is pinned to the top of our Twitter page. We would urge your readers to view it, along with our blog posts for a more in-depth analysis of the Islamist threat in Ireland. The Clonskeagh Mosque is just the tip of the iceberg.

Through lobbying and direct action, we hope to shift public opinion and government policy against the creeping menace of Wahhabism. We want to restore the confidence needed for ordinary Irish people to discuss these issues without the fear of being called racist or ‘Islamophobic’ – an Orwellian term designed to render Islam immune from criticism, by implying that any such criticism is inherently irrational. It is manifestly not.

**Jacobsen: How does the Muslim community view the irreligious, in your experience?**

**Muhssin:** In my experience, Muslims are unparalleled in their intolerance for disbelief. Even in Ireland, a liberal democracy, our members have to remain anonymous. I am less cautious about using my real name, but it’s still a major risk. I look at the example of Nissar Hussain, a British ex-Muslim and father of six, who was attacked with a pickaxe in northern England. Even now, his Muslim neighbours intimidate him by simulating beheading in their front gardens.

Many of our Pakistani members fled to Ireland after having attempts made on their lives. Indeed, the suffering of atheists in Pakistan is at an all-time high: the mere charge of blasphemy is often sufficient for lynch mobs to spill blood. The perpetrators of these extra-judicial killings are rarely ever brought to justice. On the contrary, prominent online activists against the blasphemy laws have been detained – including the blogger Ayaz Nizami, vice-president of Atheist & Agnostic Alliance Pakistan, who joins the list of over 1,300 accused from 1987 to 2014.

All of this is to be expected, of course, given how clear-cut the scriptures are on how apostates are to be treated. The Qur’an says in no uncertain terms that “whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him” (3:85). The hadith literature, too, abounds with exhortations to kill disbelievers. It is universally accepted among Muslims – with the possible exception of esoteric Sufi sects – that the penalty for apostasy is death. It is an inescapable part of the faith, not least because it was easier for Muhammad to assassinate his critics than to refute them.

**Jacobsen: How did evolution disprove Islam for you?**

**Muhssin:** When I was a believer, the idea of God as creator was at the core of my faith: because of course, if God didn’t create the world, then what exactly did he do? For the longest time, I resisted learning how evolution actually worked. I had emotional reasons to keep my faith, so I would just read the creationist material, such as that of Harun Yahya. (It was only after

renouncing Islam that I discovered Yahya's books are all plagiarised from Intelligent Design groups in America.)

I became religious, you see, out of a desire to make friends. I didn't get along very well with my classmates in De La Salle, so I went looking for company in all the wrong places. I eventually settled on the faith of my upbringing, which I had hitherto only paid lip service to. That all changed when I came to college. I found myself surrounded by genuine, wonderful people, who did not require religion to behave ethically. That was a real eye-opener, causing my emotional reasons to vanish. As they did, bit by bit, I became more accepting of evolution – accelerated to no small degree by my decision to study genetics.

As I did, I found myself redefining God's role in nature, from creator to intervener, then from intervener to 'inspiration'. Eventually, I reached a stage whereby God had no place at all; he had become a mere shadow, totally removed from the mighty figure of Abrahamic lore. At that point, thankfully, I was honest enough to give up the ghost. That was the beginning of my apostasy, which has since extended to the particulars of Islamic doctrine. I honestly think that if Muslims understood evolution, if they were humble enough to jettison human exceptionalism, their situation – and ours – would be so much better. Sadly, the Muslim world appears to be moving backwards in this regard: Erdogan has moved to ban the teaching of evolution in Turkish schools, being the philistine fascist that he is.

**Jacobsen: What are your next steps for irreligious activism, for equality, now?**

**Muhssin:** Our primary function will always be to provide moral and material support to other ex-Muslims, particularly that resident in Ireland. Beyond that, yes, we want to normalise apostasy from Islam. We want to create such a shift in public consciousness that, if an ex-Muslim is ever threatened by some Wahhabi fanatic, his fellow Irishman will not hesitate to defend him. We aim to cultivate a strict intolerance among Irish people for the evils of Wahhabism and Islam itself, from the subjugation of women to the burning of literature, from the cruelty of halal slaughter to the barbarity of shari'a courts.

At the moment, our main means of doing that is via Twitter, our website and interviews such as this. As we become more recognised, however, we do expect to host public talks and seminars in conjunction with other secular groups, such as Atheist Ireland. I believe there is a moral duty to do this: for if ex-Muslims don't speak about the Islamic threat, then given the cowardice of the Left on the issue, it will inevitably fall to the Right to do so. We have no desire for that to happen, for what we hope are obvious reasons.

In talking about equality, we would be remiss not to mention the plight of ex-Muslims in Direct Provision. Under Irish law, asylum seekers are forced to subsist on a weekly pittance while their cases are considered – often for years at a time. Many of our members are languishing on €19.50 a week, while Muslim preachers who advocate shari'a law are allowed to claim benefits. The Irish State is in thrall to multiculturalism: thus, since ex-Muslims belie the notion of a moderate Islam, our asylum claims are put off for as long as possible. We deplore this and would urge the reader to check out our article on the subject.

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

**Muhssin:** It was a pleasure, thanks for giving me the chance. I look forward to future exchanges with Canadian Atheist and its affiliates.



# **Conversation with A.M. – Ex-Muslim and Blogger, Alliance of Former Muslims (Ireland)**

**September 12, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: As a law graduate from Pakistan, what was your experience there?**

**A.M.:** What I observed in Pakistan became the main reason for my conversion or the start of rebellion though it was a gradual and long process. Ultimately, it ended up in me becoming an ex-Muslim.

What I observed there was whenever I asked questions about the creation of the universe and ultimately the creation of Allah who was the maker of the universe I was shushed all the time. I was told that good Muslims never ask questions. In fact, I did not know then that Islam had no answers for my questions. Islam needs submission and total blind followers who would follow the faith blindly, so blindly that they would tie the suicide belt for the sake of will of Allah without even asking why they were being deprived of the right to live a happy and fulfilling life.

The test of questions is so dangerous for Islam that It has developed a mechanism of Blasphemy law in Muslim countries to shut the voices and Hate speech laws in western countries to further their agenda without being questioned. You can see Muslims and Islam have become a privileged class and religion, who cannot be questioned in any way. They have the free pass to rape the girls, commit a crime, preach hatred in the mosques, wage jihad on Infidels but if you question their behavior suddenly you are bombarded with the labels of bigot, Islamophobe, Racist from all direction. Media would be bashing you not them.

In Pakistan, no religious leader has regards for the religion. They educate their children from foreign western countries but they themselves teach the children of local followers in their own local Madrassas (religious schools).

No politician follows any religious tenets of Islam which they are supposed to do as Muslims. I have seen the religious clergy on the payroll of the politicians. Who work as a mediators or suppressors of any resistance or thought of resistance, developing in the minds of Masses. In Pakistan, no resistance or revolutionary movement can prosper because the Mullahs preach in their weekly Friday prayer sermons to have patience because patience is what Allah wants and Allah is testing his follower's power of patience so that he could reward them in the Jannah(paradise).

In other words, people are emotionally and religiously blackmailed into bearing the corrupt and greedy politicians with patience considering it a test from Allah. People believe this nonsense and keep calm just because they have been taught to do so unquestioningly.

Other than that there are various sects of Islam who have bloody and severe differences with each other, very often they clash with each other, kill each other so there is no peace. These differences are so grave and huge that Saudia and Iran are two Muslim countries based on two different sects. During the current mass immigration of Muslim asylum seekers from Syria, Gulf countries refused to accept asylum seeker due to sectarian differences. Islam will bring destruction wherever it would go.

Other than that in Pakistan Mosques use loud speakers for the pronouncement of Azan (Muslim calling for prayer). So different sects have different timings for azan. For five prayers of a day, you have to listen to the noise pollution 40 to 50 times a day. Which drives people crazy but they can't question because the question would be considered a blasphemy.

Above is the shortest possible scenario. There are numerous uncountable examples of Islam's Brutality and stupidity.

But still, I was a believer in Islam when I was in Pakistan though a little suspicious about its true nature.

**Jacobsen: What prompted the need to flee the country?**

**A.M.:** I have been very active as an advocate in my country. I did a lot of Public Interest litigation and stood for the rights of my fellow Pakistanis. I challenged the corruption of the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Laptop scheme launched by the Government for the students. I even challenged the Nomination papers of Nawaz Sharif before the elections. I challenged the then Foreign Minister's right to hold the office due to her default in the electricity bills which amounted to 10 million Rupees at that time. Other than that I challenged hike in oil prices and a lot of other things for the sake of elevating Human Rights of Pakistani People.

With the same devotion and determination for making the things right in the Pakistani society. I and my friend decided to start a project for highlighting the issue of child sexual abuse in the religious schools by their own religious teacher who in the most cases were very revered in the society.

We decided to highlight this issue by writing a novel about it. I researched and wrote the preface of that book and my friend wrote the novel. We changed the names of the persons and places but based the novel on some true incidents. The novel was written in English in order to reach the elite of the Pakistan who mostly are used to read and write in English. Even otherwise official language is also English in Pakistan.

The novel after its publication got instant attention from the various class of people. The reason for quick attention was also my personal popularity in the media on the local level as a lawyer and political worker. Anyhow the novel fetched criticism from the Religious Fundamentalists or extremists who instantly issued a Fatwa against us and the novel which was published in a newspaper.

Other than that I was threatened by a group of people who met me outside high court and I was also attacked and was shot at by two bikers which I luckily escaped.

My friend and fellow writer also came under fire. Locals of his residential area protested in front of his house and demanded him dead. He had to flee instantly.

Some Petitions in the high court were also moved by various persons who invoked the high court to punish us under blasphemy law of Pakistan.

In that scenario, we considered it reasonable to run from Pakistan.

**Jacobsen: How did you survive when people wanted you dead?**

**A.M.:** The overall environment in Pakistan is religiously biased towards minorities or criticism of Islam. But same is the case with over all mentality of Islam anywhere in the world. Islam's problem is questioning. Until you don't question Islam, you are safe. But the moment you start to

question or criticise Islam, Muslims become furious. In Muslims majority countries any anti sentiment is dealt with, under the blasphemy law and the punishment is the death penalty. In western countries, anyone questioning Islam is regarded as Islamophobe, Bigot, and Racist to shut down the argument.

I think the reason for our survival in Pakistan despite the extremist's threats was that we did not contact the authorities or police about it.

In many cases, people who were accused of blasphemy were killed in the custody of the police with the otherwise inside collusion of the officials with the religious fanatics just because the sentiment of anger for blasphemers is same for everyone in Pakistan whether it be a common man or Government officials. Every Muslim wants blasphemers dead.

**Jacobsen: You are an ex-Muslim and a blogger. How has this impacted your life, simply writing words?**

**A.M.:** Simply saying that now I am spending a dual life. I am not open about my apostasy for the fear of my life and seclusion from the friends and family. Just because understanding all the deception of Islam is not easy. It's a lengthy process, not until when you personally read all the credible Muslim sources and make your own opinion about the Islamic Moralities, you cannot reason yourself out of it.

The main cause behind the force of deception is the constant promotion of this deception in the mosques all over the world. Most of them are Saudi funded. It's a business circle for Saudi Arabia, they get millions of Muslims to visit Saudia for pilgrimage and they earn billions. They spend some amount of money on promotion of Islam and win more visitors to Saudia for religious purposes every year. This cycle goes on and on. They never stop promoting because the business of the whole state depends on religion and oil basically. They are getting richer day by day whereas at the same time they treat other Muslims as 3<sup>rd</sup> class Muslims. No one is willing to understand this system because they are blinded by faith. This is a vicious circle.

After reading the objectionable content in the credible Islamic sources myself. I became frustrated, I felt deceived and downtrodden. I would like to quote some of the objectionable things here, for example, killing infidels, owning female slaves and using them for satisfaction of your physical desire, and ultimately selling them, marrying someone for short period of time by giving them some gifts, marrying underage as young as 6 years old, female and male genital mutilation, killing someone for apostasy and blasphemy, denying every other religion of the world, to mention a few. I felt as if my life had no meaning. All along the journey of my life I was living and following a lie. My parents could not understand the true nature of Islam, my friends could not understand it, I had been feeling guilty all my life for not properly following the commands of Allah. Believe me, the sense of guilt is the most tormenting and torturous feeling which I believe every Muslim is filled with as I was. This is the same sense of guilt which forces every Muslim to do something for the sake of Islam. In the name of Allah, to do Jihad or something big so that all of his sins which he committed during his life journey could be forgiven as an only means of salvation.

I felt like bursting with anger that all my life I had been believing this nonsense and wasting my life for nothing. Islam and Muslims force you to become a true Muslim and there is no perfection in the Idea of true Muslim. So no matter what you do there is always something left. So this

imperfection creates a sense of guilt which is being played, manipulated and increased by the deceptive preachers of Islam.

For example, when you impose a ban on all the natural desires of a young teenage boy of becoming physically intimate with a girl or involving in a game then he would feel suffocation and then you would create an imaginary paradise full of lucrative virgins who would be throwing themselves at him. What would he do, he would do exactly the same thing that all the Jihadi Muslims are doing nowadays. Waging Jihad winning martyrdom for the sake of achieving full breasted, sexy virgins in Jannah. Because the system did not leave any way out for him. This was the only way out of the physical and mental torture.

**Jacobsen: How do you fight for human rights?**

**A.M.:** I have been actively fighting for the rights of Pakistani People by filing Public Interest litigations in Pakistan. Nowadays my criteria of the fight are narrowing down to fight for the rights of Ex-Muslims and waking the Muslims up and out of the Barbarian ideology. I feel badly affected and Impacted by the false teachings of Islam. So I want to work for exposing the real teachings of Islam to the world at large. Which still seems to be a hard task because of the sinister collusion of the left with Islam. But still, we are doing what we can. Keeping mum and feeling bad is not gonna get us anything. Am writing blogs, tweeting on twitter, supporting other ex-Muslims and also a few plans are in pipeline.

**Jacobsen: What is your next step in fighting for the rights of the non-religious?**

**A.M.:** Now is the time of social Media. Social media is the place where we can spread our message far and wide. I am personally planning on creating more social media platforms to spread our concerns to the larger number of People. Alliance of Former Muslims is a one of such kind of Group which gives us an organized platform to voice our concerns. I really appreciate Kareem and other members of our group for being really active on this front. This struggle is hard but we are relentless, persistent and determined for our cause and we hope to achieve real breakthroughs not quickly but soon.

# Chat with Takudzwa Mazwienduna on Religion in Zimbabwe

September 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How is atheism perceived in Zimbabwe?**

**Takudzwa Mazwienduna:** Atheism or secularism is something many people in Zimbabwe are not familiar with. The constitution in Zimbabwe is very secular but the people are not. Most people in Zimbabwe do not approve of it and consequently, very few people dare to come out as Atheists. Anything that is not Christianity is frowned upon, Zimbabweans made an uproar in 2016 when the government proposed teaching other religions in the religious studies syllabus as opposed to just Christianity because it is unconstitutional, Atheism would be regarded worse

**Jacobsen: Do you have any advice for fellow non-believers in Zimbabwe for being publicly out as nonbelievers?**

**Mazwienduna:** I personally know a lot of non-religious people in Zimbabwe and we have been fighting a good fight defending our secular constitution. We recently got one of our own on the National Censorship Board and I would advise my fellow nones to join in the efforts. I would however not recommend Nones who are dependent on their parents or guardians to be open secularists since this would result in them being cut off from their guardians' financial support which is typical of many Zimbabwean families

**Jacobsen: What is something that others in countries like Canada should know but don't about religion in Zimbabwe?**

**Mazwienduna:** Zimbabwe is an exclusively Christian country although the constitution is secular. Religion influences most aspects of public opinion and some sects do witch hunts or deny children medical care or vaccinations.

**Jacobsen: Who is the biggest religious charlatan in the country?**

**Mazwienduna:** It is not easy to tell because we have so many successful "Men of God" coming up preaching the gospel of prosperity to the struggling Zimbabweans. They make millions of American dollars in tithes and seed money and they sponsor national sports teams. The big three, however, are Prophet Makandiwa, Prophet Magaya, and Dr. Ezekiel Guti. They have their own TV channels, are politically connected and their followers see them as gods.

**Jacobsen: What is the good of religion?**

**Mazwienduna:** Maybe charity with traditional churches like the Catholic Church that has numerous children homes who they unfortunately indoctrinate, the best schools in the country are also mission schools, but they downplay scientific literacy since topics like evolution are taught with a disclaimer.

**Jacobsen: What is the bad of religion in Zimbabwe?**

**Mazwienduna:** It popularises bigotry and undermines scientific medicine. It has also produced citizens who are more concerned about prayer rather than working.

**Jacobsen:** What do you think is the trajectory of irreligion in the country for the next 10 years?

**Mazwienduna:** Not so different from now if secularists do not voice their opinions and concerns. We have been on Christian sponsored radio but we were kicked off. The secular community doesn't have the funding or proper channels to advocate for secularism and as long as the Christians have power and resources they will control the future.

# Talk With Sarah Mills – Assistant Editor and Contributor, Conatus News

September 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How can religion change to adapt to a modern world in which women are increasingly educated?

**Sarah Mills:** As people become more educated, they are more likely to identify as atheists. It's a product of scepticism and reason-based thinking. This is not to say educated people cannot also- for cultural, familial, or personal reasons- hold spiritual/religious convictions that run parallel to their evidence-based ones, but organized religion generally demands a level of dependency while education liberates and encourages independent thinking. Having said that, I've always believed that people make of religion what they choose. Religion, in order to survive in a world of scientific hegemony in which there is no basis for the belief that females are inferior, must loosen its grip on the public sphere and shift to the personal realm. Religious authorities must favour teachings that exalted women and reinterpret those that legitimized misogyny- or dismiss them as fallible altogether. They must either do the gymnastics (and many scholars have) to come out and say misogynistic teachings are metaphoric or explain them in a historical context while clearly conveying that they are no longer, in any way, appropriate. For us atheists, it may seem like apologetics and wouldn't be as ideal as eschewing the whole thing as the mythology we see it as, but it's the next best thing.

**Jacobsen:** Hypothetically speaking, would change come from within faiths or from the outside?

**Mills:** One of the best tools for change we have at our disposal is the work of progressive reformers. They are the ones seeking to reconcile religion with modern, progressive values. It is unrealistic to assume everyone will simultaneously and willingly embrace atheism. Very devout persons are less inclined to listen to someone on the outside telling them how they should practice their religion. Progressive reformers and persons of faith for whom a spiritual and personal connection with something beyond the physical is deeply important are those who will shift what it means to be Christian, or Muslim, or Jewish, or Hindu. Following the development of the gay rights movement, for example, Christians of various denominations sought to reconcile their faith with their sexual orientation through linguistic and contextual reinterpretations of Bible verses that seemed to condemn homosexuality. We are seeing similar developments with the Muslim reform movement.

**Jacobsen:** Where can women's rights and religion find common ground?

**Mills:** In minority rights. If religions want to avail themselves of the right to freedom, they cannot deny it to others. The biggest religions today were once minorities.

**Jacobsen:** What are some subtle areas of religion empowering women?

**Mills:** I would hesitate to say that religion empowers women, or anyone not at the very top of the religious hierarchy for that matter. There have been very few people, historically, who have benefitted from organized religion and those were precisely the people who called the shots. Organized religion seeks to control, like any other system of power. Women are empowering

themselves, and religious women are empowering themselves by reconciling their faith systems with the feminist (and just plain decent) stance that they deserve to be their male counterparts' equals. Perhaps a woman of faith might be more qualified to answer this question, but when I was growing up in a religious organization, I certainly did not feel empowered as a woman. It is, in fact, one of the main reasons I left. I could not accept the mental contortion it took to believe that 'the husband is the head of the wife' is a loving or respectful arrangement.

**Jacobsen: The future is only as bright as we make it. What are your objectives for that bright future?**

**Mills:** If there's one thing I have faith in, it's the human spirit. We are intensely and insatiably curious; it's one of the traits that led us to search for answers in the first place. The power-hungry will always receive competition from the independent-minded. Some people do like the comfort of not having to think for themselves, but the loudest voices- the ones who bring about the sort of change that leads to freedom- are the ones who question and who do not accept contrived authority. Extremist strains will die out. It is inevitable. They are not sustainable. The human spirit is one that always tends, ultimately, towards freedom. My objective as a writer is to effectively convey the senselessness in robbing each other of the freedom to live and prosper, all in the name of uncertainties. My objective as an atheist is to encourage scepticism and evidence-based thinking.



# Conversation with Terry Murray on Sexual Minorities, Religion, and the UK

September 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**SJ:** What is the general perspective of the Christian population of the sexual minority population in the United Kingdom?

**TM:** I'm an ex-Christian so I can't speak as a member of that group. My answer will be my impression as an outsider. For sexual minorities of faith, there is always a dilemma between reformation or apostasy. The problem for those who wish to reform from within, which is a worthy aspiration, is that their efforts may be repeatedly thwarted for decades, with little more than nominal "changes" occurring.

We saw a good example of that last February when The House of Bishops report was received with widespread disappointment by lesbian and gay members of the Church of England. While the report said the church needed to repent of homophobic attitudes and called for a "fresh tone and culture of welcome and support" towards lesbian and gay Christians, it also said that it did not propose to change its "one man – one woman" definition of marriage. The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement's chief executive Tracey Byrne said: "The Church of England has spent almost three years and £350,000 in a careful process of 'Shared Conversations' about sexuality" and that "LGBTI+ people who have participated in this process in good faith, at considerable personal cost, will feel angry and disappointed that there appears so little real change."

In July 2017, however, The General Synod of the Church of England passed a motion on welcoming transgender people. Members of Synod, meeting in York, supported a call for the House of Bishops to consider preparing nationally commended liturgical materials to mark a person's gender transition. The vote comes after bishops overwhelmingly backed a motion calling for a ban on "unethical" conversion therapy for gay Christians. I think most LGBTI Christians will be naïve in viewing the embrace of 'transgender' blessing ceremonies as a progressive move by the Church, but I have argued that the 'transgender' identity itself functions as a diagnostic label, and is itself just a highly persuasive (and apparently 'liberal') re-branding of gay conversion therapy. This would explain the Church's inconsistency in maintaining its homophobic ban on same sex marriage while showing encouragement towards re-naming ceremonies for people who claim they are transgender.

Now, instead of being subjected to conversion treatment by parents or doctors, self-described 'patients' have voluntarily consented in using gender reassignment surgery as a cure for their 'condition' (gender dysphoria). The problem is that this whole conceptual model is deeply conservative in its premises about gender, as well as in its methods and tactics (basically stigmatizing and then censoring anyone who disagrees with those premises as some kind of bigot, which actually reverses the real situation).

**SJ:** Is religion one of the major sources of bigotry against sexual minorities?

**TM:** Without doubt. However, religion is not univocal. In the 'big three' monotheistic religions there are humanitarian, modernising liberal strains and more traditional conservative doctrines. But conservative religious figures can always monopolise the religion, as is happening in Islam

with Salafi-Wahhabists defining how Islam is actually practiced in Muslim immigrant communities. Meanwhile, well-meaning fully integrated Muslims who do not live in conservative sub-communities sanitise the image of Islam, unaware that they are helping Salafists to maintain good PR. In each of the big three monotheistic religions, the authorities tend to be conservative. In general, they also have an inordinate fixation on sex – and particularly on female sexuality. This might explain why pornography is most popular in religiously conservative countries like Pakistan where sexual relations are strictly policed. According to data released by Google, six of the top eight porn-searching countries are Muslim states, with Pakistan topping the list at number one. Repression breeds perversion and leads to a distorted fetishization of human sexuality, not as a natural part of human life like anything else, but as a ‘problematic’ area that must be obsessively policed and controlled.

Conservative religious views of ‘creation’ cling to the view that all healthy humans possess innate heterosexuality – a belief based on the compatibility of male and female genitals for procreation (reproduction). Accordingly, homosexuals are defective or disordered heterosexuals. Even when the Vatican finally acknowledged that homosexual orientation is innate (not a choice) in its 1975 Encyclical *Persona Humana*, they pathologized it in the same stroke, calling it “intrinsically disordered” and “incurable”. Effectively they regarded the homosexually orientated person as born with an innate predisposition to ‘sin’, which made the person’s homosexuality a kind of moral illness or defect.

What makes this diagnosis interesting is that ‘illness’ is religiously defined. The ‘patient’ actually feels better than ever when he expresses his inner (“disordered”) nature; he finds a sense of well-being that repressing his “incurable disorder” had rendered impossible. But natural theology would nevertheless say that he is sick.

### **SJ: Are sexual minorities more or less likely to be religious?**

**TM:** A PEW survey of Americans (I can’t find stats for the UK) found that LGBT adults are less religious than the general public. Roughly half (48%) said they have no religious affiliation, compared with 20% of the public at large. Of those LGBT adults who are religiously affiliated, one-third said there is a conflict between their religious beliefs and their sexual orientation or gender identity. And among all LGBT adults, about three-in-ten (29%) said they have been made to feel unwelcome in a place of worship.

Many sexual minorities have no safe choice but to live as though they were heterosexuals, and in many cases they also choose prudently to live as though they were believers. More than seventy countries continue to outlaw homosexual behavior, with penalties ranging from one year to life imprisonment. Six Islamist states impose the death penalty, and in provinces of other countries gay and lesbian acts are punished under Sharia law by stoning. Even in states where it is perfectly legal to ‘come out’ many homosexuals risk rejection and disinheritance from their families if they do so. This might explain the higher rates of depression and suicide among homosexual teens. Recent North American and New Zealand studies of large populations (especially the US Youth Risk Behavior Surveys from several States) indicate that gay, lesbian and bisexual adolescents (and males in particular) can have rates of serious suicide attempts which are least four times those in apparently heterosexual youth. It also explains the higher rates of homelessness among LGBT youth. The UCLA Williams Institute, found that 40% of the homeless youth served by agencies identify as LGBT. This is especially alarming given that LGBT youth represent a relatively low percentage of the general population.

Then too, many religious sceptics are forced to live as though they were believers. A recent Pew Research Center analysis found that, as of 2014, about a quarter of the world's countries and territories (26%) had anti-blasphemy laws or policies, and that more than one-in-ten (13%) nations had laws or policies penalizing apostasy. The legal punishments for such transgressions vary from fines to death. The Study found laws restricting apostasy and blasphemy are most common in the Middle East and North Africa, but blasphemy laws can be found in all regions, including Europe (in 16% of countries) and the Americas (29%).

Many sexual minorities have been brought up within a religious culture. Religion may form an important part of their belief system or 'identity'. But a person's religious identity can come into conflict with other aspects of the person's identity, such as his or her sexual orientation or his or her intellectual curiosity. I like how Amartya Sen thinks of identity not just as something we discover, or find ourselves inhabiting, but as something we acquire and earn. It is not that we can just chose *any* identity we wish to, as though we had no background conditions, but that we have some freedom of choice (within cultural constraints) in the priority we give to the identities we may have. Despite the tyrannical implications of putting persons into the rigid boxes of their given "communities", says Sen, "that [communitarian] view is frequently interpreted, rather bafflingly, as ... individual freedom." Sen asks, I think rightly, whether a person's relation to [his nation] must be *mediated through* the "culture" of the family in which he or she has been born.

**SJ: Does the irreligious community provide protections for sexual minorities in the United Kingdom from the dominant faiths that tend to explicitly (in religious texts and in social life) express open bigotry and even contempt for sexual minorities?**

**TM:** There is a genuine will to do so among secular organisations and in the UK there are also ex-Jehovah's Witness organisations and Ex-Muslims groups. However, the latter face constant accusations of bigotry – the new trope used by real bigots (religious bigots) to shut down freedom of speech and criticism of *their* intolerance. Sexual minorities within the practicing religious communities face real dangers and threats of violence from family members and others in the community. They can always leave the community if they have sufficient financial means and language ability, but some do not.... especially women.

Then too there must be a frame of reference from which an individual can recognise his own possibilities. One cannot recognise oneself as "gay" or "lesbian" if one cannot fathom this possibility. Homosexuality is frequently the love that has no name. I know this myself from my own past experience. I had internalised my community's Christian homophobia to such an extent that I was homophobic, and it takes a long hard struggle to shake that off and to recognise one's own longings for what they are. One needs opportunities to meet homosexuals or at least to see them represented in some form.

**SJ: What is the main confusion about sexual minorities that people simply don't get?**

**TM:** Heterosexuals just know, and do not need to be taught, what turns them on (sexually). It is the same for homosexuals. All of the available empirical evidence suggests that being homosexual is not defective heterosexuality, but another natural variant of human sexual nature. Now one could wonder how homosexuality could conceivably be natural, since it seems to contradict the reproductive function of the human genitals. Apparently, homosexuality could only be a malfunction or 'mis-match' between the brain and the genitals. But this is to read the body too literally, and not down to the genes and chromosomes, where most evidence for a

‘naturalistic’ homosexuality is to be found. Darwin himself understood that survival of the species is not only about competition but also about cooperation. Only Herbert Spencer’s followers and Social Darwinists over-emphasised the competitive ‘survival of the fittest’ competitive struggle. Where resources are scarce, and the population is growing at a rapid rate, homosexuality provides a benefit to the population by lowering the birth rate and thereby the population. This means that there are more resources available for the population as a whole. Not *all* humans have to reproduce. It is actually better *for everyone* if some do not. Aesthetically, heterosexuals may not like people who do not conform to stereotypical ideals of masculinity or femininity, but biodiversity is not only about human constructions and tastes.... it is about us as a diverse species with beneficial variations. We eliminate biodiversity at our peril.

**SJ: What will it take to broaden the landscape of perception about sexuality and gender identity?**

**TM:** I will sound biased for saying this, but less religion and myth. Fewer cultural fantasies that are propagated by religion, the mass media and porn industries, and more empiricism. This is unlikely, however, since all of our experience, our empirical observations, are today ‘mediated’ through the lenses of a culture that powerful capitalist hegemonic forces have implanted in our minds from a very early age, and projected onto our experiences. So it is hard to see the world stripped of mythical prejudice or bias. Taking off those lenses is almost impossible but I think a return to Plato’s cave analogy is appropriate here – we need to see the light of day.

**SJ: In a way, the mainstream faiths have been around longer and have forced through even threat of death the idea of a sexual binary, or the idea that men and women were created in God’s image in the Garden of Eden.**

**They have been around longer and have used harsh and brutal methods to inculcate this in societies, whether through the Russian Orthodox Church in the Putin Regime, in Constantinian Christianity with Constantinople, as well as America with evangelical Christianity, and so on, to take one faith.**

**Then when fields such as gender studies conceptualize a broader landscape, granted in over-complicated terminology, about human sexuality and gender identity, the dominant faith representatives, who are often heterosexual men, grumble, moan, and hurl epithets such about “radical gender ideologues.” How do we bridge the gap, broaden the landscape, and not get bloodied in the process?**

**TM:** Well, as I said above, the dominant faith representatives will embrace new conceptualizations and new semantics about sexuality so long as doing so confirms their idea of a sexual binary. One thing most people don’t know is how insidious religion is. For example, despite the traditional wisdom that “Hollywood is run by Jews”, the Catholic Church have a very longstanding ‘relationship’ with the Hollywood film industry, which now has global reach.

Religious authorities today continue to spread the gender ‘binary’ faith – ironically – through the Trans movement, which they support. This is because the Trans concept maintains the gender binary and its conservative stereotypes about men and women, as I have argued elsewhere.

The epithets go both ways. Gender-critical feminists like myself are liable to be branded and stigmatized as “femiNazis”, ‘TERFs’ or “Transphobes” before anyone actually listens to our arguments. A better term for us would be ‘Trans-sceptics’! I come to this topic as someone who personally (before giving it much reflection) self-diagnosed as “gender dysphoric”. As my

understanding of the role of gender in patriarchal culture deepened, and as I came to understand that the disciplinary technologies and institutions like medicine work in a less than objective way, I came to realise that I had been duped.

As soon as Trans Activists see that we have some reservations about the “Trans rights” movement, they dismiss us, assuming that we could only be motivated by bigotry. This is dangerous not only for us but equally for them – because Trans sceptics are trying to explain how the category of “Transgender” has been incorporated into a medical framework that will be used eugenically in the future, and not for the progressive ends of fostering diversity.

# Conversation with Gary McLelland – Chief Executive, International Humanist and Ethical Union

September 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How does IHEU fight for the rights of the religious and the non-religious?

**Gary McLelland:** The IHEU is the only global democratic membership body for the range of non-religious organisations in the world. We are a network of atheist, humanist, laïque, skeptic, ethical cultural and other groups.

IHEU does a range of activity to promote the rights of non-religious people. We primarily do this through the lens of ‘freedom of religion or belief’ or “FoRB” as it’s known to many. This is the idea that people should be treated equally regardless of their religious or other beliefs, such as humanism, atheism and so on.

The power of this approach is that it’s grounded in international human rights laws (Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights). This means that we can use global and regional institutions to highlight and challenge states who violate, or fail to protect, atheists and other non-religious people.

We do this by speaking out at the United Nations on the danger of so-called ‘blasphemy laws’, calling for the protection of dissenters and apostates within Islam, but because the ‘FoRB’ agenda also calls for the protection of religious groups – it means that we can work with religious leaders to call for secularism and freedom of expression.

This doesn’t mean that we don’t also criticize religion and religious organisations. Recently we published a video interview with Armin Navabi, who founded the world’s most popular online platform for atheists – Atheist Republic.

**Jacobsen:** If a state has any position on faith that isn’t neutral, it favours one faith over others as well no faith. What countries are leading the way for fairness and justice at the level of the law and public institutions?

**McLelland:** I’ll refer here to the IHEU Freedom of Thought Report. This looks at discrimination against the non-religious in every country, and therefore looks at public institutions and the attitude of the state to religion. States that fare best in our rating system in the report are countries like Belgium, Netherlands, also Taiwan. Iceland and Japan also do pretty well. France, which of course is renowned for its laïcité secularism, believe it or not only has a nearly clean sweep: some local exceptions and exemptions for overseas territories are problematic.

Interestingly, both Netherlands and Belgium, which get clean-sweep ratings in our report, both use a kind of “pillar model” of secular neutrality, as opposed to a strict separation model. It means for example that they might fund certain religious groups in some way, but would also do the same for comparable secular groups. Now that’s not to every secularist’s tastes, but it does exhibit neutrality and non-discrimination.

**Jacobsen:** What countries simply aren’t doing the aforementioned?

**McLelland:** Most countries have some degree of religious privilege in how the state treats some religious groups. It can take the form of subsidies that are open only to religious groups, or probably more often in fact these subsidies just exist solely for the purpose of propping up some particular denominational church with historic significance to the state. That's common in Europe and Latin America for example. There's state funding for religious schools in many countries. A lot of predominantly or historically Catholic countries have very problematic arrangement with the Catholic Church. And in so many countries there's a kind of deference or official recognition to certain religious groups that sets them apart and elevates their beliefs above those of their neighbours. There's really too much to mention here: all countries except those I mentioned above are going to be contravening secularism in some way. And of course across much of the Islamic world the word 'privilege' doesn't even begin to cover it anymore: in states like Iran, Saudi, Pakistan, and increasingly even in places like Indonesia, Maldives and so on with resurgent Islamist influence, you see the massive repression of freedom of thought, and the unapologetic alignment of the state with a particular set of really fundamentalist religious values, imprisoning people for blasphemy, even threatening 'apostates' with death in some cases.

**Jacobsen:** Who seems to be the most reasonable and reasoned irreligious person you've ever met? Why this person? How do they penetrate to the core of the issues around faith and secularism, and society?

**McLelland:** That's a tough question! Different writers and thinkers place emphasis on different things depending on their experiences and interests.

I think one of the most interesting and stimulating thinkers for me is AC Grayling. I find his sober, engaging and optimistic analysis very interesting. He is able to analyse situations and formulate ideas which are, in my view, of great value to those of us working in campaigning or advocacy.

I would recommend any of his books, and there are lots of videos available on Youtube.

**Jacobsen:** What book is a good primer on humanism? Where can folks get it?

**McLelland:** I think a good overview of humanism is Peter Cave's book "Humanism: A Beginner's Guide", you can get it very easily online. There's also a very good book on the history of the IHEU called "International Humanist and Ethical Union 1952-2002" by Bert Gasenbeek and Babu Gogineni.

I also think it's important that we recognise that while for many humanism is an intellectual position, there is a growing number of people around the world for whom it is a lived experience. I think we need to be more open to that, and avoid intimidating people who might not be as interested in the intellectual side.

For instance, another great way to get involved in humanism can be through attending event and conferences, b getting to meet and speak to like minded people. I often find these kind of personal engagements some of the most rewarding.

**Jacobsen:** Does humanism align closely with internationalist principles and values enshrined in various documents such as the UN Charter?

**McLelland:** Yes, very much so. The post-war developments in human rights law and internationalism were heavily influenced by humanist thinkers. As an example, Julian Huxley

who presided over the opening Congress of the IHEU was also responsible for setting-up UNESCO.

It's not a huge surprise that humanist thinking was a leading inspiration for the development of human rights. When we think about it, human rights are based on the self-evident goal that we all share for the enjoyment of the greatest amount of happiness and well-being which is possible. There is no divine motive, or reference to authority – it's quite simply humanist thinking in practice.

This is way even today one of the most important parts of IHEU's work is to maintain delegations at the major international institutions, such as the United Nations, Council of Europe, African Commission on Human and People's Rights and many others.

However, there is a risk to these hard-fought battles. As we see the reemergence of nationalism and populism across much of the world, we see a tendency from radicals of different political perspectives to want to break the principle of universality which has guided our work for decades. Instead they want to insert narrow differences, divide and seek to foster disagreements for their own cynical means.

Our challenge is to be able to communicate the success of international cooperation and universal human rights in a way which makes sense in people's lives.

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



# Conversation with Professor Tina Block on the Secular Northwest

September 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** You have done research into the secularism or irreligion in the Northwest, including the province of British Columbia and the state of Washington. You wrote on this in *The Secular Northwest*. What was the primary research question and finding?

**Professor Tina Block:** I was interested in exploring not only why the Pacific Northwest was and is more secular, but how people were secular, and what that meant in their day-to-day lives. Focusing on the 1950s through the 1970s, I conducted archival and statistical research, along with a number of oral interviews with people who lived in the region, to learn more about the nature and meaning of secularity in the region. I found that residents of Washington State and British Columbia were, in the postwar era, far more likely than those in other regions to reject, dismiss, or ignore religion, particularly in its organized forms. I suggest that this secular culture was created largely by ordinary people in the spaces of everyday life, and that it was experienced differently according to gender, class, and other categories of identity.

**Jacobsen:** Northwest people have been rejecting organized religion to lose religious affiliation, but have continued to adhere to informal spiritual beliefs. Why have people lost their organized religion here?

**Block:** People in the Pacific Northwest have been more likely than those in other regions to stay away from religious institutions and to identify as of “no religion.” The reasons for this are complex, and rooted deep in history. Some prominent explanations include: the highly mobile character of the region which, in certain cases, weakened religious ties; and demographic factors (such as, for instance, the gender imbalance of the late 19th century – there were fewer women and families in the Northwest than elsewhere). In my book I point to the significance of cultural constructions of place – the Pacific Northwest has been less religious, in part, because it has been understood and imagined that way. Over time, secularity has come to be seen as part of the Northwest identity, entwined with regional ideals of hardiness and independence.

**Jacobsen:** Why have Northwest people continued to adhere to spiritual beliefs?

**Block:** It is important to note that ‘spiritual beliefs’ and ‘spirituality’ are broad concepts that are defined in very different ways by different people. For some, spirituality includes belief in a god or gods or the supernatural; for others, spirituality has very little to do with the other-worldly. The spirituality of Northwesterners was and is broad-ranging – in the postwar decades, many sought spirituality in nature, and understood religious institutions to be separable from, and irrelevant to, their own engagement with the sacred. In my book I found that many who were outside of religious institutions did indeed consider themselves spiritual – but there was also a small but significant minority of individuals who rejected organized religion and were, quite simply, disinterested in, or indifferent to, religious belief.

**Jacobsen:** Do these two – organized religion and informal spiritual beliefs – tap into a similar, or even the same, human need? If so, what is that need? As

**Block:** As an historian who focuses on irreligion and unbelief, it's difficult for me to do other than speculate as to the relationship of religious institutions and beliefs to human needs. It seems likely that the fellowship and community offered by churches and other religious institutions has been a significant draw for many. My current research, which focuses on atheists and unbelievers in Canada between 1950 and 1980, suggests that many atheists/unbelievers have also sought out the fellowship of like-minded individuals in various ways (including through Secular Humanist organizations).

**Jacobsen: What are the near futures of organized religion, irreligiosity, and spiritualism in the Northwest?**

**Block:** The Pacific Northwest is more secular today than it was in the immediate postwar era; the proportion of the population claiming "no religion" continues to grow. At the same time, the Northwest is less distinct in this regard than it used to be – the "no religion" population has grown substantially across Canada and the U.S., which has narrowed the gap, at least somewhat, between the Northwest and other regions. Although it is difficult to predict the future, the decline of organized religious involvement in the region shows few signs of slowing down. I would anticipate that the proportion of the population identifying as spiritual but non-religious (or outside of religious institutions) will continue to grow. My research also points to a long history of religious disinterest and indifference in the region; if past trends persist, it seems likely that the Northwest will continue to be at the forefront of broader secularizing currents, and of the growing acceptance of non-religious ways of understanding and engaging the world.

# Chat with Isaiah Akorita – Head, Media Campaign Team, Atheist Society of Nigeria

September 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become an atheist?**

**Isaiah Akorita:** I wouldn't say it was a single day. I was raised in a kind of liberal Christian home and although church attendance was strongly encouraged, I wouldn't say my family was really fanatic about Christianity. I started having doubts in my University, late 2011 and early 2012. By the middle of 2012, I was sure I didn't believe any of those things again but I kept going to church for the music. I love classical/opera music.

**Jacobsen: How did the family and community react to it?**

**Akorita:** Funny enough, a mixture of indifference and mild alarm. While my brothers were basically indifferent and broached the subject as a matter of curiosity, my sisters were initially a bit alarmed. Obviously, they thought I had become this evil somebody or that university has corrupted me. But they eventually came around when they realised I was still the cool and quiet brother they always knew.

**Jacobsen: What is the general perception of atheists in Nigeria?**

**Isaiah Akorita:** It depends on the geographical location. In the mostly Christian south, I'd say most people see atheists as confused people or rebellious sinners who are looking for an excuse to sin without guilt. Some think we have no morals and can't possibly tell good from evil. In the Muslim north though, atheists are viewed as the literal spawn of Satan. You could be seriously harmed for daring to come out as an atheist there.

**Jacobsen: What are main problems of Nigerians at the moment? What are their main focuses? (Are they aligned, in other words?)**

**Akorita:** In order of severity, I'd say Politicians, Corruption and Religion. And no, they're not aligned. Most ordinary Nigerians are incredibly obtuse when it comes to identifying our real problems.

**Jacobsen: How did you become involved with the atheist movement in Nigeria?**

**Akorita:** I've always been outspoken about my atheism on social media and offline too. Because of that, I have met plenty atheists both online and offline and it was only a natural progression that I'd be a part of the movement in whatever form it is shaping up to be.

**Jacobsen: What do you do for the Atheist Society of Nigeria on its board?**

**Akorita:** I head the media campaign team. I'm in charge of the group of volunteers tasked with publicising the activities of the organisation on various social media platforms and news media.

**Jacobsen: What are the more effective means to educate and inform the public on atheism?**

**Akorita:** I think public debates, radio and TV appearances will go a long way into educating the public on atheism in Nigeria.

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

# Reflections on Hempstead's Secular Humanism

September 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I was reading an article in the *Law Cruces Sun-News* on secular humanism and naturalism, which made me begin to think some more about the philosophy in a similar way.

Paul Kurtz was a hero to many. Hempstead opened the article with a quote by him. In echoing the thoughts of Hempstead, the philosophy of naturalism is one focused on the natural world and natural means to discover that world. It is a philosophy that entails a lack of supernaturalism about descriptions of the world. In other words, they look to the material world and physical explanations for it.

Often, the secular humanist community will support this kind of philosophy. In terms of the epistemological stance, its position is focused on empirical, evidence-based reasoning. For some, they can see the world is meaningless without divine existence, guidance, even intervention. The secular humanist community does not see this at all, generally.

The meaning you get is the meaning you make. There's no intrinsic meaning to the world, which means that any meaning can only be derived from the world. Any thinking thing can get meaning in the world, but the meaning is not an intrinsic property of the universe. That is an enlightening and freeing perspective on the cosmos.

It follows that responsibilities to ourselves and others come from ourselves and others, and not from some outside supernaturalistic super entities.

The justice that we will get in addition to the fairness that we will experience comes from ourselves and others, not from some divine intervenor.

That makes things like constitutions of secular countries and the United Nations Charter, and similar documents, important for guidance based on global consensus around the right and the wrong things, or the correct and incorrect behaviors in any given instance.

This implies human rights, women's rights, children's rights, sexual minority rights, labor rights, and so on, and their implementation by ourselves and others. However, to secular humanists, we view the world as not ideal, which means that idealized notions will be tempered by reality.

Prayer and fasting won't solve our problems. Ideas of saints and sinners will not. Authority figures in dresses will not. Also, being born of a virgin will not, the world exists by natural means and can be understood by natural methods. That natural understanding of the material world or the physical world will be the best guide for our actions, right or wrong, by and for ourselves and others. That is part of a secular humanist outlook.

# The Opinion of the People

September 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Canadian public, though, by and large, religious in proclivities, remains skeptical as to the functional utility of religion throughout the nation. According to Crux Now in “Canadians think religion does more harm than good, latest poll says,” 51% of Canadians, even with the majority of the population as religious, viewed religion as a net negative on society (Din, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2013).

One possible interpretation seems to be the steady growth of a sentiment, or taste, for secularism: place of worship and government separation.

Tied to the growth in this taste comes the decrease in fervor, such as the removal of the last residential schools in 1996 (and so a lessening in the numerous crimes against the Indigenous population) and the reduction in self-reported church attendance, this points to the rise in the “Nones” or those without formal religious affiliation (Miller & Marshall, 2016; Lindsay, 2008).

Whether in the world, America, or Canada, the rate of growth for the non-religious is stark and the total numbers are over 1 billion in the world, the number is set to increase, too (Bullard, 2016; Lipka, 2015; Fiedler, 2016).

The world, as well as Canada, has a larger secular and “Nones” base, where even the religious across the country hold views in support of the notion, or at times explicitly empirically supported claim, that religion does more harm than good in society on net, which includes Canada. It’s the ‘Opinion of the People.’

## References

Bullard, G. (2016, April 22). The World’s Newest Major Religion: No Religion. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/04/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-nones-rising-religion/>.

Din, J.K. (2017, July 1). Canadians think religion does more harm than good, latest poll says. Retrieved from <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2017/07/01/canadians-think-religion-harm-good-latest-poll-says/>.

Fiedler, M. (2016, October 3). The rise of the ‘nones’ or ‘nons’. Retrieved from <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/rise-nones-or-nons>.

Lindsay, C. (2008, November 21). Canadians attend weekly religious services less than 20 years ago. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-630-x/2008001/article/10650-eng.htm>.

Lipka, M. (2015, May 13). A closer look at America’s rapidly growing religious ‘nones’. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>.

Miller, J.R. & Marshall, T. (2016, September 29). Residential Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools/>.

Pew Research Center. (2013, June 27). Canada’s Changing Religious Landscape. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/27/canadas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

# When Political Ideology Eclipses Science: Evidence-Based Decision-Making and Harm Reduction

September 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Conservative Party leader, Andrew Scheer, has made recent comments on harm reduction in practice (Conservative Party of Canada, 2017; CBC News, 2017). He is touring B.C. to boost the profile with voters (Ibid.).

Scheer said, “I don’t believe that should be the focus... There’s nothing there that breaks that cycle of addiction. I think that’s what more and more Canadians want to see.” He spoke out against safe injection sites as well:

“I really do think we need to move beyond this kind of supervised injection, where government makes it quote unquote safer to inject illicit drugs, and to focus more on recovery and helping those who are addicted to get off drugs.” (Ibid.)

No evidence or authority was referenced in the assertion; as well, he considers the awareness of young people particularly important as an emphasis.

When queried about the “onerous” factors to be taken into account as set out by the previous Conservative Party of Canada government, Scheer said the emphasis should not be on the repetition of the cycle of addiction.

Of any new party candidate leader, Scheer has had the smallest bump in the last 14 years out of any of them (Grenier, 2017). Even with the attempts for politicization of harm reduction in the attempts to garner voters in B.C., the B.C. health authorities have already spoken through the evidence, as per the most important question: what does the evidence say?

“Harm Reduction: A British Columbia Community Guide” (2005) from the B.C. Ministry of Health stated, firmly:

*Harm reduction benefits the community through substantial reductions in open drug use, discarded drug paraphernalia, drug-related crime, and associated health, enforcement and criminal justice costs. It lessens the negative impact of an open drug scene on local business and improves the climate for tourism and economic development.*

Scheer is bringing a musket to a battle lost for his party in another generation. He’s engaged in historical re-enactment.

## References

B.C. Ministry of Health. (2005). Harm Reduction: A British Columbia Community Guide. Retrieved from <http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2005/hrcommunityguide.pdf>.

CBC News. (2017, August 29). Q&A: Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer says harm reduction doesn’t break addiction cycle. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/q-a-conservative-leader-andrew-scheer-says-harm-reduction-doesn-t-break-addiction-cycle-1.4267020>.

Conservative Party of Canada. (2017). Andrew Scheer. Retrieved from <https://www.conservative.ca/andrew-scheer/>.

Grenier, E. (2017, August 30). ANALYSIS Andrew Scheer's Conservative leadership bump the smallest any new party leader has had in 14 years. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/grenier-scheer-honeymoon-1.4265903>.

# **Short Chat with Pirate Jen Takahashi – Administrative Coordinator, Lethbridge Public Interest Research Group (LPIRG)**

**September 25, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** For those that don't know, what is the situation with the conversion therapy ban ongoing at the moment?

**Pirate Jen Takahashi (petition):** We are continuing to collect signatures on letters. We are continuing to reach out to PRIDE organizations and churches in the province. The letters are a sign of support, of solidarity with the ban and the PRIDE community. We are showing the government there is this support and that we want to see this ban happen. You can go on the website and add your own thoughts, stories, or suggestions to the letter. It auto-sends to multiple ministers, MLAs, and the Premier.

Recently, Minister Hoffman made some statements to the effect that she doesn't see conversion therapy as a problem in the province. We beg to differ. She said to contact her office directly about conversion therapy. It is offensive and tone deaf. It destroys families and lives in communities regarding work and education.

**Jacobsen:** How does one respond to an individual who considers conversion therapy effective, when there's no evidence for it?

**Takahashi:** There's no way to respond to someone who believes raping and torturing someone will change their biology and genetics. There is no amount of science and evidence out there that will prove to these people that they are wrong. We have report and study, report and study, that conversion therapy doesn't work. These people can't believe otherwise. That you can rape the gay out of somebody.

**Jacobsen:** What faith organizations are the main endorsers and practitioners?

**Takahashi:** Typically, Reform and Evangelicals are the ones who do this. The Mormon church gave this up a while ago. It is Evangelical and Dutch Reform, especially here in Southern Alberta. They will be the ones in compounds with the most virulent forms of it.

**Jacobsen:** What have been the most tragic stories to come out?

**Takahashi:** One was a gentleman who was queer-identifying and actually handcuffed down and forced to watch pornography while being electrocuted. The theory was he would then associate gay sex with violence. Those negative neural pathways being built was the idea. It is that pseudoscience. There is also a particularly upsetting woman, a queer-identifying woman, who was raped. She had decided, queer or not, to save herself for marriage. The church told her it doesn't count as sex because Jesus wanted this to happen to cure her. So, she was raped and received no support or therapy to deal with the trauma of rape.



# Talk with Dr. Caleb Lack on AA and Secular Therapy

September 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** With Alcoholics Anonymous, I notice one thing in particular, which is an amorphous or vague definition of “God.” Is there a functional utility to it? Does it have a purpose?

**Dr. Caleb Lack:** If you go back to the 1930s, there was basically a cult called The Oxford Group, which is what splintered off into Alcoholics Anonymous. They were very specific about their God, which was a Christian God. Fast forward some 25 and more years later, they started to have this vagueness about what their “higher power” could be, saying things like “Your higher power can be a rock or yourself.”

Part of the reason for the switch was the negative feedback they got from the secular and evidence-based community. They now have the more broad, vague definition, or claim that it is not a religious-based treatment. However, if you look at the history, core principles, and even specific steps of AA and the 12 Step programs, half of those are religiously-based.

They appear to be trying to stay relevant in a world where they are less increasingly less relevant, as evidence shows that they work for only a small majority of people who use them. This broadening is part of that progress, I think.

**Jacobsen:** How are the alternative therapies, the secular therapies, providing a better alternative to dealing with these issues of addiction?

**Lack:** One thing that helps people in AA, for the pretty small percentage that it does help, is that they get into a supportive group of people that is not engaging in problematic substance use. You can easily have that without the religiosity and cult-like things. Groups like SMART Recovery, for instance, provide a good and supportive atmosphere. But on top of that, they teach you coping mechanisms for dealing with problematic drinking or other drug use. That supportive atmosphere plus the coping skills actually do help you get much better, better than the majority of folks do with AA.

**Jacobsen:** With regards to evidence-based practitioner work, what are the common reasons people come into a secular therapeutic setting to deal with the problem?

**Lack:** People come into secular settings for treatment of drug and alcohol abuse for a couple of reasons. One is that, sadly, they have often tried (or been forced into) AA or some other 12 step program and it did them no good. This could have been because they were non-religious and just couldn't buy into the “higher power” aspects of it, or it could just be because AA doesn't work

for some 85% of people, according to our best outcome studies. They may also have done some research into what we know works for helping reduce problematic drinking, which isn't any religiously-based therapies.

**Jacobsen: In a Canadian context, what are the organizations that come to mind with regards to a secular alternative?**

**Lack:** SMART Recovery has groups all over the world, although they started in the U.S. There are many groups in the larger Canadian cities, certainly. Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS) is another option for group-based support. The other thing I would do is to seek out an evidence-based practitioner who uses techniques that we know work for substance-based problems, such Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or Motivational Interviewing. This can be done via therapy search websites, and there is a really nice network called MINT, for Motivational Interviewers.

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

# Protection Through Solidarity

September 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Alberta school educational system will be providing protections for the traditionally vulnerable sexual minority, gay, students with new legislation aimed at Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs).

The GSAs have been integral for the protection of these students who are either gay and in-the-closet, or not and simply want a place to mingle without discrimination, or who are not and who remain allies to the sexual minority community.

In any of these students who would see themselves as such, GSAs can be and are for many important places for community, similar to sports teams and chess clubs are for others.

Imagine if you had something that you were being discriminated against on and then this became a basis for wanting a social group for a small community to, at times, protect yourselves in some way, the GSAs perform this function and to be forced to be outed as gay or an ally would go against one, not the only but one, of the purposes of the alliances public educational facilities.

There have been calls in Alberta to make outing gay students a norm as if it has to be done, but it doesn't have to be nor, personally, should it be. *The Herald News* talked about the recent events with Eggen and Kenney:

*Alberta's education minister says he will be introduce legislation to make it illegal to out students who join gay-straight alliances.*

*On Twitter, David Eggen says the government believes all students deserve to feel safe and welcome at all schools.*

*He says no student who belongs to a gay-straight alliance — intended to foster understanding and give LGBTQ students a haven from bullying — should be outed.*

*His comments come as the issue creates a rift among leadership candidates for the new United Conservative Party.*

*Former federal cabinet minister and leadership candidate Jason Kenney has said schools should tell parents in some circumstances when their child joins an alliance. (The Canadian Press, 2017)*

This is the rift topic: GSAs. I feel a little surprised, but not too much, to be typing that first portion of this sentence and to read that in the *Herald News*, but there you go. The *Edmonton Journal* commented on the situation, too (French, 2017a).

Eggen's proposal is a new bill with requirements for all Alberta schools receiving public money to "establish an anti-bullying code of conduct that prohibits discrimination based on gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation and other grounds in the Alberta Human Rights Act."

One issue is the "legal loophole" that would permit private schools exemption from the bill (French, 2017b). Nonetheless, if approved, the bill would protect LGBTQ+ students and allow them to create GSAs. Not bad, what can we do? Show solidarity through protections, wouldn't

want the same if heterosexuality, in a hypothetical universe, was the minority and often bullied? I stand with Norway's statement in December of 2006, the UNHCR's statement in 2011, and the Government of Canada's position in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in section 15, and on and on (Strommen, 2006; UNHCR, 2011; Government of Canada, 1982).

#### References

French, J. (2017b, March 23). Education Minister David Eggen issues order for Christian schools to accommodate LGBTQ students. Retrieved from <http://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/education-minister-issues-order-for-christian-schools-to-accommodate-lqbtq-students>.

French, J. (2017a, September 28). Education minister vows to tighten privacy rules around gay-straight alliances in schools. Retrieved from <http://edmontonjournal.com/news/politics/education-minister-vows-to-tighten-privacy-rules-around-gay-straight-alliances-in-schools>.

Government of Canada. (1982). Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Retrieved from <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/Const/page-15.html>.

Strommen, H.E.W.C. (2006, December 1). 2006 Joint Statement: 3rd Session of the Human Rights Council Joint Statement. Retrieved from <http://arc-international.net/global-advocacy/sogi-statements/2006-joint-statement/>.

The Canadian Press. (2017, September 28). Alberta to bring in legislation to protect students who join gay-straight clubs. Retrieved from <http://thechronicleherald.ca/canada/1507250-alberta-to-bring-in-legislation-to-protect-students-who-join-gay-straight-clubs>.

UNHCR. (2011, November 17). Discriminatory laws and practices and acts of violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. Retrieved from [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Discrimination/A.HRC.19.41\\_English.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Discrimination/A.HRC.19.41_English.pdf).

# International Safe Abortion Day

September 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

It is International Safe Abortion Day. Some thoughts come to mind for me. Many (maybe most, even possibly all public) pro-life positions equate to anti-human right positions. If you'll indulge, I can support the argument:

Human Rights Watch states:

*Women's ability to access safe and legal abortions is restricted in law or in practice in most countries in the world...Abortion is a highly emotional subject and one that excites deeply held opinions. However, equitable access to safe abortion services is first and foremost a human right. Where abortion is safe and legal, no one is forced to have one. Where abortion is illegal and unsafe, women are forced to carry unwanted pregnancies to term or suffer serious health consequences and even death.*

*...international human rights legal instruments and authoritative interpretations of those instruments compel the conclusion that women have a right to decide independently in all matters related to reproduction, including the issue of abortion. [Emphasis added.]*  
(Human Rights Watch, n.d.)

As "first and foremost a human right," the arguments for the pro-choice perspective amount to the pro-human right view because the right to choose, or not, is the point, which implies safe and equitable access to the abortion services or part of reproductive health services.

In areas of the world, countries or sections of countries, where the reproductive health service is limited, the ability of women to make the choice is limited, which is the right, and so becomes a violation of the right.

That's what a free choice is: the ability to select between at least two options. If no options, then no choice, so denial of the right is implied.

Many pro-life positions want to limit the access of this reproductive health service, which goes against the equitable and safe access to the service and so violates the choice and, thus, the right: hence, the pro-life position becomes anti-human right; and the pro-choice position becomes pro-human right.

Multiple United Nations experts<sup>1</sup> came together, \* deliberated on abortion, and "called on States across the world to repeal laws that criminalize and unduly restrict abortion and policies based on outdated stereotypes, to release all women in prison on abortion charges and to counter all stigma against abortion" (OHCHR, 2017).

I am pro-human right here. Even in Calgary, Alberta, there are clinics simply calling for the end to harassment (Cameron, 2017). That is, the social bullying for restriction of abortion is an issue in Canada, too. Worse yet, throughout the globe, half of the abortions performed in the world are in unsafe conditions (Thomson Reuters, 2017).

In these reflections and in sympathy with many, many Canadians with pro-life, or even simply conflicted-agnostic positions, I must stand with the pro-human right positions. If someone doesn't want them, the only fair one for all is to be able to choose or not, not to force the ability

to not choose, to not have the right, on all implied by the pro-life/anti-human right positions through restriction of services in any way.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *International Safe Abortion Day – Thursday 28 September 2017* (2017) states:

*Kamala Chandrakirana, Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice; Dubravka Simonovic, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences; Dainius Pûras, Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Ms. Agnes Callamard, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions.*

OHCHR. (2017, September 27). International Safe Abortion Day – Thursday 28 September 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22167&LangID=E>.

References

Cameron, E. (2017, September 27). Calgary abortion clinic wants provincial protection from harassment. Retrieved from <http://www.metronews.ca/news/calgary/2017/09/27/calgary-abortion-clinic-wants-provincial-protection-from-harassment.html?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Ft.co%2F7S00So3t7S%3Famp%3D1>.

Human Rights Watch. (n.d.). Abortion. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/women/abortion.html>.

OHCHR. (2017, September 27). International Safe Abortion Day – Thursday 28 September 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22167&LangID=E>.

Thomson Reuters. (2017, September 27). Nearly half of abortions worldwide are unsafe, study says. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/health/unsafe-abortion-around-the-world-1.4310002>.

# **Petition E-1264 (DISCRIMINATION): Open for Signatories**

**September 29, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

Doug Thomas of Secular Connexion Séculière, who I have talked with before, has done something, which I have talked with some others in the irreligious community in Canada before about: using the *Freedom of Thought Report* from 2016, of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, for activism in every country because it remains of the most succinct and comprehensive listings of discrimination in law, in culture, in societies generally, against the irreligious (Secular Connexion Séculière, 2017; Jacobsen, 2017; International Humanist and Ethical Union, 2016a; International Humanist and Ethical Union, 2017).

That leads to E-Petition 1264 (DISCRIMINATIONS), or simply E-Petition 1264, which is about the formal investigation into the discrimination against non-believers in Canada (House of Commons, 2017). Doug Thomas, with sponsorship from Marwan Tabbara, proposed this e-petition, which is already in the 3-figure zone for signatories and seems better than many based on a brief scan of the others surrounding it. It states in full:

“Whereas:

Approximately 25% of Canada’s people are non-believers; and

The International Humanist and Ethical Union, in its December 2016 Freedom of Thought Report, has identified Canada as a nation that systemically discriminates against non-believers.

We, the undersigned, citizens of Canada, call upon the House of Commons in Parliament assembled to ask the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Canadian Heritage to investigate, through the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights and the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, with specific invitations to the national leaders of the secular humanist community, the systemic discrimination against non-believers in Canadian laws and regulations, specifically, but not limited to: (a) the National Anthems Act, 1980; (b) the Criminal Code of Canada, section 319 3(b); and (c) Regulations for registered charities under the Income Tax Act.” (Ibid.)

I signed it.

Because I know the Freedom of Thought Report (2016) provides a good introduction to the levels of discrimination against the irreligious in this country (International Humanist and Ethical Union, 2016b).

While ignoring the historical crimes in the name of Christianity, often by Canadian Christians against the Indigenous population, we have remnants with the privileges for those with a belief in a Theity in the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982 in the Preamble, where there is the, as many reading this know about the, statement about the “supremacy of God...” (Government of Canada, 1982). What if this was removed?

Even if symbolic, it would mean, for the next generations, formal equality with the Constitution Act of 1982 as neutral, no preference for one or the other, on a God or not. That would be fair and equal; not asking for superior but for real equality.

Another remnant is the Catholic system, often for non-Catholics as well. What about the Muslim, Daoist, and Scientologist schools for non-Muslims, non-Daoists, and non-Scientologists, even Catholics? You don't see them. Why should we see Catholic schools, especially in the long view? Secular public educational systems and schools for all Canadians seems fair and simple too.

Do these denominational rights for Catholics, and at times Protestants, violate Section 2 and Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms? Yes, but Section 29 makes that a move no-no, apparently, that protection against potential action later amounts to an educational and charter privilege in the favour of one religion, Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians (so, two, technically), who happen to be the mostly settler-colonial religions (International Humanist and Ethical Union, 2016b).

But we can do things about these and others such as prayers in public meetings, in schools, and so on. They were placed by Canadian citizens at one point, so they, too, can be removed. We can do the same with Canada as others have moved to secular systems for public life. The data is there. The undercurrent is there. Likely, the will is extant throughout the nation with 1/4 people having no formal religious faith and may of the other 3/4 sympathizing with the 1/4 on common issues. So, why not? The petition is simply waiting to be signed by Canadian citizens. It's a start.

Let's get to work! ...

Together.

#### References

Government of Canada. (1982). Constitution Act, 1982. Retrieved from <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/Const/page-15.html>.

House of Commons. (2017, September 14). E-1264 (DISCRIMINATION). Retrieved from <https://petitions.ourcommons.ca/en/Petition/Details?Petition=e-1264>.

International Humanist and Ethical Union. (2017b). International Humanist and Ethical Union. Retrieved from <http://iheu.org/>.

International Humanist and Ethical Union. (2016a). The Freedom of Thought Report. Retrieved from <http://freethoughtreport.com/countries/>.

International Humanist and Ethical Union. (2016b). The Freedom of Thought Report: Canada. Retrieved from <http://freethoughtreport.com/countries/americas-northern-america/canada/>.

Jacobsen, S.D. (2017, August 6). Interview with Doug Thomas – President of the Secular Connexion Séculière. Retrieved from <https://conatusnews.com/interview-doug-thomas-president-secular-connexion-seculiere/>.

Secular Connexion Séculière. (2017). Secular Connexion Séculière. Retrieved from <http://www.secularconnexion.ca/>.



# **Answers on Living Without Religion in Tanzania: Chat with Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam) – Founder, Jicho Jipya/Think Anew Tanzania**

**September 29, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** So, you're out in Tanzania. That is far removed from the normal life of Canadians. What is something that those in Canada are almost certainly not likely to know about atheism in Tanzania but they should?

**Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam):** Thank you I am Mr. Nsajigwa, Canadians should know that as it is for every human society throughout ages and generations that there have been within independent thinkers and freethinkers, so too there are such ones in Tanzania, though few, as it has hitherto been.

There are Tanzanians who think outside of the box of religiosity despite the fact that in Africa religion is overwhelmingly omnipresent and -potent, covering all aspects of life, from the birth point of entrance to death point of exit. In past, Africans were said to "Think emotionally" and being more "spiritual" as a philosophy of Negritude would assert, "rational is Greece as emotion is black." Maybe today, we might just understand that to have been too much of a generalization.

In terms of percentage, it is recorded that independent thinkers individuals living without religion in Tanzania could be up to 1% of the population (the challenge is to make it rise to 10% as there might be enough such ones who however are in the closet).

**Jacobsen:** How is atheism viewed by the general public in Tanzania?

**Nsajigwa:** In the past, it was associated with socialism of communism brand, the USSR type, thus ideological.

But also by Tanzanians who are fundamentalist in their religious outlook, they view it negatively, as an arrogant rebellion against God's will by the few people educated (to become confused) by too much secular book reading. Further extremes view it as for those who are "lost" and on Satan's side (Satan being the opposite of good God).

**Jacobsen:** How common is atheism there?

**Nsajigwa:** As a movement it is coming up, emerging as is the reality of it all over Africa. Some individual independent thinkers to freethinkers exist, it's only recently since new millennium that there have emerged some pioneer efforts to teach it by philosophy, identify and bring such individuals together.

I am the pioneer number one for this philosophy, life-stance here since the mid-1990s before the arrival of the internet in Tanzania. We are developing a fellowship to be a community in the future via Jichojipya – Think Anew as a formal organization and vehicle for that, we founded it to live to achieve common goals of institutionalizing Humanism ideas and ideals guided by Humanist's Amsterdam Declaration 2002 of which I translated into Swahili that being first time that it was in an African language. Its Humanistic aspects happen to be similar to some aspects of Tanzanian own Arusha declaration doctrine of 1967.

**Jacobsen: If you could pick one great atheist thinker in Tanzania, who would it be?**

**Nsajigwa:** It would be an eminent elder retired public figure named Kingunge Ngombale-Mwilu. We identified him as one because he was the public figure, only one known throughout to swear for a public position (he has served since independence in top ranking positions even as a minister of state) without holding Bible or Quran.

That is, how we suspected him to be a nonbeliever and on interviewing him recently he came out as such, a freethinker who is Agnostic (though our society thought of him as a socialist communist). He told us himself he became freethinker inspired by reading the subject of Philosophy including the writings of Thomas Paine and Ludwig Feuerbach in his analysis that; “it’s not god creating man in his own image but rather a man creating God in his imagination.”

Another longtime freethinker would be Nsajigwa (me myself) a self-taught individual operating at the grassroots. I have taught and inspired many enough by my knowledge (book reading) and my own everyday life as a freethinker, someone living ethically good without a religion.

**Jacobsen: If you could take one great atheist book in Tanzania, what would it be?**

**Nsajigwa:** There is no one whole book on that, however, there are particular stories on some books say by one late Agoro Anduru – a good writer that he was. Also stories (in Swahili) by one Mohamed Salum Abdalla (in short Bwana Msa) and speeches by Mwalimu (Swahili for a teacher) Nyerere – Tanzanian founder father, teaching, insisting and reminding on several occasions that Tanzania is a secular state.

**Jacobsen: What are some of the prejudices and biases that the atheist community experiences in Tanzania?**

**Nsajigwa:** Basically so far organized atheist community is just emerging, we few freethinkers are just pioneering to bring it out but judging from our personal life experience, our social milieu is such that to be a nonbeliever you are misunderstood in many ways and judged negatively, its something you just have to endure, too much pressure and frictions to confront right from the family level. African culture is “communitarian” in outlook, wanting conformity to all its members. Things should be done as traditions and what religions require. On religion itself, it is very influential, plus our political culture is illiberal, yes we are a peaceful Nation since independence but skepticism and criticism are not tolerated despite the fact we became a multiparty democracy since 1992.

**Jacobsen: What are some of the biases in law that are explicitly anti-atheist or, at a minimum, tacitly so?**

**Nsajigwa:** The founder father Mwalimu Nyerere was, fortunately, a good student of John Stuart Mills philosophy “on liberty”. He made it clear the fact that our Nation is secular though people (including himself) are in religions. There is a temptation though from various players to wish that religion should penetrate more into government because people and their leaders are religious anyway. In Zanzibar, a semi-autonomous government with a majority of its population (90%+) being Moslem, Islamic laws applies (via what are known as kadhi courts) in dealing with matters of inheritance, marriage, and divorce.

**Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts?**

**Nsajigwa:** We live in modern times yet we have not yet successfully modernized our cultures and societies. The need to secularize our outlook to life, thus STEM (Science Technology

Engineering and (rationalism of) Mathematics) Project. We by Jichojipya – Think Anew a Tanzanian Freethinkers secularist humanists organization here initiated a GalimotoCar making STEM project from the grassroots, we need support to continue doing that, a fight against superstition believes including Albino killings.

There is modern African triple heritage concept by which in Tanzanian case, Islam, Christian, and Traditionalists are almost one-third each by percentage (35-35-30 respectively), though there is much dominance of the first two in the public while the third (tradition believes) are somehow dormant, activated only when everything else fails to work.

By SWOT approach most African countries Tanzania included are illiberal. In such situations, independent thinking and freethinking are thwarted and such individuals live to endure hard life mentally (psychologically) and physically. Freethinking Atheism Humanism in Africa should mean an idea to emancipate Africans from illiberality and concurrently from the mental slavery of religions that have evolved to become dysfunctional, as they shape ideas of superstition and wishful thinking that support dogma, irrationality, and fatalism.

It's a herculean task needed to be met to push the cause of African renaissance and its enlightenment. All due support by Freethinkers Humanists from other parts of the world (Canada etc) is needed, to sustain this work for modernism by secularism in Africa, Tanzania inclusively. That is the historic generational duty for humanity. Thank you.

# Irreligiosity in Greek Culture, Angelos Sofocleous

September 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What are the demographics for humanism in Greece? Because most of the population is Greek Orthodox.

**Angelos Sofocleous:** According to the latest Pew report, 90% of the Greek population identifies themselves as a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. It has to be stressed, however, that many people identify as a member of the Greek Orthodox Church only by convention. From birth, Greeks are proselytized into the Greek Orthodox Church by baptism at a very young age – when they are less than a year old – and, therefore, on paper, almost every Greek citizen is a member of the Greek Orthodox Church.

What is more, as the Church is strongly infiltrated and influences almost every aspect in the public and private sphere, including education, politics, family, culture, and tradition, most find it difficult to break away from religion as this is often accompanied by intense criticism from family members, colleagues, and the wider community. Although rare, some are even ostracized from societal religious gatherings, or from their families altogether.

With blasphemy laws still present in the Greek Penal Code, many of which were applied in various cases in the previous years, it is of no surprise that Greece has many ‘closet humanists’ and ‘closet atheists’; people who are afraid to come out as humanists or atheists, speak up against religion or openly criticize it. Specifically, Article 198 of the Greek Penal Code states that “1. One who publicly and maliciously and by any means blasphemes God shall be punished by imprisonment for not more than two years”.

Nevertheless, the percentage of Greeks who identify as humanists has risen to 14.7% (compared to 2% in 2006), according to new research by Kapa Research. Of course, no major cultural change took place that would justify a sevenfold increase in the number of humanists in Greece. Cultural changes are taking place in the country, but it’s also the case that people are less afraid of identifying as humanists or atheists. This, however, remains an anonymous survey; percentages would be lower considering those who are still not as courageous to identify themselves as non-Christian.

**Jacobsen:** Does humanism have a hard time gaining influence in the country?

**Sofocleous:** “In the name of the Holy and Consubstantial and Indivisible Trinity,”; this is how the Greek Constitution begins. Merely by looking at this, one can see how religion lays on the foundations of the modern Greek state. As it follows, humanism has a very hard time gaining influence in the country.

Before giving a satisfying answer as to why humanism has a hard time gaining influence in Greece, one should consider how easily the Church influences every aspect of social and political life. The Orthodox Church of Greece is one of the most wealthy and powerful organizations in Greece, probably only comparable to the State itself. It enjoys great privileges, such as exemption from taxation, exemption from austerity measures, while it is almost fully funded by the State. At the same time, the Church is legally unbound to give any percentage of its income back to the State. Salaries of priests, clerks, and employees of the Church amount to

220 million Euros per year, while the Church's wealth amounts to billions of Euros, an amount impossible to be calculated, as no official reports are given.

Despite the fact that the Constitution does not recognize any official 'state religion', it states that the Church of Greece is recognized as the 'prevailing religion' in the country. What is more, the Statutory Charter of the Church must be passed by the Plenary Session of Parliament, and the Archbishop presides over each opening session of Parliament. On what regards national celebrations, these are often jointly attended by leaders of the State and Church, and equal status is given to both.

What is more, the Church has a major say in politics, education, and civic life, including the school curriculum and LGBT rights. State leaders meet regularly with Church leaders to discuss, advise each other, and exchange opinions on political and societal issues. Also, Church leaders have a considerable exposure to media, managing to influence the general public. At schools, a morning religious prayer is said, and religious symbols, such as icons and crosses, are present, as is the case in most of the state's buildings. Furthermore, Religious Education in schools is one-sided, presenting Christianity as the only true religion, while it merely criticizes other religions and considers them 'sinful'. Schools, instead of being places where students can freely express themselves and develop their ideas, are doing the opposite by strictly limiting the ideological scope of students, and their freedom of expression and association.

Due to the large influence of the Church, humanism also has a hard time gaining influence in Greece because, as politically active, the Church holds a right to far-right agenda, sometimes in line with Golden Dawn, a Greek Neo-Nazi parliamentary party. Hence, the Church influences the political ideas of a great number of people and often spreads homophobic and anti-immigration statements. Greeks have strong feelings of cultural superiority and national pride, something also outlined at the Pew report. In fact, three-quarters of the public (76%) says that being Orthodox is important to being "truly Greek." They believe that their religion, language, culture, tradition, is superior to those of other nations. This, of course, holds them back from even conceptualizing humanism's basic ideas. Humanism has no place for any kind of superiority, especially when one claims to have superiority innately e.g. by being 'born Greek' – whatever this may mean.

It is also difficult for any Greek to avoid engaging in religious practices, as a great number of cultural events and traditions have a religious background. Such events are often the only time families come together and the only time Greeks have the chance to engage into activities with members of their wider family. Therefore, completely abandoning religion, has the consequence of abandoning other practices which can be described as non-religious on their roots, but which, nevertheless, are directly influenced by religion. Families maintain religiosity within them and pass it onto the younger members, constructing their religious identity.

Besides societal structures, even the Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, despite the fact that he considers himself an atheist and despite being the first Prime Minister to give a political and not a religious oath, has close ties with the Church. Before being elected in office, and during his first weeks in office, Tsipras adopted a mostly secularist worldview and, upon election, he tried to implement it. However, such is the great power of the Church that Tsipras realized that a State-Church separation would not be politically or financially beneficial, and as a result keeps the Church in the government agenda and gives it an advisory role, with the power to influence government strategies.

Humanism, then, has a hard time gaining influence in the country, not primarily because it would be an unappealing concept to most, but because the Church itself is so deeply infiltrated in social and political life, at a degree in which it's almost impossible for humanism to gain any considerable support over Orthodox Christianity.

**Jacobsen: Among the youth (18-35) subpopulation, are they more or less likely to be religious, and are they more or less likely to be humanists?**

**Sofocleous:** There is something that needs to be distinguished before proceeding to answer the question. As religion is deeply enrooted in the country's culture and traditions, and the Church is greatly involved in education, religiosity needs to be distinguished from following religious traditions or attending mass. It follows, then, that one cannot determine which members of the population, and subsequently the youth, are religious or are simply following religious traditions. Attending church because of a marriage, baptism, or funeral, or attending family gatherings in Christmas, Easter, or other religious celebrations, cannot be classified as religious acts, as they are only done by convention.

Church attendance and following religious traditions are, unfortunately, what most surveys measures. Most young people, whatever their beliefs might be, still follow religious traditions, even if it's just a family gathering which has a religious background. However, this does not tell us much about those who actually believe in God.

Nevertheless, the number of people who reportedly believe in God amounts to 79% of the population, according to Eurobarometer 2010, in contrast to 98% that is reported by official data. The reason that official data mention a higher number is that Greeks are registered as Christian Orthodox from a very young age, and most do not bother to change their legal status from 'Christian Orthodox' to 'Atheist', 'Agnostic' or 'Non-religious'. It is expected, then that the difference of, nearly, 20% between the two sets of data, is due to young people's decreasing religiosity.

As a general rule in the country, religiosity and attending mass or religious traditions, must be clearly distinguished, as one does not imply the other.

As young people move away from religion, it's fortunate to say that they also adhere to certain humanist principles, even if they are not aware that they are humanists. Young people become more educated and thus they show greater reliability on science and reason rather than faith and belief. They have also become more environmentally aware, and some are following vegetarianism/veganism.

What is more, a great number of people in Greece are disillusioned with the Church and despise it, even if they believe in God. The reason is the great amount of wealth that the Church has, of which a miniscule amount is used to help people (something which is most of the time done in discriminatory ways e.g. by only helping Orthodox Christians). It looks provocative to many that, at a time when unemployment and poverty in Greece is at an alarmingly high level, the Church does not adhere to its principles and remains passive on the financial crisis that Greece is going through. For this reason, even more people are secularists and call for the complete separation of Church and State, in order to lift the special privileges that are given to the Church, something which is also a humanist principle.

**Jacobsen: Of the negatives of the Greek Orthodox faith, what antidote does humanism provide for the Greek citizenry, potentially?**

**Sofocleous:** Apart from the belief in God as a supernatural figure, Greeks also tend to believe in superstitions, prefer faith over reason, and have a large sense of national pride, something that puts barriers between them and people of other nationalities. First of all, humanism can show the benefits of rationality over faith, something which has various real-world implications which assist in society's improvement.

The Church's great influence is also something that divides rather than unites people, against all groups which do not adhere to the Church's strict principles: homosexuals, atheists, heathens, communists, socialists, even refugees.

The Church, largely, has become the voice of ultra-conservative politics in Greece. It holds back the country from progressing, as it's a financially damaging institution which also spreads harmful and hateful ideas.

Humanism could provide the Greek citizenry with what it could provide anyone who chooses to follow humanist principles:

They will be able to use their own rationality and collective responsibility as the source of moral code; not the Church, any priest, monk, or 'holy book'. This will make it possible for them to treat others in a more humane way, and do not consider those who do not follow the Church's teachings as 'sinful to God's eyes' or as 'harmful to society'. Being able to see LGBT people, refugees, or any other minority group members who are often discriminated against, as fellow human beings, will aid in building a society upon dignity and respect, and not hatred and discrimination.

Adopting a more humanist worldview will also help the country get rid of its blasphemy laws. There are various examples of blasphemy laws being enacted. In 2012, three actors in the play "Corpus Christi" were arrested on the charge of blasphemy. The play had to be canceled after demonstrations by fundamentalist Christians and public outcry, and the organizers, producers and cast continued receiving violent threats. In 2013, Dionysis Kavalieratos, a Greek artist, was tried in court on blasphemy charges for his Christian-themed cartoons displayed in a private art gallery in Athens.

The most known case is the case of Philippos Loizos, a Greek man who, in 2012, was arrested on charges of "malicious blasphemy and religious insult on Facebook". Loizos created a Facebook page named "Elder Pastitsios", a wordplay between Saint Paisios, a late Greek monk who is considered a prophet by many, and Greek food 'pastitsio'. Loizos was given a 10-month suspended prison sentence which was later quashed.

The abolition of blasphemy laws, and the adoption of humanist policies, will allow free speech to be respected in the country, and an understanding that citizens cannot be silenced or arrested for criticizing religion.

Humanism will also allow Greeks to realize the openness and plurality of today's world and heal nationalism-incited violence. Due to their rich ancient history, Greeks feel superiority over other nationalities. This goes far beyond national pride and is the reason of the country's regress, shown by the country's high number of believers in God or the supernatural, the presence of a neo-Nazi party in the Parliament, and the limited acceptance of LGBT people, immigrants, refugees, and other minority groups.

**Jacobsen: Who are exemplars, in history, of humanism in Greece?**

**Sofocleous:** Ancient Greece was a center of development of humanism, along with other centers of thought in the ancient world: Ancient Rome, China, and even different Islamic centers later on. Humanist thought in Ancient Greece was reflected both in philosophy and art.

In literature, one can refer to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to see how ancient Greeks viewed the meaning of divinity and deity and how they altered it, by putting human characteristics to the divine, and divine characteristics to humans. Humans and gods were not seen as having wholly different attributes, and did coexist, showing that humans could be attributed divine characteristics without, at the same time, claim divinity. Also, Greeks attributed much more realistic characteristics to gods, by not seeing them as perfect or omnibenevolent, but as creatures who often behaved like humans and had human needs. Ancient Greek gods could take a human or animal shape and interact with humans and develop relations. This 'need' of gods to interact with the physical world, raises the status of *physicality* in front of *divinity*.

In this respect, Homer viewed humans as inherently worthy of respect for their nature, and viewed them as able to develop themselves without requiring divine intervention or any supernatural contribution.

However, in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, gods still remain central figures and play a primary role. Where humanism comes in in these literature works, is in the use of reason and rationality in solving arguments and conflicts. Even in wartime, ancient Greeks tried to adopt a democratic and rational approach to the conflicts that arose.

It would be largely an ignorant move, though, to consider Homer as a wholly humanist writer or proponent of humanism. What is important in his works, however, is that human experience is put at the epicenter of events. Humans are seen as being able to get divine characteristics *by nature* and not *by nurture* as is the case in the philosophy of other religions, such as Christianity. The fact that the status of humans is raised to imitate god-like characteristics, gives great importance, trust, and respect to humans, as does humanism.

Where humanist ideas flourished, however, in ancient Greece is in the field of philosophy. Despite the fact that the societal structure of ancient Greece contains characteristics that would be considered undemocratic today (large gender inequalities, slavery, nobles controlling the State), ancient Greece was where democracy was firstly introduced, developed, and applied. Along with democracy came freedom of speech, independence of thought, advancement of the sciences, arts, and philosophy, and a turn-away from religion, superstition, and faith.

In particular, Protagoras (lived 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE), an agnostic Greek philosopher stated that "Man is the measure of all things" (Greek: Panton chrimaton metron anthropos – Παντῶν χρημάτων μέτρον ἄνθρωπος). He saw humans as fully able to determine what is true or not, and was a strong proponent of relativism, considering that different viewpoints about a certain issue can be all true at the same time. Although this idea would probably not get much credit today, it is a significant advancement that Protagoras considered that the truth could be reached merely by human means, and humans could determine the value of things by realizing and adopting their own rationality. He is considered one of the first philosophers to doubt the existence of God, claiming that there is no way of knowing if gods exist or what they might look like "because of the obscurity of the subject, and the brevity of human life", an idea for which he was severely criticized.



Epicurus, (lived 4<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) one of the most famous atheist philosophers of ancient Greece, adopted and developed a number of humanist ideas. He stated that there is no life after death, as neither the body nor the mind survive death. He also showed the inconsistency of attributing certain divine characteristics to a God, rendering it impossible for there to be an omnibenevolent, omnipotent and all-knowing creature. He is considered the first philosopher to develop the ‘problem of evil’, later stated by David Hume as: “Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?”. Epicurus was against the idea of an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God, and thought that, even if gods exist, they would be alienated from the world of humans and would be unconcerned from what is happening in it. He did not see morality, or the physical world, as something that gods would involve themselves in.

Aristotle (lived 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE), although he did not wholly adhere to humanist principles, as he believed in the immortality of the soul and considered God as the ‘first cause’, he introduced and developed logic and rational thinking. Until now, Aristotle’s logic is considered one of the major works of logic today, and is of great use to philosophy, mathematics, and the sciences. Aristotle greatly contributed to humanism as well, by showing how certain truths can be reached without referring to the supernatural or any creature which exists beyond human nature.

During the middle ages and Renaissance, humanist ideas were re-introduced and spread by various Greek scholars. Their impact and influence, however, was limited as the country was under Ottoman rule at the time. For this reason, many of those scholars were active in other countries, mainly Italy. Greek scholars, during the Renaissance, managed to spread Greek literature and philosophy, and developed its teaching. Emmanuel Chrysoloras and Theodoros Gazis were both important humanist figures of the era. They greatly contributed in the expansion of Greek literature in Europe, as Chrysoloras translated the works of Homer and Plato’s Republic into Latin, and Gazis translated works of Aristotle.

Demetrios Chalkokondyles, a student of Gazis, is considered as one of the most influential Greek scholars and humanists. He was highly respected in Italy, where he taught, and first managed to edit Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odysey* and get them printed as a book.

Ioannis Argiropoulos, considered as a continuer of the works of Chrysoloras, wrote on ancient Greek philosophy, and translated many of Aristotle’s works too, including Nicomachean Ethics, from Greek to Latin.

In general, philosophy, primarily in ancient Greece, is a major proponent of rational thinking, managing to develop a humanist world under which societies flourish because of reason and logic, and not through belief in the supernatural or any god or gods.

### **Jacobsen: What sorts of activism do young Greek humanists tend to involve themselves in?**

**Sofocleous:** Greece currently has two organizations which promote humanist ideas: The Atheist Union of Greece, and the Humanist Union of Greece. Most of their members belong to the 18-35 age group. It has to be stated, nevertheless, that, as Alexandros Sakellariou, a Greek professor of sociology, has noted, “atheists unlike other minority groups studied by sociologists do not tend even nominally to join specifically atheistic organizations and this means that atheists, especially the young ones, could be described as disbelieving without belonging”. Despite this, both organizations are active in promoting and protecting humanism, atheism, and secularism in Greece.

The Atheist Union of Greece is doing great work in informing the public about their rights regarding religion. As already explicitly stated, religion is deeply involved in Greek culture and society. Because of this, many practices such as baptism, marriage, funerals, oath in the government and military, are considered by the general public to only be possible through religious means i.e. through the Church. This is not because of any law which states that the above practices need to be performed through the Church, but because of how these practices were always, by convention, religious.

The Atheist Union of Greece helps students get an exemption from Religious Education at schools, helps whoever is interested to be registered as non-religious on official papers, or not register their religion at all, and inform the public about the difference between baptism and naming, among others. Baptism is considered a ‘must’ in Greek families, and it is considered by the general public as the procedure by which a child officially gets a name, when this is not the case. Furthermore, the Atheist Union of Greece promotes a humanist agenda by encouraging people to “Do good without God”, as one of their campaigns is named, and is considered the major protector of atheism, secularism, and humanism in Greece.

The Humanist Union of Greece, is active in securing a secular Europe, ensure equal treatment of all humans regardless of their religion or beliefs, and fight religious fundamentalism in Greece and Europe. It’s continuously active in campaigns concerning freedom of speech and incidents of hate speech and racism in Greece. With the rise of neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, attacks against immigrants and refugees in Greece has increased, and the Humanist Union of Greece is a strong voice of condemnation for such incidents. More importantly, it campaigns for the abolition of blasphemy laws in Greece and worldwide, an issue which puts limits on freedom of speech in the country.

# The Calgary Pride Parade with Christine M. Shellska

September 30, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Christine Shellska is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Communication, Media and Film, Faculty of Arts, at the University of Calgary, Canada. Her research involves studying the rhetorical strategies employed by the Intelligent Design Creationism movement, and her areas of focus include history, philosophy and sociology of science, and rhetoric. Among other involvement in the secular community, she is the first Canadian to be elected to the Board of Directors for the American Humanist Association, and a regular co-host on the Calgary-based Legion of Reason podcast.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Recently, the LGBTQ+ community held its pride parade in Calgary. You are a multi-generational Calgarian. How do events like this make you feel?

**Christine M. Shellska:** Calgary has grown to become very diverse. Not only have our industries, educational institutions, and quality of life attracted people from around the world, but we welcome about 10,000 immigrants every year. As a happy consequence, the number of cultural events[1] held here have increased, most of which centre around music, dance, art, and of course, delicious ethnic food and (frequently intoxicating) beverages.

Calgary's Pride movement started in 1990 with about 100 marchers, many of whom wore masks to protect their identities. One year later, Pride week was declared an official civic event by Mayor Al Duerr, but the parade only attracted about 400 attendees[2]. In 2016[3][4], there were 140 parade entries, about 4000 participants, and about 60,000 attendees. This year, Calgary Pride reported[5] that there were 175 parade entries, about 5000 participants, and about 65,000 attendees.

To give you a bit of context, the annual parade that kicks off the Calgary Stampede is regarded as one of the world's largest, with 2017 attendance estimated at 275,000[6]. This year's marials were Chiefs of the Treaty 7 Nations, and it featured over 150 western-themed entries, including 30 marching bands, 40 floats, 750 horses and 4,000 participants[7]. Following the Stampede parade, Pride is by far our most popular and well-attended.

Because we have long been well-known for the Stampede, the history of which spans over 100 years, I think some hold the perception that Calgary, often referred to as "Cowtown," is a bit of a backwards hick-town. Alberta's reputation for its high population of religious fundamentalists, some of whom hold very bigoted attitudes, doesn't contribute positively to this image. Stampede Week features many western-oriented exhibits and events, but it also features world-class artists and musicians, a large fairground, strange and novel foods like scorpion pizza, and a substantial amount of partying at almost every drinking establishment in town, as well as some that are erected solely for the festivities.

Stampede Week, like Pride, is an opportunity for Calgarians to reflect on our history – to acknowledge the reality of past transgressions, and to celebrate hard-earned rights won – to show our civic pride, and to leverage the spirit of these events to unite as a city. Cultural events that celebrate ethnic arts and food reflect our diversity, encourage community among new Canadians, and welcome Calgarians to share aspects of our friends' and neighbours' cultures. And, perhaps

most importantly, during rather a humourless time in our global history, many of our events are just a good excuse to have fun, like our yearly Zombie walk and 4-20 gathering at City Hall.

Unfortunately, this year's Pride parade sparked off a great deal of controversy when the organizers announced that they would not permit the Calgary Police Service to participate in uniform. Within my personal sphere, when the Centre for Inquiry (CFI) Calgary announced its decision to withdraw their support, after a lengthy process that included input from members of both CFI and the LGBTQ+ community, a nation-wide shitstorm arose on social media. Our Executive Director, whom we interviewed on the *Legion of Reason* podcast[8], was the target of much verbal abuse, resulting in her resignation.

Having said that, there were many who supported CFI Calgary's decision, including several members of the LGBTQ+ community. There were also many thoughtful contributions, which resulted in some productive dialogue. However, the voices of cis-gendered people (including me) soon came to dominate the dialogue, most of whom reside outside of Calgary and are largely unaware of the history of the relationship between the CPS and our LGBTQ+ community. By most accounts from LGBTQ+ Calgarians, the Pride parade organizers did not consult the broader community. The proposal was presented Voices – Calgary's Coalition of Two-Spirit & Racialized lgbtqia+, a small, local advocacy group inspired by BLM, founded in 2016[9]. Their position is summarized by Carrie Tait of *The Globe and Mail*[10]:

Some two-spirit people – an umbrella term to describe and used by some, but not all, individuals who are Indigenous and identify as LGBTQ or elsewhere on the gender and sexual spectrums – feel their white counterparts are leaving them and people of colour behind. The broader LGBTQ community has made significant gains in the quest for equality, thanks to years of fighting for rights. But some members of the LGBTQ community who are not white feel overlooked because, while homophobia may be dissipating, they may still be on society's social and economic margins because of race.

Pride announced, "We acknowledge the historical oppression and institutionalized racism faced by queer/trans people of colour and Indigenous persons, and the potentially negative association with weapons, uniforms and other symbols of law enforcement."

While the usual, trite accusation that "You need to educate yourself!" was tossed around in its various instantiations on social media, the argument is clear. Few, if any, CFI Calgary members would deny these claims. What many objected to, however, was the method, because of its exclusion of uniformed officers, many of whom are non-white and LGBTQ+. Summing up the sentiment, in response to Pride's statement, "We welcome the participation of Calgary Police Services, and other law enforcement agencies in a manner that demonstrates allyship and understanding," Kelly McParland of the National Post[11] observed, "Just as long as they do their best to hide their identity, like gays used to do."

The CPS agreed to respect the Pride organizers' decision, from what I understand, reluctantly. Even our mayor, Naheed Nenshi, expressed his disappointment in the decision.

**Jacobsen: When you look at some of the particulars of the event, what were notable highlights for you?**

**Shellska:** Oddly, Calgary's Pride Week does not coincide with Pride Month, which is widely recognized as June, to commemorate the Stonewall riots. The Pride parade held in early

September concludes Pride Week, followed by Pride in the Park, a family-friendly event that features live entertainment, a marketplace, and a beer garden.

In recent years, highlights of Pride Week include the raising of the Pride flag at City Hall, the Calgary Tower's light display, rainbow sidewalks (this year featuring a sidewalk representing the transgender flag colours), public transit signage, and countless other shows of support by individuals, local businesses, and corporations.

**Jacobsen: In reflection on the progressive outlook, one of progression to greater inclusion in spite of, usually religious, attempts to narrow the landscape of people's self-identification and expression. How has the environment changed for the LGBTQ+ community? What are some notable examples of this?**

**Shellska:** Since I'm cis-gendered, I really can't speak to this personally. The best I can try to do is relay my personal observations. Growing up, my best friend in high school was gay, and he certainly wasn't socially open about it, although his family knew. Some of his family members were bigoted and occasionally rude, especially his grandmother, who was clearly a product of a different era. Despite her ignorance, she did love my friend in her way. Fortunately, his mother was very supportive.

For awhile, he had a partner who adamantly denied being gay. He would make very offensive comments about gays, and he drew on his Italian heritage to present a macho, tough-guy façade. In hindsight, he reminds me very much of what some refer to as "self-loathing" gays who adamantly endorse "family values" and the like. I think he was Catholic; my friend was also openly atheist, so we shared that bond in common as well as others (we are both only children and introverts). The partner was clearly jealous of our friendship, and he was horrible to me. My friend later confided that he was being physically abused. Sadly, this was the beginning of a pattern of long-term, abusive relationships for him.

Maybe things would have been different for both of them if society had been more accepting of LGBTQ+ people back then. Then again, my friend's abusive father passed away from alcohol-related illness when he was young. Clearly, being LGBTQ+ does nothing to shield one from the psychological consequences of familial violence, nor being the victim of domestic abuse. Perhaps the self-loathing partner might have fared better if he'd been spared a religious upbringing that focused upon guilt, shame and suffering. I hope he is living the best, most honest life he can.

**Jacobsen: For sexual minorities, what do you see as the modern battleground for greater freedom and acceptance in socio-cultural and political life in Calgary?**

**Shellska:** I'm happy to see that things have changed here: it is true that "the broader LGBTQ community has made significant gains in the quest for equality." My daughter is a young adult now; several of her friends have comfortably inhabited various gender identities and/or openly expressed their sexual orientations since high school. Same-sex marriage has been legal in Canada since 2005, and it is commonplace to see same-sex couples strolling the streets holding hands in my community. This year, a bill was passed to include gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation, in the *Canadian Human Rights Act*.

In my observation, my daughter's generation doesn't much care about gender identity, sexual orientation, or race, when it comes to social acceptance of their peers, possibly because of a general trend toward irreligion and the consequent rejection of the bigotry and prejudices that

often accompany it. That's a good thing, worth celebrating. However, it's important that her generation understand that minority rights were hard-earned, and this is why so many of our cultural events, like Pride, are important. The people who fought for those rights deserved to be recognized and honoured.

While LGBTQ+ people have successfully challenged legislation, there still remain social stigmas that need to be overcome, religiously-based and otherwise. I think that Voices is correct in asserting their identity, and reclaiming their history of two-spirited people, who were revered and not marginalized in many First Nations' cultures. I think they're correct in asserting the historical cultures and rights of non-white LGBTQ+ people; even if those rights are legally recognized, in many communities across Canada, some police officers continue to abuse their authority and enact violence against marginalized groups. I think they're correct in pointing out the historical and present failures of authorities, of which there are many. Unquestionably, these stories need to be told.

But from what I've heard from my friends in the broader LGBTQ+ community, the CPS are largely regarded as allies, having earned trust over many years by protecting their rights as individuals (including ethnic minorities), business owners, etc.

Singling out the CPS was interpreted by many as rejecting allies by denying their identity. This is very much an American strategy that doesn't necessarily align with Canadian issues and values. It raises questions about groups that were not excluded. For example, if we take up the premise that certain groups should be excluded, it is simply outrageous to include many Christian groups, given the history of residential schools, who participated in what the Truth and Reconciliation Council deemed "cultural genocide." Not to mention their historical treatment of LGBTQ+ people.

There also seems to be an underlying assumption that non-whites accept LGBTQ+ people, and we know this is simply not the case. Many cultures around the globe are notoriously misogynistic, homophobic, bigoted, etc.

I admit that I find it very distasteful when Canadians jump on American bandwagons with no regard to our unique context, as if we're affected by the same issues. Granted, we share very many similarities, and some of their issues are ours as well. But racism and LGBTQ+ bigotry are not uniquely American nor Canadian issues. They are global issues that require culturally-appropriate strategies.

Clearly Calgary is merely a microcosm of a broader movement. Police have been disinvited to Pride parades across the US, and now Canada. Protests that include disrupting vehicular and even air traffic have sprung up across North America and Europe. More recently, some protests have erupted into violence. These events have alienated many who are allies or potential allies, and have been responded to by violent and overtly racist groups who were marginalized long ago, and should have remained so. I don't want to see that happen here. We don't need to flock like a bunch of lemmings to American "solutions." On the global stage, Canada is respected as a humanitarian country. We can do better.

What if Voices were to propose something along the lines of a March Against Racism, or something like that, and invite Pride as an honoured guest? As a new initiative, the organizers could unproblematically choose who they wanted to exclude and include, thus setting their own precedent. It would be more inclusive in the sense that it would support the right of all non-

whites, not just LGBTQ+ non-whites. And it would be a chance to educate and foster community among Calgary's multiple cultures. I think this is something most Calgarians would support, even if it meant some of us, even most of us, were excluded. Not only would it be a contribution to our civic events, it could provide an alternative approach that could serve as a model for other communities facing similar issues.

**Jacobsen: What was the turnout for the uniform event? Why was this an important event to hold?**

**Shellska:** The Unity in Uniform was organized as a Pride alternative event by Gregory John and Jim Heaton<sup>[12]</sup>, in response to the exclusion of the CPS, to "show the community that there's another part of the community that is in support of the police [and] other people in uniform," including firefighters and EMS professionals. The event was important to many members and groups representing the broader LGBTQ+ community, including Morley Pride and the Drag community.

I hadn't intended to go, because I felt there were others far more deserving to attend the limited-seating event. But I wanted to contribute something positive to both communities, especially given the division amongst CFI Calgary internally, as well as with other Canadian branches. When I pitched the idea, several individual members of CFI Calgary offered to support a crowdfunder to contribute toward the evening's festivities. Greg kindly thanked me for my offer but felt it was improper to accept a contribution of this nature, and instead encouraged us to donate to Officer Tad Milmine's "Bullying Ends Here" campaign, located here: <https://www.bullyingendshere.ca/>.

When I explained why I wanted to do the crowdfunder, Greg was saddened to learn how the decision impacted CFI, especially the Executive Director. He placed me on his guest list, and when we met I extended my hand, to which he responded, "Sorry, I only do hugs." Exactly what I hoped he'd say!

The event was very well attended, and represented by many groups and individuals, including some gay CFI members. It was an honour to attend the inaugural Unity in Uniform event, and I met several inspirational leaders of the LGBTQ+ community, including police officers. The speeches delivered by the organizers and other leaders focused on inclusivity and widely stirred the audience's emotions. Despite the controversy, attendees were encouraged to participate in the Pride parade. Many officers showed up out of uniform, carrying the CPS Pride banner, graciously accepting the decision and taking the higher road.

**Jacobsen: Was there any backlash to the uniform event, whether online or with protestors of the event?**

**Shellska:** When I found out about the Unity in Uniform and shared it on facebook, I rather harshly pointed out that those who were shouting, "Educate yourself!" ought to do the same. There were some interesting exchanges, but the discussion on the general principle of excluding police officers continued in other posts, for several days after Pride Week.

I can't confirm whether there was any backlash toward the Unity in Uniform event, but I highly doubt it. It seemed clear that the event represented the views of the broader LGBTQ+ community, the strength of their relationship with the CPS, and the strong overlap of the two communities. Certainly there was no physical presence of protestors, and there were, to my knowledge, no notable public criticisms of the event.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you for your time again, Christine.

**Shellska:** Thank you again too! I'm looking forward to future discussions.

[1] [http://www.geoscalgary.com/misc/magazine/content/cultural\\_festivals\\_in\\_calgary.htm](http://www.geoscalgary.com/misc/magazine/content/cultural_festivals_in_calgary.htm).

[2] <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/calgary-pride-25th-anniversary-1.3217157>.

[3] <http://globalnews.ca/news/2920620/2016-calgary-pride-parade-brings-thousands-to-downtown-core/>.

[4] <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/calgary-pride-2016-1.3748147>.

[5] <http://globalnews.ca/news/3715669/thousands-expected-to-attend-2017-calgary-pride-parade/>.

[6] <http://calgary.ctvnews.ca/2017-calgary-stampede-parade-draws-an-estimated-crowd-of-275-000-1.3492932>.

[7] <http://globalnews.ca/news/3538653/watch-live-2017-calgary-stampede-parade/>.

[8] <http://www.legionofreason.com/episode-211-calgary-prides-regrettable-decision/>

[9] <https://www.facebook.com/yycvoices/>

[10] <https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/alberta/calgary-pride-indigenous-lgbtq-two-spirit/article36154435/>

[11] <http://nationalpost.com/opinion/kelly-mcparland-pride-won-yet-now-chooses-to-be-picky-about-its-allies>

[12] <https://globalnews.ca/news/3701993/calgary-lgbtq-community-members-create-alternative-pride-event-where-uniforms-are-welcome/>



# Chat with British Christian Suzie Mason, Ph.D. Candidate, on Christianity and Atheism

September 30, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What convinced you of the Gospel?**

**Suzie Mason:** ‘Convinced me of the gospel’ is not a phrase that sits well in my brain. It sounds far too certain to have anything to do with faith. You wouldn’t find too many British Christians using that phrase. I’ve chosen to be a Christian because I think that given the choice between two positions with evidence (theism and atheism) where neither has proof, theism is the one that makes most sense (in many ways). Once a theist, Christianity appeals for many reasons, personal and practical. Christianity teaches that we are flawed broken beings in desperate need of help. It doesn’t take much observation to gather evidence for that claim. Christianity is radical and wildly opposed to the easy ways we would love to live. Forgiveness is hard. Loving your enemy is all but impossible. I want a religion that kicks me in the arse to do better, every day. As for why I believe in Jesus, that’s between the two of us.

**Jacobsen:** What tends to not convince atheists of the Gospel in the United Kingdom?

**Mason:** People tend to believe what they are raised to believe. While atheists raise this in regards to religion, they often fail to note that the same applies to them. Religious, political and cultural ideas and identities are bestowed upon us as children, without our consent or understanding. Most people in the UK are atheists because they are raised by atheists (I often meet 40- and 50-year old people in church who have never attended before, and are curious about religion, something seen but not heard). I think that one of the reasons that atheists don’t become Christians is that they think that religion is about knowledge, rather than belief. A belief is a choice based on evidence. Knowledge is an obligation based on fact or proof. I know climate change is happening based on the fact of our evidence base around the phenomenon. I believe that it’s probably not a good idea to drink alcohol during pregnancy, but the jury is out on the impacts. With atheism and theism, there’s no proof either way. When I say ‘I believe in God’, I am not making a claim about reality. I’m making a declaration of choice: I have chosen to believe in God, based on the evidence I see. I’m not demanding that everyone make the same choice, or weigh up the evidence in the same way. I think that misunderstandings like this contribute to people not trying to find out more about religion.

**Jacobsen:** From the perspective of a Christian, what is the state of atheism in the United Kingdom? How do holders of the two belief systems tend to relate to one another?

**Mason:** Generally, if you’re religious or atheist, Britain is a good place to come. The default British attitude is: ‘do whatever you want, just don’t bother me with it’. For many years, politics and religion were regarded as taboo topics in public, and public evangelism is frowned upon. I think people are becoming more open about discussing religion in public, but our outlook is increasingly individualistic and I think that the vast majority of atheists and theists relate to one another in a sense of ‘this person’s private life is not my business’.

**Jacobsen:** What do you think is the best argument for atheism? Why aren’t you convinced of it?

**Mason:** Being a scientist, I think the best argument for atheism is that God can't be measured by science. Not being able to be sure of something causes a lot of grief for the human mind, and if there is something that can't be captured by an empirical materialistic methodology, it's very tempting to ignore it. We like to be able to comprehend our world, and discard things that are too complicated or excessive. A lot of atheists treat God as an unnecessary addition to people's worldviews. I'm not convinced by this because the opinion that it's simpler God not to exist is just that, an opinion. It's not obvious how the big bang was imitated, or what evidence we should see if God exists. I don't see God as an addition; God is the whole worldview, opposing a Godless universe worldview.

**Jacobsen:** Most New Atheists, as opposed to atheists generally, are white young males. Why is this the case? Christianity tends to attract a broader audience. Also, the corollary, why does Christianity tend to attract a wider audience?

**Mason:** Well, I'm not sure why the young men are white. However, it's a general rule that people tend to be radical and liberal in their youth. New Atheism was a movement designed to stir people against religion, and was marketed as a bright sharp revolutionary action to overthrow the oppressive weight of old stodgy regressive tradition. It also was primarily fronted by men, talked about by men, and was about confrontation, argumentation, and aggressive decisive claims: be an atheist and you will be more intelligent than deluded fools; you are on the side of science. These are claims and formats that appeal to men, and young men desire role models. The sheer volume of Hitch fanboys who recite quotes like Bible verses is a testament to that. This is not a unique thing to atheist men – I think something similar happens with fans of charismatic (usually male) Christian speakers. But speaking of New Atheism specifically, I think that many young men left the authority of their family churches to look for a different authority, and found it in Richard Dawkins or someone similar.

I think Christianity has a broad audience because it is fundamentally a religion for broken people, and there is no shortage of those. Comparing it to a crutch is rather apt, because it helps people who wouldn't normally be able to function in society to do just that. Everyone has times they regret, where they know they could have been better. In an individualistic society, Christianity reminds us that we were made for relationship and community. Many people are drawn to the church because they are starved of love and compassion. I belong to the Anglican tradition, where the term 'broad church' comes from: we have people who are more Catholic than the pope, and more protestant than Martin Luther. This broadness allows many people of many theologies to come together and share in one bread.

# Ugandan Kasese Humanist Schools' Bwambale Robert on His Locale and Work

September 30, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Can you describe the local context? What is it like where you live? Also, to fill in some more blanks, what are some misconceptions about where you live?

**Bwambale Robert:** Irreligiosity, where I live, is not much as religions take a large threshold in the community. I can estimate that the percentage of religious diehards goes to 80% for Christian sects, Muslims may take 10 % and surprisingly even those going to places of worship to foreign religions still practice African religion traditional practices, those who don't believe in god or gods is a small fraction of less than 2%.

Whereas education seems to unlock doors and enlighten people about good and bad, very few believe religions were invented by the people themselves.

Many people where I live are religious, normally respect and observe Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Wednesday for some traditional loyalists. The evangelical churches here open all day throughout the week as many have morning glory, lunch hour fellowships, evening fellowships and most Fridays conduct over night prayers which goes from dusk to dawn.

In this era of competition among churches, in my community, I have witnessed scores of open crusades by the Anglicans, Catholics, Evangelicals, Adventists and surprisingly traditionalists in their shrines.

For every two kilometers apart, you can easily locate a church or several churches of different denominations. In their business each one is trying to win the attention of believers, the music played has also changed, we now have versions of reggae, Rnb, Raga, pop-gospel music or song versions, and this is accompanied by real dancing. At least most churches I have gone to have invested in drums, keyboard, drum sets, guitars and music speakers.

The percentage of women in churches here outweighs that of men. Elderly people seem to be more religious. The percentage of children going to churches is also high while among the youths especially those struggling hard to earn a living seem to be boycotting going to churches. This might be attributed to their realization that the church might be using them as ladders, the behaviors of some church leaders too of committing crimes like fornication, adultery, pedophile practices, thuggery and some being arrested as con men or con women has made people alert that some mess is going on somewhere.

Some other youths seem to be fed up being told that Jesus is coming for years now and scores of them are questioning the religious leaders or groupings about things that matter to them and have not been given justifiable answers.

The high costs of living and the ability of humanity to meet the basic needs themselves have made them realize that their well-being here on earth depends on how best they work and plan for their lives. People have seen scores of people perish in floods, die in hospitals or accidents or die of hunger which are cases where god or Jesus the savior could have intervened.

A section is ignoring being religious because they see that it's like they are being milked each other day, they see religious heads living worthwhile fulfilled lives while the majority of believers are in shacks of poverty. This annoying factor turns away believers who in the end shun religion.

Misconceptions about my work:

*These misconceptions are propelled by the following:*

*Religious fanatics mostly leaders of the mainstream religions from the Anglican church, Catholic church, a section from American evangelical churches, some school Directors who look at my schools a potential threat in the world of competition and a few individuals who don't wish me well economically in life*

Several people think that am satanic just because they think that being a non-believer; you have to subscribe to satanic practices.

This is a big lie because I have a feeling that Satan does not exist but I do agree that wrong acts do exist in our society and it's our right as people to fight against them. You don't have to be religious to fight against a wrong act.

People think I get money from under the seas or underwater and often link me to belong to a certain group of people called "Illuminati". Why they say so is that they fail to understand how I get money. When I take a photo with a camera, some think I am taking the photos to the witchdoctors to seek blessings.

The truth is, all my works are online and I do once in a while receive generous donations from kind people or organizations who think what I do is important for the world, it's a pity that even those who already know I get donations, because of hate, envy or jealousy, they go on painting a bad picture so that am brought down.

People think I will go to hell since I don't believe in god. I think the people have no right to judge me since I live my life and if I am to go to hell as they claim, why are they bothered. The truth is neither hell nor heaven does exist since there is no proof for it. We have lost people over the ages, among them who has ever come from hell or heaven to tell us: what is there? I just think we live in a world of recycling, a world of the food chain and a world of diversity. I normally argue people to always be good, do well and avoid doing bad for it's what makes us special.

People think that children who study at my school are possessed by the devil, this is evidenced by some of the enemies of the school mostly bishops and pastors conducting prayers and deluding the masses that they are casting out demons in them. This is complete rubbish for my schools are as clean and tolerant to people's beliefs, we welcome learners from all walks of life and our role is to offer knowledge, we are not devilish as they claim for I believe there are no demons.

People think that the word BIZOHA I normally use in my projects is the kind of god I believe in; others think that am a self-proclaimed god codenamed BIZOHA. The truth is the word BI ZO HA represents three personal friends of mine whom I admired because of their good deeds and reputation in the world and generated a word from their three names as below:

BI for BIBA Kavass

ZO for Zoltan Istvan

HA for Hank Pellissier

All these three people live in the United States, one of them by the names of HANK has so far visited me three times now, Biba is a high school teacher while Zoltan Istvan is a politician, scientist, and a transhumanist.

People think am ritualistic and that the humanism is promoting is religion. This is a total lie, Humanism is a life stance, and it's an alternative to religion.

**Jacobsen: Is Humanism is a religion or not?**

**Robert:** Humanism is not a religion or some sort of new religion; I think it lacks the basic characteristics of religion as listed below:

A religion should have a leader, should have several sects, should perform rituals and sacrifices, should have elements of spirits or supernatural elements in its settings, should have a promise of afterlife.... paradise..... hell, should have a sacred book which believers believe in or refer to all the time, should have mediators or middlemen who connect believers with the super deity, should have a place of worship codenamed church, shrine, temple, synagogue. Should have the likes of a pyramid scheme in its setup with few people at the top and the believers at the bottom, should have elements of offerings, tithes, offertories, should have their leaders take special training and thereafter take oaths not to disclose some secrets, most dominant religions should be closely attached to global superpowers over the ages, history has it from the Roman empire, British empire, Former USSR, Arabic empire and of recent The United States of America all created religions to expand their influence worldwide.

In summary humanism, none of these shows up in humanism and this discredits it to be called a religion though like-minded individuals not interested in joining world religions do have a right to assemble and associate together in meetings like these there can't be elements of spirits, higher powers or unjustified promises.

**Jacobsen: In terms of the religion in the local area, how much authority do religious leaders have? What about secular leaders?**

**Robert:** Religious leaders in my area have too much authority in their religious circles, secular leaders as in political circles like village chiefs; local councils and traditional clan heads have much more authority in their areas. Religious leaders here are looked at as opinion leaders and some people here still think that what they always say is the right thing.

On social functions or events, both of them are given a platform to pass a word to the locals.

**Jacobsen: Is there intermingling of politics and religion? In what ways is this more subtly done?**

**Robert:** Yes, there is a mix-up of politics and religion almost in everything. Our government set up embraces this too as the National Motto speaks it all "for god and my country". On some occasions though political heads normally go on fooling religious leaders to stay away from mixing the two while inwardly the politicians do a great deal in corrupting religious leaders to campaign for them such that they achieve their political ambitions.

**Jacobsen: What do people tend to worry about in the daily lives?**

**Robert:** People tend to worry about the future of Uganda as a country which is currently under the leadership of President Museveni, things keep on changing and an imminent war is possible by those against life presidency of the current leader.

People tend to worry about life after death after being duped by a section of religions who pedal information that there is life after death.

People worry a lot about the current health trends, high rates of HIV/AIDS, narcotic and drug use and alcoholism is at its best among most youths and mature people.

The locals are worried about the future of their children who are growing under harsh economic conditions, most parents hardly manage meeting the basic needs of their families, there is a high rate of teenage pregnancies, high rate of school dropouts.

Most youths and the elite community are worried about getting jobs which is almost a national problem. There are mushrooming colleges, universities each day producing graduates who find themselves in the job market.

Most locals especially those having homesteads are worried of the land grabbers, many of the locals traditionally owned the land and have no papers to prove the land they sit on is theirs, even acquiring those land papers with this vicious cycle of poverty looming only a few can manage to process land documents accredited by the government.

**Jacobsen: How do they go about their daily and weekly worship?**

**Robert:** In an average religious home, there is mandatory prayer each time one takes a meal thanking God for providing food and life, this means one has to make one at waking up, breakfast, lunchtime, supper time and sleeping time.

Prayers have to be made on holy days as they call it say Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Wednesday for traditionalists. Locals depending on the church one are attached to are supposed to attend worship.

Among born-again sects and mostly American evangelicals, they worship all day long with services in mornings, lunchtime and evening fellowships, night praying normally follow suit most Friday nights at some churches.

**Jacobsen: How much of this is truly harmful to the lives of ordinary citizens where you live?**

**Robert:** Even though its people's freedom to worship or pray, I think it's high time locals try question the beliefs they believe in. I have a feeling that religion tends to make people weaker than stronger since it creates an impression that whatever we do or get, there is always a provider who is god, who can choose to give you or not yet in my perception I think its people's hard work or weaknesses that makes them stronger or weaker. If one works hard and calculates well his moves, you succeed, if you work hard and plan poorly; you lose so I think it's high time people start believing in themselves.

People should be encouraged to think for themselves and come up with solutions than relying on an imaginary higher power to guide them in what they want to accomplish. This means their brains should be free from brainwashings that tend to come along with religion.

**Jacobsen: How can people donate and help out?**

**Robert:** People can donate to my initiatives via the Brighter Brains Institute whom we share with several projects under the BIZOHA Initiatives. The link to donate is:

<https://www.humanistglobal.org/donate/bizoha-day-scholar-mentorship-or-renewal> or send check to BBI, 425 Moraga Ave., Piedmont CA 94611

Atheist Alliance international, one of my longtime partners do accept donations to Kasese Humanist Primary school. They periodically redirect donations to me. The link to donate is: <http://atheistalliance.org/support-aai/donate> Then select KHPS under directed donations to AAI specific projects.

You can make donations on my website at Africa Humanists; you can pick an item that suits your donation. The link to donate to is: <http://africahumanists.org/new-products/> and choose a project to support.

Alternatively, you can volunteer and fundraise for my projects in your own areas in support of what I do. In case you want to fundraise, notify me so that I write up a simple intro or biodata about myself and the strings of projects that I manage. My email is [kasesehumanistschool@hotmail.com](mailto:kasesehumanistschool@hotmail.com).

# Chat with Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy's (CSSDP) Avery Sapoznikow on Ayahuasca

October 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

## **Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is Ayahuasca?**

**Avery Sapoznikow:** Ayahuasca is an ancient tea originating from the Amazon Basin of South America. It's an admixture of, at a minimum, two different plants, one being a source of dimethyltryptamine (DMT), a potent psychedelic compound, and the other being a source of monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs; drugs that prevent stomach enzymes from destroying DMT post-ingestion). Traditionally, Ayahuasca is made from the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* shrub (DMT source) and the stalks of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine (MAOI source). Generally, Ayahuasca has been reported to cause intense distortions to normal perception, usually in the form of hallucinations or visionary experiences. People also tend to be affected emotionally in terms of empathy and openness. Individuals have also reported interactions with what they referred to as "divine beings" or in many cases a strong female or motherly presence (often named "Mother Ayahuasca").

## **Jacobsen:** How has the substance been used in the past?

**Sapoznikow:** Ayahuasca has been used in several ways in the past. Firstly, there are formalized Ayahuasca religions such as the Santo Daime and União do Vegetal where they use Ayahuasca as religious sacrament. Secondly, Ayahuasca was used as a medicine to treat various ancient maladies and psychopathologies. Finally, Ayahuasca has simply been used to have personal visionary or spiritual experiences.

## **Jacobsen:** How has the substance been used in Canada? Why is it used?

**Sapoznikow:** Use of Ayahuasca in Canada has been very limited due to the locations where the plants needed to brew the tea naturally occur. Further, DMT is a schedule I drug in both Canada and the United States so possession of the DMT is technically breaking the law. Fortunately, Canada and some US states have recognized certain Ayahuasca religions and allow them to practice and drink the tea as sacrament for religious purposes; similar to indigenous use of the peyote plant. Other than religious use, sometimes you can find shamans living in Canada who have brought some of their own materials to brew the tea themselves with them from the Amazon. These shamans host their own Ayahuasca rituals or retreats where individuals may ingest ayahuasca many times over the course of several days, for the purpose of spiritual, physiological, and psychological healing. The only other forms of use of ayahuasca would be individuals. As for why it is used, other than as religious sacrament, individuals tend to drink Ayahuasca in Canada for healing experiences as well as to experience one of the most powerful psychedelic experiences one can have.

**Jacobsen:** What are some of the experiences that users report? Although, the reported experience is more difficult to translate the direct experience; however, this can give an indication at a minimum.

**Sapoznikow:** What users experience has a lot to do with the *set and setting* of the experience and the individuals ingesting. What I mean by this, is that an individual's *set* – their mindset,



temperament, emotional state – and *setting* – the physical space of the experience and the other individuals present – play a huge role in how the experience unfolds. If someone is in a very dark place mentally when they use ayahuasca, the experience will likely be extremely unpleasant. They may be forced to face these issues in a state when they feel most vulnerable. This could be a healing experience or an extremely scary experience, it all depends on the individual. The shaman or ayahuasca guide also plays an important role when drinking ayahuasca as they are said to be able to somewhat direct where the experience will go with music and chants (icaros).

On the topic of translating experience into words, a year ago I conducted an archival research study on a collection of over 150 ayahuasca experience reports where individuals detailed what they experienced after ingesting ayahuasca in various contexts (i.e. with shamans, alone, in a group, etc.). For the study I had to read and edit all of these reports so I've a pretty solid idea of what occurs. That being said, one cannot truly understand what the experience was like unless they experienced it themselves.

Some fairly common descriptions that came up were visual hallucinations of some otherworldly “beings”, often relaying important information to the individual. There also tended to be almost entire loss of connection to reality when the dose of ayahuasca is strong enough. Conversely, there were other reports of little to no effect after drinking ayahuasca. This variance could be due to the quality of the prepared brew, the dosage of the brew, and/or the weight/size of the individual. An extremely common physiological effect of drinking ayahuasca is nausea and a reflexive vomiting sensation, which more often than not leads to actual vomiting. This is generally seen as a cleansing or purge of an individual's being.

**Jacobsen: Have you used it?**

**Sapoznikow:** I personally have not used ayahuasca.

**Jacobsen: What is the process of using it in terms of dosing, intake, and making a spiritual practice in one's own life?**

**Sapoznikow:** As I mentioned earlier, ayahuasca is traditionally used in a group or ceremonial context with a guide to the experience. If one wishes to use ayahuasca for any purpose, I would strongly recommend following tradition and go to an ayahuasca ceremony being run by a trained and well-experienced shaman. You'll likely be given a cup (relative measurement, not an actual cup full of ayahuasca) of ayahuasca to drink and after 20-30 minutes if there are no effects, the shaman may deem another dose necessary. For making use of ayahuasca for spiritual exploration and practice, participating in these well-known ceremonies will surely provide an individual with a spiritual experience, given they are in the right *set and setting*.

**Jacobsen: What are the short-term effects on the psyche?**

**Sapoznikow:** Some of the diverse short-term effects of ayahuasca on the psyche that have been reported include: increased happiness, feelings of inner peace, love, and empathy, and feelings of connectedness with the earth and other people. On the other end of the spectrum, people can also feel very disconnected from the world, and may experience unwanted or undesirable feelings. Again, these effects have a lot to do with the *set and setting* of the individual and experience and resulting outcomes.

**Jacobsen: What are the long-term effects of it on the psyche?**

**Sapoznikow:** While under the influence of ayahuasca, individuals may have had intense revelations about reality or a divine/spiritual experience where they feel as if they have spoken to or reached a higher power. This could result in profound life-changing effects in terms of behavior and personality. Few studies have been completed surrounding ayahuasca relative to other psychoactive drugs, however some studies have show associations between the ingestion of ayahuasca and reductions in substance abuse and other maladaptive behaviors. Of course, there is always the potential for negative long-term effects such as loss of sanity and exacerbation of current or initiation of underlying mental health disorders, such as schizophrenia, in those vulnerable if the proper precautions aren't taken. Ayahuasca isn't just the next psychedelic for people seeking a fun experience, it likely will not be "fun", but moreso exploratory and mentally taxing. However, if it is exploration of the psyche, the potential to change views and beliefs, or to heal oneself spiritually and potentially even psychologically or physiologically, ayahuasca may be something for one to look into. I would recommend to be sure to do your own research and try to gain as much knowledge about the brew as possible before trying it, it isn't something to take lightly.

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

# Conversation with Cheri Frazer – Winnipeg Chapter Co-Coordinator, Dying With Dignity

October 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** To start, are you an atheist, an agnostic, or some other non-theistic title?

**Cheri Frazer:** I am a lifelong atheist, 4<sup>th</sup> generation on one side of my family.

**Jacobsen:** What is Dying With Dignity, as a movement and organization?

**Frazer:** Dying With Dignity Canada is the national organization committed to improving quality of dying, expanding end-of-life choices, and helping Canadians avoid unwanted suffering.

We defend human rights by advocating for compassionate end-of-life choices and by providing personal support to adults suffering greatly from a medical condition who wish to die on their own terms.

We educate Canadians about all of their legal end-of-life options, including the constitutional right to medical assistance in dying (MAID), and the importance of advance care planning. We also support healthcare practitioners who assess for or provide MAID.

We are part of a growing international movement seeking to stop suffering and help ensure peaceful deaths for people at the end of their lives.

We enthusiastically support the Supreme Court's 2015 ruling in Carter v. Canada, which established medical assistance in dying as a right for competent adult Canadians who are suffering intolerably as the result of a "grievous and irremediable" medical condition. We believe rules for assisted dying must, at the very least, comply with the Supreme Court's decision and ultimately, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

**Jacobsen:** How can people become involved in it?

**Frazer:** There are plenty of ways people can get involved, from running workshops to writing for our blog to witnessing applications for medical assistance in dying. Readers can visit <http://www.dyingwithdignity.ca/volunteerto> explore the options they're interested in. Winnipeg announces its events here: <https://dwdwinnipeg.weebly.com>.

**Jacobsen:** What makes this movement more noble than the idea that a religious authority can determine what Canadians can do with their, arguably, most important decision of their life – how they die?

**Frazer:** I think that if a person subscribes to a particular religion and believes in that religion's views on assisted dying (or dying in general), then that's the definition of "noble" for that person. Actually, I think "dignified" is a better descriptor. In my years with the Winnipeg chapter I've met people from many different religions (and no religion) who support medical assistance in dying, and sometimes that support is at odds with their religion's stated beliefs. To me, dignity comes in having your choice for your own end-of-life respected. If a Catholic person comes to me for advice on making an end-of-life plan that does not include medical assistance in dying, then I'm happy to help that person find all the answers needed. If another Catholic who believes

in MAID comes to me for advice, I'd give the same advice but with one more option added. Our service is about the patient, not about forcing our personal beliefs on others—an approach I wish religious authorities would take as well.

**Jacobsen: Have there been any attempts to prevent assisted dying from moving forward in Canada? How, and by who? Is it a fair series of attempts or not?**

**Frazer:** Yes, attempts are being made to prevent MAID from moving forward, both legislatively at the federal level, and physically at “faith-based” institutions. Initially, a federal panel that was assembled to study the current law was chaired by a vocal opponent of MAID; he has since been replaced. Institutions all across Canada that call themselves “faith-based” are denying patients access to legal medical services, sometimes resulting in painful, traumatic patient transfers to different facilities, assuming there are other facilities nearby, and that those facilities will accept such transfers.

You've probably heard about the situation at St. Boniface Hospital in Winnipeg, where a Catholic-controlled board of directors was ‘stacked’ in order to re-vote and reverse a democratic decision among staff to allow medical assistance in dying (MAID) on the premises in certain circumstances (e.g., where a transfer would be painful or traumatic). Please note that this is not a criticism of the hospital or its staff; the staff there are dedicated professionals who provide excellent care, and the majority of them support their patients’ right to make their own health care decisions. The issue at stake is the control of hospital policy by a religious board of directors.

This is a serious issue because in our publicly funded health care system, patients frequently do not have the opportunity to choose the hospital in which they are treated. Many services are consolidated at certain sites and not offered at others – so even if a patient goes to the emergency room at the hospital of their choice, they could end up being transferred to another. Ambulances are directed to hospitals according to both service and bed availability, so in an emergency, the patient has no say whatsoever. This means that all publicly funded hospitals must be able and willing to accommodate all patients. An institution has no right to limit access to legal services to patients who have different beliefs than they do, if a publicly funded institution can claim to have “beliefs” at all.

It's time for Canadians, the majority of whom support MAID, to speak up and demand that something changes. Recently, the Pallister government required that all institutions in Manitoba that provide health care declare whether they are “faith-based” and whether they will allow assisted dying on their premises. DWDC has been gathering this information on institutions all across Canada in their “Shine a Light” project, which provides an online map of institutions near you and their policies on MAID. What's important to note in Manitoba, that's different from all other provinces and territories, is that no healthcare worker is required to participate; we have one central team that services the entire province. The institution doesn't have to be involved in any way either, since the team comes to the patient.

For more detailed information on this issue, you can read DWDC's report, “Challenges to Choice: Bill C-14 One Year Later”, found here: [http://www.dyingwithdignity.ca/challenges\\_to\\_choice](http://www.dyingwithdignity.ca/challenges_to_choice).

**Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts?**

**Frazer:** We stand up for the rights of the dying, the weak, and the vulnerable. We believe in a Canada that respects the rights of people who are suffering intolerably as a result of a devastating medical condition. The person — their rights, interests, and choices — is at the centre of our work.

In our society, the way we express love is to say “do everything you can to save grandma” in an emergency; but if grandma didn’t want to be saved, then that’s a cruelty rather than an act of love. Better to know each other’s wishes and values before you’re faced with a terrible decision in an emergency.

No matter what your age or health status, if you are a competent adult you should fill out an Advance Care Plan (health care directive) and discuss your values with your friends and families. Kits are available free to download from the DWD website, and two of the Winnipeg chapter members have posted ours publicly in the hopes it will help people to fill in their own answers. Please note that the kits are province-specific, so be sure to get the right one!

# **“Oh Friar, damned souls use the word banishment to describe hell.”**

**October 12, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

There is a new course on the block on the cognitive science of religion (edX, 2017; The Ubysey, 2017). It comes riding the wave of the Massive Open Online Course, or MOOC, movement continuing to make inroads into the alternate-to-Academia educational route, i.e. more affordable, more points of intake, more variation in content depth and course length, and so on.

The host of the course is edX while the material is taught by Dr. Azim Shariff from the University of California, Irvine (University of California, Irvine, 2017). I have been a scholar there. It is a lovely campus and community. Dr. Edward Slingerland also is part of the course (The University of British Columbia, 2017). They're basically asking, "So why do some believe, have faith that is, and others do not?"

The funding is coming from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Slingerland said that the course uses "the tools of cognitive science and evolutionary theory to explore and understand religious behaviour and belief."

The assumption, or primary premise, in the course is naturalism. If granted as the premise, then the rest of the course, at least according to the descriptions, follow from it.

There are views on the functional utility of religion, for survival in an evolutionary perspective. Some see it as a means of social control, as per the social control hypothesis, which "posits that religion has historically been controlled by social elites who trick the populace into contributing resources for their own gain" (The Ubysey, 2017).

Professor Daniel Dennett posits that religion is an invasion of the mind, of sorts, where the cultural abstraction has a neurobiological parallel in the real world, in the brain (Tufts University, 2017). That religion is this points to the idea of the phenomena – religion – as a virus that attacks the mind: hijacks it.

After sufficient 'hijacking' of the mind, the host of the virus of religion goes about for the propagation of the idea, akin to memes from Dr. Richard Dawkins – the most prominent of the New Atheists' 'Four Horseman', to other suitable hosts: other human beings – so the theory goes.

Another idea is that it is a means of anxiety reduction through a strong sense of agency – so to speak – with religion giving that sense of control over our lives. I suppose this may implicate not even necessarily concrete ideas but simply notions of freedom of the will, or free will.

If you remove the tacit premise of naturalism, the longstanding view is that, in general, one's religion is true, so the benefit may come from having the correct belief, or justified true belief in the theological phraseology.

The cognitive science of religion course views religion in the naturalistic frame, as a social benefit:

*Grand temples, for example, could serve a symbolic social purpose and create solidarity among groups that could help them outcompete others, explained Slingerland. (The Ubysey, 2017)*

Alongside the social benefit view could be the impairment of the ability for theory of mind, for making natural events somehow the result of agency, by impairment in this context becomes excess theory of mind, of seeing other people as having minds but also natural events too, e.g. Poseidon and Zeus, or Yahweh in modern cases.

It seems like an interesting course. If I get the time, I may take it; if you do, please send me an email at [scott.d.jacobsen@gmail.com](mailto:scott.d.jacobsen@gmail.com) to know what it's like.

#### References

edX. (2017). The Science of Religion. Retrieved from <https://www.edx.org/course/science-religion-ubcx-religionx-0>.

The University of British Columbia. (2017). Edward Gilman Slingerland III. Retrieved from <http://eslingerland.arts.ubc.ca/>.

The Ubysey. (2017, September 26). Massive online course from UBC investigates religion from a cognitive science perspective. Retrieved from <https://www.ubyssey.ca/science/edX-course-science-of-religion/>.

Tufts University. (2017). Daniel C. Dennett. Retrieved from <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/dennett/>.

University of California, Irvine. (2017). People: Azim Shariff. Retrieved from <http://sharifflab.com/staff/>.

# Ian Bushfield, M.Sc., on Humanist Marriages in BC

October 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Ian Bushfield, M.Sc., is the Executive Director of the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA). The BCHA has been working to have humanist marriages on the same plane as other marriages in the province. Here we talk about it.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How did humanists not acquire legal equality for their marriages in British Columbia, Canada in the first place while others have the marriage equality?

**Ian Bushfield:** The Marriage Act in BC governs who gets to perform marriages. It delegates that responsibility to the head of Vital Statistics. When we applied in 2012 to be able to perform marriages, that person decided that our group didn't qualify as a religion for the purposes of the Act.

We're not so convinced by his reasoning though. He argued that we describe ourselves as "an alternative to religion" in one of our governing documents but just because a bicycle is "an alternative to a car" doesn't mean it isn't a valid way to get to work. He also says we have no dogma, but the same is true of many other religious groups that are registered, such as the Unitarians, many spiritualist churches, and a metaphysical ministry.

**Jacobsen:** Is this an inequality across the country, all provinces and territories?

**Bushfield:** As far as we're aware, Ontario is the only province that allows Humanists to perform marriages. This is particularly frustrating as the Ontario Marriage Act is nearly identical to BC's. It just happened to be that one bureaucrat there said yes while ours said no.

We know that the Quebec Humanists ran into the same stonewall as we did when they requested approval from their provincial government. They even failed to bring a human rights complaint against the government as their Human Rights Commission ruled that Humanism isn't a religion for the purposes of human rights protections! This leaves atheists without human rights in Quebec.

**Jacobsen:** What makes a humanist marriage different than, say, a theologically-based marriage?

**Bushfield:** Simply put, it's a lack of god in it. A Humanist marriage is based on a celebration of the people involved – the couple, their families and their friends. It's entirely personalized around the values of the couple and seeks to celebrate that coming together. It's more of a bottom-up commitment than one given approval from on high.

**Jacobsen:** As the executive director of the BC Humanists Association (BCHA), how effective has the petition for inclusion in the Vital Statistics of the province of BC been for the BCHA (BCHA, 2017a; BCHA, 2017b)?

**Bushfield:** Our petition, which currently has just over 500 signatures, has been invaluable in helping us raise public awareness of this issue. We'd hoped it would have a greater effect on the Government, which has continued to dismiss our concerns, but we're just going to have to keep on building a movement as we take this campaign forward.



**Jacobsen: Why did you decide to target the Health Minister and the provincial Vital Statistics?**

**Bushfield:** Vital Statistics is the department in charge of who gets to perform marriages and they're a branch of the Ministry of Health. After our rejection by Vital Statistics, it seemed clear to me that we weren't likely to argue a different result from them. Instead of appealing to court (which is still an option), we hoped the new government might be willing to direct the Agency to open the door to our Association.

**Jacobsen: What is the next step?**

**Bushfield:** We still have a couple options moving forward. First, we're going to keep trying to put pressure on the Ministry to allow us to be registered through an internal directive. There's no definition for religion in the Act, so we contend that the Minister can simply direct Vital Statistics to adopt a broader definition of religion, in line with Ontario's, for example. If that fails, we'll look to start building a legal case in case we need to launch a constitutional challenge. And at the same time, we'll start reaching out to MLAs to see if any might be willing to bring forward an amendment to the Act.

In any case, we're going to continue to need supporters – both signatures on our petition and donors to help make all of this happen.

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

References

BCHA. (2017a, September 18). Over 500 for Humanist Marriage. Retrieved from [http://www.bchumanist.ca/over\\_500\\_for\\_humanist\\_marriage](http://www.bchumanist.ca/over_500_for_humanist_marriage).  
BCHA. (2017b). Legalize Humanist Marriage in BC. Retrieved from [http://www.bchumanist.ca/legalize\\_humanist\\_marriage?splash=1](http://www.bchumanist.ca/legalize_humanist_marriage?splash=1).

# On the March: Secularization of Canadian Academia

October 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to Nathan Fung of *The Gateway*, the next convocation at the University of Alberta will not mention God, whatever that one happens to be or whoever they happen to be, but, rather, the community will be the target of service. As in, you serve your community rather than your personal god.

The General Faculties Council at the University of Alberta, which is the highest body for academic governance, approved, or passed, the changes to the convocation admission. As an undergraduate student, I find this intriguing as a development, as this has been something of discussion in elementary and secondary schools in sectors of the country. The conversation around the level of the secularization of the schools or, more properly, the level of one or other religion's privileges over other religions/irreligion, or most/all religions educational privileges over the irreligious.

That being, the secularization of the educational system at the first two recognized tiers, primary and secondary. Now, apparently, this is another instance in the long march towards further secularization at the post-secondary, or tertiary, level now.

Intriguing.

The original phrasing in this convocation speech was “to serve your God,” which in a majority Christian adherent nation makes sense, but, with the decline in the numbers of the religious, the questions begin to arise with the increase in the irreligious – those with no religious affiliation – throughout the nation, as well as the reduction in the markers of faith (e.g., religious attendance, in the secondary beliefs, and so on), “Why have ceremonial reference to gods or a God? What if this was the hope of much of the student population but not a significant minority of them, say lower double-digit percentages? Why not have the university or college be neutral in its convocation on religion in the first place?”

Now, the phrase is “to serve your community for the public good.” That seems fair. I would commend Chancellor Doug Stollery for doing so, whether religious or not. It is a public good and community life statement, so the University of Alberta becomes a neutral player on religion at least in its convocation reference.

It seems similar to the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in Canada with God's supremacy stated in the *Preamble* (Government of Canada, 1982). Why not remove it, even if only symbolic, for neutrality of the state on matters of faith? If not, does one argue the state remain preferential in matters of faith? If so, why? (und so *weiter*...)

It also seems like the tide of history for advanced industrial nations with highly educated populaces such as Canada. Religion becomes more personal, which I respect, and less socially, culturally, and educationally leaned-to in terms of privileges, which I observe as a loose historical heuristic – especially for education.

Stollery said, “A very important value of the university is inclusivity...that includes inclusivity of students of all faiths and students of no faith.” That seems fair to me, too.

Prior to 1999, the religious statements were, in essence, basic statements of allegiance: “for the glory of God and the honour of your country.” This was changed into: “for all who believe, to serve your god,” To top it off, the convocation began with a prayer with a call for blessings from the, at the time, chancellor of the University of Alberta.

That will be replaced with a call for the celebration of community and no prayer. Less than two decades to go from prayer, blessings, and the “glory of God” to no prayer and simply serving the community. That’s the rapid trend towards secularization.

#### References

Fung, N. (2017, October 8). Convocation speech changed to be more secular. Retrieved from <https://www.thegatewayonline.ca/2017/10/convocation-speech-changed/>.

Government of Canada. (1982). Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Retrieved from <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/Const/page-15.html>.

# Alberta Sex Positive Centre's Angel Sumka on Alberta

October 14, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Angel Sumka is the President of the Alberta Sex Positive Centre. Here we talk about sex culture in Alberta.*

## **Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is the current sex culture in Alberta?**

**Angel Sumka:** Sex culture in Alberta is a mix of positive and negative. Alberta has a very diverse and rich population when it comes to gender, gender expression, and sexuality, yet we are still the province with the highest increase in cases of syphilis and gonorrhea, which may indicate some sex-negative values related to stigma and sexual risk profiles. That said, Alberta has many sex-positive organizations that provide services, countless groups that meet to discuss sex positive topics or enjoy sex positive entertainment/gatherings, and our universities appear to be working towards supporting consent culture. It is not perfect, but it is exciting to be part of the growth of sex-positive culture in our province!

## **Jacobsen: What was the sex culture in Alberta?**

**Sumka:** That is a very complex question that depends on what we count as sex culture. On the surface, it may seem as if Alberta was a very repressed culture. Our sex education was (and still is to a large extent) lacking in providing accurate and shame-free information to youth, our government was slow to recognize same-sex marriages, and attitudes about sex, sexuality, and gender often seemed to indicate a reticence to acknowledge that sex is about pleasure, that gender is a social construct used to oppress individuals and society in general, and that risk reduction measures are worthy of support. Under that fairly grim surface, however, there is and always has been an active sexual underbelly. Steamworks, for example, has been around for a long time, as have other clubs and organizations that create opportunities for people to explore their sexuality.

## **Jacobsen: What are some ongoing initiatives of the organization regarding positive sex culture?**

**Sumka:** ASPECC has, and continues to, offer workshops, written literature, presentations and gatherings for individuals and groups to learn about sex, sexuality, gender, and alternative lifestyles. We host workshops on bondage, consent, ethical communication for sex, transgender topics, sex-positive parenting -you name it. We are always working on developing our content and facilitating other presenters on topics that are within their expertise/experience. We also host the consensual play space at the Edmonton Taboo show, where attendees can come watch BDSM related demonstrations and learn about the local communities and how consent works within these lifestyles.

## **Jacobsen: What seems like the positive trends for positive sex culture in Alberta?**

**Sumka:** There does seem to be an increase in consent culture, which is very exciting! We are also seeing many changes to our educational system, such as the mandates regarding Gay-Straight Alliances and changes to the sex education curriculum; and increase in organizations that are focusing on supporting persons who face challenges due to sexuality and/or gender, with many addressing the intersectionality of sexual oppression.

**Jacobsen: Would have been some of the bigger successes in the progression of this trend?**

**Sumka:** Some of the successes, as mentioned above are the implementation of GSA's, the protection for children who are gender variant and/or queer, and the development of programs that target homeless youth who are queer. The inclusion of consent and the increased scrutiny that universities are facing is also things to celebrate, although we have a long way to go still.

**Jacobsen: Would have been some honest failures in this movement as well?**

**Sumka:** A huge failure would be the way in which our legal system addresses sexual assault and sexual harassment. Until drastic changes are made to how such cases are handled we are not likely to see a decrease in gender-based intimate violence.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved in terms of donations? How can they volunteer their time and skills?**

**Sumka:** Donations and sponsorship are welcome. If you are interested in sponsoring the community center we are working towards the opening, you can contact us at [info@aspecc.ca](mailto:info@aspecc.ca). Donations can be made through our webstore (see [www.aspecc.ca](http://www.aspecc.ca)). Volunteers are also greatly valued! We are always looking for people to help with a wide variety of projects and tasks. We have a volunteer application on our website or you can email to have one sent to you.

**Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings?**

**Sumka:** Sex positive culture is not about encouraging promiscuity, but about removing the shame from sex, gender, and sexuality. We believe that consensual sexual activity is healthy and that every individual has the right to know about their body and to learn not just about diseases and risks but to learn about pleasure and how to talk about sex in a way that is consensual.

# **Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam) – Founder, Jicho Jipya/Think Anew Tanzania: Living With Religion in Tanzania – Other Countries and Struggles**

**October 16, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

*Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam) founded Jichojipya (meaning with new eye) to "Think Anew". We have talked before about freethought in Tanzania. Here we continue the discussion, other conversation [here](#).*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** We talked about the situation in Tanzania. How are things for surrounding countries? Are the bad parts of religion as prevalent or more prevalent there?

**Nsajigwa:** By religion, we should include African's own traditional beliefs. Now Tanzania borders with 8 countries. Yes, the negatives jump across borders notable witchcraft believe from Zambia in the past, to kill young girls and flay to get the human skin. Albino killing from here got exported to Rwanda, Burundi, and Malawi.

The glamorous flamboyant Preaching pastors termed "Pastorpreneurs" style came all the way from Nigeria West Africa. It is bad in Uganda. Pentecostals speaking in unknown sound evolved following influences from Uganda and Nigeria.

In politics, consulting traditional medicine men during campaigns for election, rampant here got exported elsewhere. President is God's choice, a fallacy that lingers except now in Kenya the high court annulled the results. So that brings contradiction, has God erred this time...?

**Jacobsen:** How do these bad parts influence politics and daily life?

**Nsajigwa:** In politics, it enforces religious-based myth, a fallacy that a President is God's choice in Swahili "Rais ni chaguo la Mungu". It also causes "historicism"- people are made to believe such and such things have never happened, implying (such changes) cannot happen.

In daily life people believe in kismet – fatalism that everything is God's will even to accidents caused by reckless driving. Circles of killings to flay humans for skin, killing the bald-headed all the way to Albino. Hitting people on the head and use the iron rod split with blood to hang on butcher's shops to "attract" customers, killing people with disability who are seemingly successful or influential.

More-so people become gullible to "pastorpreneurs" to believe that just by their praying they can cure diseases instead of sending the sick to hospitals, and there are prayers for one to pass examinations even at higher learning levels!

There is an advertisement for a cure to enhance love magical-wise, also by "Doctors" (diviners) about making one get rich quick, in some cases telling clients to bring parts of human bodies to enhance the combinations. There is Culture of blaming it to an owl as messenger bird of bad omen. Christianity makes people hate snakes seeing it as a symbol of Satan himself, plus Swahili being neo-Islamic culture, there is believe in Jinns.

Furthermore, people believe literally in the miracle of virgin birth, and in the resurrection (in Swahili "Msukule").

There is a misinterpretation of recurrence of incidence in a particular area if accidents happen from time to time in a place, there has to be a vampire kind of ghost there. Just recently people believed there was a big tree that cried with a human voice, oozed blood while being cut to make way for road expansion. The work had to stop to the next day and when eventually it was cut down with many people witnessing afar, its branches suddenly became antidote medicine to cure anything. People believe these things in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of science, computer, internet, and technology!

**Jacobsen: Reflecting on your own locale in Tanzania, what are the impacts on the daily lives of believers? What are the rituals and superstitions they have in their daily lives?**

**Nsajigwa:** Impacts are; believers use sound amplifiers in sermons even at night for the Pentecostals. It causes “noise pollution” tolerated (endured) because it is in the name of God. Even Moslem have adopted that on Fridays and for Muezzins daily.

The faithful are so self – assured thinking because they are on God’s side, therefore, their way is the only right way, unchallenged. By contradiction, they would insist on maintaining our cultural values yet forget even these modern scruples that we cherish today as “ours” came from outside, our very prejudice to say African culture being based on those very holy books from outside Africa, yet still they would be against “western values” meaning secular one’s example on dress code, how women should or shouldn’t wear, this or that being against our (African) ethics, they would argue.

Some are anti secularist by outlook, some are anti-science confusing science as a “western thing” yet using it overwhelmingly in their everyday lives – Phones, Tv, Medication, Transport etc.

Many are against evolution theory that they don’t understand and aren’t ready to know it.

It causes blame game mentality, just looking for someone or something to blame on – be it the devil, snake, women or the West. Some have compartmentalized, they live secular life but becomes religious on Fridays Saturdays and Sundays.

On Rituals, it is Praying constantly as individually and in fellowship, believing prayers answers human wishes even if it’s to the contrary. They blame game others for one’s own problems and incompetence, wishing those others bad, those that they think, more so feel as to be the ones who caused them problems that they are in. It is a witch-hunt mentality. They go around preach threatening people with stories of hellfire, in some cases their prayers ending in ecstatic trances.

On Superstitions, they believe in speaking (while in a trance) an unknown language sounding “abracadabra” as if from Congo. They believe in chasing away evil spirits and jinns, believe in prayers (and pay tithe for) to get employment, promotion in work, getting someone to get married to even as far as winning one’s case in a court of law. They believe in wishful thinking that life is driven by lucky or misfortunes all as ordained by Almighty God. That for anything happening, there are (super)natural forces behind, that holy books (Bible and Koran) have all the answers for any and all human questions and problems, even those of scientific field while some even thinking science is a Europeans “western thing”. There is too much confusion as between modernization and westernization, Africa had “bad bargain” for that. The SWOT Challenge is to modernize our cultures like say how the Japanese did theirs.

**Jacobsen: What do you consider the positives of religion? As a freethinker, it can’t be all bad.**

**Nsajigwa:** It brought modernity or rather came with it, thus services of modern education (on top of African's traditional functional one) that made Africans discover the world beyond their villages, modern medication (hospitals) to cure or just explain scientifically diseases notably malnutrition-based, and for Islam the service of free water as in every mosque there must be water available for ablution. This even today alleviates water supply which is a big problem in cities. Neighbors are assured to get it at the mosque reservoir out of its well once dug. Religion brought fellowship, a sense of "Ummah" for Islam and "Catholicism" loyalty beyond Ethnicity for Christians. It fought to eradicate some kind of (tradition) superstitions example colonial church based schools discouraged practice of female circumcision (FGM) but overtime new kind of superstition, religion-based emerged.

For many religion gives Hope, in the past especially those who joined were the ones being secluded by traditions example women (unlucky), not in marriage, or were in it but childless (seen as worthless). Today for those whom the harsh struggle for the survival of the fittest of modern life has not worked well for them.

**Jacobsen:** How do you cope with the social circle that by definition is much smaller than the religious? It must make a finding for fulfilling conversation difficult at times.

**Nsajigwa:** Yes! Very difficult most of the time. It is hard to reason logically with believers as they have a sense of self-assurance thinking they are right just by using their holy books (however most haven't read the whole of). I developed solitude aspect of life, book reading on philosophy, comparative religions, world history, psychology, sociology, and culture gave me the only company. Libraries became my sanctuary place. A lonely person that became used to this life.

Otherwise a hardworking Teacher, guide, and mentor inspirational to the Youth and kids, jovial, Socratic elenchus, approachable to anyone for any question, Humble, Peaceful, classless, Empiricist, realist. More than books its music that keeps me going, also watching Tv sports soccer being favorite. Likewise, traveling (to learn new things) when a trip arises, and write a story about.

**Jacobsen:** What words best describe your struggle there? What has been your greatest emotional tribulation or trial?

**Nsajigwa:** ENDURANCE describes my struggle. Like a Stoic philosopher, living been misunderstood, what you can't change, you have to endure. I carry with me several bruises first one is to be thought a crazy madman literally, ostracized Spinoza-like but never committed anything negative to law or humanity, then even now. Over years people realized I am just a mentally normal person, possible just more enlightened by book reading, plus a rationalist, ever curious questioning reality to try to seek answers.

Second going to mid-1990s when multiparty came back to Tanzania, I was rounded by Police just because of the high level of discussion I had with my freethinker brother in a public bus while Tour-guiding a visitor. A plain policeman happened to be on that bus. Three days later in town, we were suddenly rounded up, picked in a cab each and send to the police station, searched up and locked. They didn't find anything in our bags, even a match box or a piece of cigarette, non-smokers. They found instead books on Philosophy and comparative religions.

Nevertheless, they locked us without ourselves knowing what the charges were. When our Guarantor came late he could not believe what they wrote as our crime, theft of shoes! No said



he, not those two I know, not even money unless you tell me it is a book that they have taken. After a week-long trauma, we were released as free though nothing as our crime was established in the first place. We never knew what. African state machinery can jail independent thinker to freethinker for any excuse. I am a victim of that.

The third is when I met a Professor of history while a youth, after much discussion to his amazement the sad part came along. He told me I am so impressed that you know all these things by your book reading habit but now realize this, just by being that, you have become dangerous, your very knowing will annoy so many people. This bitter truth shocked me innocently, I only came to understand it along the way, a freethinkers life journey, what an odyssey!

I am someone suffered for living ahead of my time, just by analyzing contextually I see things straight which for others it takes months or years. I am lucky to have met few like-minded, in fact, these are my own students, few that I molded into philosophy in general, and freethinking in particular.

**Jacobsen: Do you think that the number of religious people and the level of religiosity will both decrease in the coming decades for Tanzania?**

**Nsajigwa:** It is tough to forecast based on the experience that during 1960 – 70s it was thought then that the campaign going on to fight against “enemy ignorance” would, by the year 2000 lead to high level of literacy. It surprises that irrationality and gullibility is still high despite education. Someone said it was free education but also free of knowledge too!

So likewise prospects are, religiosity could decrease thanks may be due to the internet that has made it possible to access just by oneself, by one’s own computer or a smartphone, religions being questioned left, right and center, plus being informed Atheists zeitgeist elsewhere asserting itself. This can inspire many others anywhere with doubting mind to questions and possibly end up being nonreligious. By SWOT approach, I see a golden Opportunity than (n)ever before. Thanks to internet connectivity.

However, there must be efforts like ours of Jichojipya to showcase (thus catalyze) the populace to know that even at the local level there are freethinkers individuals, that it’s possible to “live clean”, ethically good, rationally guided without a religion, any.

**Jacobsen: Is religion in Tanzania more about theology or about social cohesion based on non-reality grounded structures of conceiving in the world?**

**Nsajigwa:** It is both more so for the second. The church is powerful theological-wise on what it disseminates each Sunday plus it has several educational institutions that it runs. Mosque exerts quite an influence too. But it’s social cohesion where religion is strong in playing the non-reality of how to conceive the world, as I have explained the impacts of religions to our daily life here. That is a big part, African triple heritage cultural reality on the ground.

**Jacobsen: How can people in the surrounding areas help you out? How can surrounding countries in the African Diaspora help out?**

**Nsajigwa:** First, by people in surrounding areas do you mean my neighborhood? if so they should just be open-minded open-ended, rational and skeptical to any claim, including those of religions. They should question things, everything. They should seek evidence, logical, rational and more so empirically-based.

For surrounding countries bordering Tanzania, they also should foster skepticism outlook likewise, establish Freethinkers Secular Humanist movement at the grassroots. I am aware there are such positive initiatives across.

If by African diaspora you mean Africans of the continent now living overseas? Then Yes if willing to support Motherland's emancipation from the mental slavery of superstitions in any form, including that of religions. If they are for secular and scientific Africa, if they are for STEM projects, if they, in particular, are independent thinkers, Freethinkers, Secular Humanists they should support these efforts to bring about modernization, science-based of our traditions here to match the reality of 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

And if you mean Afro-Americans, yes likewise if they are open-ended Black freethinkers nonbelievers, those free from keeping a blame gaming white man for everything 50 years since civil rights movement, Humanistic to see things beyond either-or black and white. If willing they can help out. In fact, anyone within a human race can help on this. Thanks for the opportunity.

**Jacobsen: You are welcome. Thank you for the opportunity and your time.**

# Meeting with Richard Dawkins and Ex-Muslims – Mohammed Charlie Khadra

October 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** You met Richard Dawkins. Many consider him the most famous atheist of the New Atheist movement. Where did you meet him? What was it like? What did you get to ask him?

**Mohammed Charlie Khadra:** I met Richard Dawkins at the international conference of free expression which was the largest gathering of ex-Muslims in history. It was very brief as people were all over him. I just thanked him for being the spark which leads me to atheism.

**Jacobsen:** When did you become convinced of it? That is atheism.

**Khadra:** It was back in 2012 when I was on the midway between looking into sects and religions were. I started a new path to look into which was: what's goes science say about all of this? Later that year I became an atheist.

We can all agree on one simple idea; no proof of a supernatural deity exists. That's pretty much what we all have in common. Other than that we can't say that we stand for something else although most of us appreciate free speech, science, and human rights.

**Jacobsen:** What are your current tasks and responsibilities in activist work for the non-religious?

**Khadra:** No one can say of at certain tasks or set of ideas that an atheist has. We are left wing and right wing, active and non-, so some choose to be "militant" some might focus on saving those at risk, some choose to just keep it to themselves. What I mean is there are no responsibilities that come with atheism.

**Jacobsen:** What do you see as the next steps for atheism in North America?

**Khadra:** While we win on some grounds and lose in another North America is soon to be a ground to lose in. With the introduction of laws to limit people's rights, Canada and Trump's "protection" of religious "rights", people there are giving up their rights in exchange for peace. What they don't understand, this type of behavior, especially with a fascism, the only result is more rights being asked to be dropped and more lives to be lost if they don't obey.

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

# Interview with Chiedozie Uwakwe on Nigerian Irreligiosity

October 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Chiedozie Uwakwe is from southern Nigeria. Ukwakwe and I talk about irreligiosity in Nigeria.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Regarding family of origin, what are its language, culture, and religious background?

**Chiedozie Uwakwe:** I'm Nigerian, from the Southern part of Nigeria. The first language of my tribe is called the Igbo Language. The name of the tribe is Igbo. So, I'm basically an Igbo guy. Traditionally, we practiced a religion that is grouped under African Traditional Religion, it is a form of Animism, until the British Colonized Nigeria and brought with them Christianity. The Igbo embraced it, so they are more or less a Christian culture now. I was born and brought up a Christian. The traditional culture of the Igbo still reflects the animistic religion of their forebearers. With the land, bodies of water, animals, sky, and sun considered sacred.

**Jacobsen:** Was this religious upbringing a benefit for you? If so, how? Also if in some ways not, how?

**Uwakwe:** I would say the religious upbringing had a few benefits, for example, even though the bible is a poor book on the subject of morality, it gave me my first lessons on morality and I developed from there.

The disadvantage of religious upbringing for me that readily comes to mind is that it made me think that I wasn't at fault for my problems, instead of me taking charge of my problems, it made shift the blame to some nonexistent entity, thereby robbing me of the opportunity to take charge of my life and assume responsibility for my actions and failures. After all, you can always blame it on the devil.

**Jacobsen:** What seems like some pivotal moments in movements towards the reduction in religious belief for you? Why those moments?

**Uwakwe:** Firstly, when I stumbled on books and articles on the history of religions, especially Christianity and Islam, it was nothing like what was written in their holy books, the metamorphosis of religious gods like Yahweh and Allah. How they went from obscure deities to huge forces. That was my first step towards doubt. Secondly, the issue of evil in within the concept of a benevolent and all-powerful god. I couldn't wrap my head around that fact. It just didn't make sense. Thirdly, watching people around me pray for things that didn't come to pass, which is a direct contraindication to what is written in the holy books.

**Jacobsen:** Canadians can live in a cultural bubble. We hold internationalist values often, enshrined in things like the UN Charter, but we live lives high in life quality that can exacerbate our bubble. What should Canadians know about your own society's dabbling in religion, faith, and superstition, and their impacts politics, law, and social interactions in daily life?

**Uwakwe:** I would say my society is largely religious because of the failure of the government and social structures. Religion and superstitions offer a kind of hope and succor that is not

forthcoming from our political structure. So, this has greatly influenced our social relationships and interactions as they are all laced with religion as that is the only system they believe that can't fail us. Since the political structure has made life unbearable for us on earth, there must be some sort of compensation in the afterlife. This has led to so many religious leaders feeding fat off of this false hope.

**Jacobsen: What seem to have been effective methods in combatting religious superstition?**

**Uwakwe:** Awareness campaigns, with increased penetration of the internet, there has been an insane increase in social awareness campaigns on social media especially. Irreligious people have been writing articles, debating on social media and forums, challenging religious superstitions and dogma, debunking and ridiculing them. Those honest enough to recognize a superior argument have been welcoming and they've been supportive.

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

# Bayo Opadeyi on Leaving Religion in Nigeria

October 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How was religion in your family and community growing up?**

**Bayo Opadeyi:** Religion was very important in our home growing up, Catholicism especially. Though my father came from an Anglican/Baptist family, he wasn't much into church going when we were young, and so my mother a staunch Catholic was responsible for our religious education. The Nigerian society is made up of mostly Christians and Muslims, with some who still practice our traditional religions. It would have shocked me as a 10-year-old to hear from someone that there were no gods. A lot of the stories we heard were packed with the supernatural.

**Jacobsen: Did this impact your own view on religion? How so? Also, what were some moments that were crucial for leaving religion?**

**Opadeyi:** Looking at my childhood and my then firm belief in the teachings of the "church", I can empathize with religious people I meet today and understand their visceral reaction when they hear for the first time that some people believe there are no gods. My religious upbringing, I think, has given me that. The seeds of disbelief for me started when I was in my teens and in the middle of an "evangelical" phase. I decided to read the bible from cover to cover but had to pause when I got to 1 Samuel, the story of Saul and his army going to kill all the Amalekites. My 15 yr. old's sensibilities were shocked by the morality of killing children and animals just because, I could not understand how the "loving" god I worshipped would want this, and so I asked older people what they thought. They just beat about the bush and tried unsuccessfully to explain it away. And that was when I realized that the people whom I assumed understood the "faith" were more or less like myself. So why would I accept their views blindly? I started to read the Bible with a pinch of salt from that moment. Another important point was during a vacation we spent with our grandparents, I was going through their library and came across a book by Winwood Reade "The Martyrdom of Man" where he talked about the history of religion. This was the first time I was seeing religion being talked about from a secular, irreverent point of view. And from that moment I was on my way for another 20 years to call myself an atheist.

**Jacobsen: What do you consider the strongest argument against religion and for reason, and for secularism and against theocratic tendencies (implicit or explicit, e.g. in culture and political life, or in law, respectively)?**

**Opadeyi:** I think religion encourages a lot of harmful practices. In the North (of Nigeria), free-speech is often met with mob action that sometimes leads to death or serious injury. Women's rights being trampled upon because some religious book says so. In the South, old women are assaulted on accusations of witchcraft, Mega-church pastors milk their congregation on promises of "divine favor", and people fall into this "magical thinking" mindset that is not very useful for solving problems and planning long-term.

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

# **Moninuola Komolafe on Irreligion: A Personal Narrative of Nigerian Non-Belief**

**October 20, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was religion a part of family life? If so, what was a big moment of awakening and leaving the faith?**

**Moninuola Komolafe:** Religion was a major part of my family especially because my father owns a church. I began participating in three-day fasts, revivals, and vigils when I was barely eight years old.

Occasionally, I had doubts but the turning point came at an outreach my church organized sometime in 2012. About eight of us laid hands on this madman on the street. He appeared healed and we had a crowd behind us chanting and praising Jesus but looking at him, I didn't think he was healed. We later realized this and two of us shipped him out of that community so that our ministry activities could continue because we knew people would question the message if they saw the man we healed roaming the streets. That raised questions that I just couldn't push aside. Why wasn't he healed? Why wouldn't god heal him and convert unbelievers? Are miracles real? If miracles aren't real, isn't the bible just an ordinary book? Can the book be trusted?

I followed this questions and when I got my answers, I realized I no longer believed the Bible and its message.

**Jacobsen: In the surrounding culture, how much did religion determine the style of social and political life? How does it do so today if at all?**

**Komolafe:** Religion influenced impacted almost every aspect of our lives, from proscriptions against alcohol to relationships between people of different religions, to dictating how women should dress and how homes should be run, even sexual relations between unmarried people. It also played a major role on law-making with lawmakers refusing to pass laws on issues where their religious books had opposing views. Today, the influence remains but no longer has a stronghold because people are asking questions and are coming to the realization that times are changing and that some of those practices should become obsolete.

**Jacobsen: What makes for the better arguments for a reason and against faith to you?**

**Komolafe:** Faith, by its very definition, means believing without evidence and because of this, anything, no matter how ludicrous it is, can be believed. Faith in ideas such as demons, demonic oppression, and witches is why a sick person will be dropped at a church instead of the hospital. Faith is why we label any occurrence we do not understand as supernatural and why an innocent child can be labeled a witch and left to starve. Faith in a religious book is a reason for discrimination against people who don't share our beliefs. Faith is why people will adamantly go against facts because it negates the dictates of their religion. Faith is harmful.

The truth, however, is that we do not apply faith to everything. We conduct investigations before moving to new locations. We check if the place is not constantly robbed if there's constant

power supply. We immunize our kids too and not rely on supernatural protection. Why not something that impacts our lives as much as religion?

**Jacobsen: What are some common stories that you hear – over and over again – from those who have lost their faith? In short, what are their reasons for becoming irreligious in your locale?**

**Komolafe:** For those that came out of my kind of setting, the absence of evidence to support the miraculous claims of the bible was a push for them. For others, it was the ridiculous stories of the bible and the disparities with our reality.

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



# First Principles Activism

October 21, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I was reading the news. Something ‘struck’ me. An article by *CBC News* entitled “‘I don’t think it’s fair’: Ontario group pushing to end government funding for Catholic schools” (2017).

The basis appeared something of interest to me, for a decent amount of time now: working from first principles to enact secular change within province and territory, and the nation.

I saw (and see) different means by which to acquire change towards secularism. One is the use of national or provincial documents such as the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Government of Canada, 1982), as the organization is attempting to do in the article.

Another is temporary coalition building. For example, if you look at Humanist Canada, you can find a list of organizations counted as allies, or affiliates:

*The International Humanist and Ethical Union, (IHEU), based in London England with an office at the United Nations.*

*Center For Enquiry, (CFI), based in the US and is represented in multiple Canadian cities.*

*Atheist International & Atheists of America.*

*AHQ our Quebec partners.*

*Secular Ontario.*

*Humanist Perspectives a humanist publication based in Ottawa.*

*Dying With Dignity, Canada.*

*One School System Network, OSSN, an Ontario based organization.*

*Imagine No Religion Conference, INR5, 2015.*

*Ontario Humanist Society, A positive force for Humanism in Ontario.*

*Quinte Secular Humanist Society, QSHA. This is the “freethinking” group started by Bill Broderic many years ago. It is an active and collegial group of friends. (Humanist Canada, 2017).*

I could see this extended between the moderately religious and the stripes of the irreligious to provide a framework for change: said coalition. But the coalition must retain common marks, goals, or targeted objectives.

Those targeted objectives amount to specific, identifiable marks. Those which start small, work into the medium, and then into the larger, e.g. municipal, provincial, and then federal/national, respectively. And why not? It has been the tide of history for this country and for the world, especially the developed world or as countries/nations become more developed.

Women gain rights; minorities gain rights; children gain rights; labor rights become more instantiated; quality of life rises; lifespan and health span rise; education access, completion, and level of final achievement rise; and so on. Also: religiosity declines in raw numbers and level of markers of religious life, and secularism increases.

If activism becomes oriented within this axis, then the tides of history seem easier to grasp, manage, and ride.

Another possibility seems like the utility in the *Freedom of Thought Report* (International Humanist and Ethical Union, 2016a), which contains a section on Canada (International Humanist and Ethical Union, 2016b). These kinds of documents can act as guides as to what inequality exists and then where to acquire the targeted objectives.

That makes temporary coalition building, finding targeted objectives, utilization of robust documents for activism. There does exist such a thing as first principles reasoning, working from the basics and then develop the strategy. It seems robust.

Insofar as activism may contain first principles, the utility in documents capable of the provision of the basic fruits of the secular activist ideals. I would argue for a first principles process: identification of inequality, targeted objective acquisition, examination for coalition need or not, the creation of or building on prior successes, and persistence.

The documents can help find the inequality, or the locale or nation's controversial discourse in a relevant secular domain. Basing decision of the targeted objectives on the available resources for those inequalities to be reduced or eliminated, the determination of the need for assistance, or not, given the magnitude of the problem. Then the creation of successes and persistence in the activism, or looking to prior successes to simply make the job easier.

And in Canada, we have the open, easy capability to make those secular changes, not for superiority but for equality.

#### References

CBC News. (2017, October 19). 'I don't think it's fair': Ontario group pushing to end government funding for Catholic schools. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/beta/news/canada/toronto/ontario-catholic-funding-1.4361542>.

Government of Canada. (1982). Constitution Act, 1982. Retrieved from <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/Const/page-15.html>.

Humanist Canada. (2017). Vision, Mission, and Values. Retrieved from <https://www.humanistcanada.ca/about/vision-mission-and-values>.

International Humanist and Ethical Union. (2016a). The Freedom of Thought Report. Retrieved from <http://freethoughtreport.com/countries/>.

International Humanist and Ethical Union. (2016b). The Freedom of Thought Report: Canada. Retrieved from <http://freethoughtreport.com/countries/americas-northern-america/canada/>.

# Life and the Possibility of Absolute Finality with Terry Sanderson

October 23, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Terry Sanderson, the President of the National Secular Society – a British campaigning organization that promotes secularism and separation of Church and State. He has cancer. Here we talk about atheism in the 21st century, the meaning of life, the possibility of death, absolute finality, and more. Prior interview [here](#).*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What does being an atheist in the 21st century mean to you?**

**Terry Sanderson:** It means nothing more to me than a lack of belief in anything supernatural. There is no such thing as “the supernatural”. Anything that occurs is, by definition, natural. There is nothing outside those bounds, no ghosts, no gods, no miracles. That is all atheism means to me – add other things – humanism, secularism – and it becomes something else.

**Jacobsen:** You have cancer. You are about to enter major surgery. What does this make you think about the meaning of life?

**Sanderson:** Life has no meaning beyond itself. People who cling to religion are appalled by such thinking and regard it as sad. But trying to ponder the supposed “Big Questions” – things like “Why are we here?” “What comes after”, “What is the meaning of life?” is a complete waste of time. These questions have no answers so why ask them? Or as Gertrude Stein put it, “The answer is: there is no answer.”

Why torment yourself with such stuff? Get on with life, enjoy your senses – have good food, good wine, good sex. Our senses are all that we have to tell us we are alive. Make the most of them.

**Jacobsen:** How do you feel about the possibility of death?

**Sanderson:** Death is not a possibility, it is an inevitability – for everyone, no exceptions. The fact that my own end may be arriving sooner than I had anticipated is disappointing only in the sense that life is good and I want more of it.

I have had seventy years of perfect health, which I have taken for granted. Such good fortune can give one a misguided sense of immortality – nasty things happen to other people, not to me. But when the reality of life’s conclusion suddenly presents itself, you start to think – sometimes resentfully – about the things you will miss by going too soon.

My mother lived until she was 97 and by that stage, with rapidly fading senses and physical decline, she longed for death and welcomed it when it came. I watched her take her last breath and she struggled to cling on, but she was under the influence of morphine so it might just have been her body’s natural instinct to survive. If she had survived, she would have cursed the doctors for reviving her. So death is not always the terrible enemy, sometimes it is a welcome friend.

One wise philosopher once said, “The living are just the dead taking a vacation” and I find that comforting. The eternity of non-existence before I was born was a state of complete unawareness

for me. That is the state I expect to return to when I am dead. No need to fear non-existence (although for some Christians non-existence is the very definition of hell, a denial of the time they had expected to spend with their god).

**Jacobsen: How important does the potential for the reality of death, of absolute finality, make friends and family and their love for you?**

**Sanderson:** Love is a wonderful thing. It is life's grandest experience. Naturally, we want our loved ones to stay with us, not to die, and we mourn when they are gone. But the pain of loss is what we must endure in order to experience love. There is no escape. I don't want my partner to hurt when I am gone, but he will. We have spent half a lifetime together and when that comes to an end it will be hard. Bereavement seems unendurable, but it can be endured. I hope that those who have loved me will remember me with affection. That's the best I can hope for.

**Jacobsen: If you could advise youth on making the most of life, and fighting for the rights of others in the livelihood of others, what would you recommend for them? Even though they may not know the most about the world, this might help some who are reading this find some guidance from an elder.**

**Sanderson:** I hesitate to give advice because life as a young person is very different to life in later years. When I think back to my own youth, it is like looking at another person. What I thought then has changed several times. And we are all molded by our genes and our upbringing, so there is no formula that fits everyone.

I was lucky to have a childhood filled with love and I have always wanted to be like my mother, who was gentle, tolerant, forgiving, understanding and affectionate.

I want people to be happy and to accept them as they are in all their irritating variety. I try not to make sweeping statements about groups and to judge everyone on their individual qualities. If you can learn to do that, you will have a happy life filled with people who love you because you love them for who they are, not for any perceived racial or religious identity or ideological label that they put on themselves or have put on them by others.

Life is about fun, too. Fun is not trivial, never think that. It is about being happy. As the great American atheist Robert Ingersoll said, "Happiness is the only good, the time to be happy is now, the place to be happy is here and the way to be happy is to make others so."

So, have fun, be silly if you feel like it (I love being silly) and don't make cruel or humiliating jokes about other people, however much you think they deserve it.

**Jacobsen: The United Kingdom is much more secular and atheistic than Canada. What is one thing about the United Kingdom that Canadians should know but potentially don't with regards to lack of faith?**

**Sanderson:** Our histories are very different and despite the long centuries of religious dominance, I have a feeling that the British have never really been very religious, not in their hearts.

If you read some Victorian novelists – like Anthony Trollope – you will see that even in those days, when the Church was very powerful in politics and society, there was still a lot of skepticism.

The Church has been cruel and greedy all along the way, and people know that, but until they got organized there was no way for ordinary folk to resist. Gradually the Church's powers have been reduced until now it is regarded by most people as a complete irrelevance.

I don't think there is much that secular or atheist groups can do to persuade people out of religion. I'm not sure that we should even try. For some people it is comforting and it brings the community into their lives. Such people will have to find their own way out of it.

The churches seem to be doing a good job of bringing themselves into disrepute by being so completely irrational and out of step with modern life. They take themselves so seriously and some religious people actually believe all the self-important bilge that they spout. Fervent religionists will have great difficulty seeing how fatuous their beliefs are. They have devoted their lives to nonsense and admitting it is next to impossible. That's their problem.

It is when they demand that we all respect faith that I get annoyed. I don't respect it. I never have. Why would anyone respect something so crazy? In some parts of the world, though, people are forced to respect religion or risk death. Blasphemy laws illustrate just how weak religion really is at its foundations. When respect has to be enforced by threats and menaces, you know that it isn't deserved.

We should just keep on encouraging religious leaders to make stupid statements. We should continue pointing out how dangerous religious identities can be. It's a gradual process, but it is gaining momentum every day.

**Jacobsen:** In the latter part of life, you have experienced quite a lot. You've experienced a lot of abuse. But you have come out an important voice. How do you persevere in light of all of the pain inflicted on you simply for being different and speaking your mind for the rights of others?

**Sanderson:** I have never really been affected by abuse and only on a few occasions have I been threatened with physical violence.

I have love all around me from my friends and family, and I know that I can always retire to the safety of my home where warm hearts are waiting. Surround yourself with supportive friends and no amount of abuse will then penetrate.

If you see a glaring injustice (as I did with the treatment of my fellow LGBT people back in the 1970s and 80s) and you want to challenge it, then there is no easy way to do it. You just have to do your best, campaign as hard as you can and keep on going in the face of setbacks.

There may be people telling you that what you are doing is wrong, that you don't understand the issues, but don't take notice of that. If your conscience tells you that you are doing the right thing, something that will improve the lot of others and harm no-one, then press on despite opposition.

**Jacobsen:** What have been the bigger changes away from religion in the UK?

**Sanderson:** Gods are no longer the most powerful influence in this country, as they have been in the past. People will claim to believe in "something greater than themselves" but pressed about what precisely they mean, it is soon apparent they don't believe any religious claims.

Most religion-inspired legislation has been repealed – abortion is no longer illegal, homosexuality has been decriminalized, family planning is easily available. The churches have

had to adjust to all these changes, but each one of them reduces their influence a bit more. Every reform secularises the nation further. Education and easy communication have also weakened the grip of superstitious thinking.

Religion is dying in the West, in Islamic countries, though, its baleful influence continues to grow. People in poverty often turn to religion as their only comfort and solace. It's understandable. But one day they, too, may achieve the affluence enjoyed by the West and be educated without indoctrination. Then that they will have the luxury of being able to reject the religious props that seem so important when they have nothing else. They will, as in the West, abandon beliefs that ultimately bring them so much misery. It is then that religion will collapse once and for all.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Terry, I wish you the best in recovery and good health.**

# License and Copyright

## License



*In-Sight Publishing* by Scott Douglas Jacobsen is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Based on a work at [www.canadianatheist.com](http://www.canadianatheist.com).

## Copyright

© 2012-2019 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen and *In-Sight Publishing* 2012-2019. Unauthorized use and/or duplication of this material without express and written permission from this site's author and/or owner is strictly prohibited. Excerpts and links may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to Scott Douglas Jacobsen and *In-Sight Publishing* with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.