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Scott

By the Grace of the Godless with Professor David Orenstein

October 23, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I spoke with Dr. David Orenstein, Professor of Anthropology at the City University of New York, and author of "Godless Grace: How Nonbelievers are making the world safer, richer and kinder."

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's cover a little of your brief background. What was faith in your family, community and, subsequently, to yourself?

David Orenstein: It is a great question. I really grew up very secular. My family members were believers, but they never pushed faith on me or my sisters. I was Bar Mitzvah'd, but it was more of a social event than a need to be recognized by God or the State or something like that.

I don't think my family was very happy when I came out an atheist and I came out an atheist at a very young age. Not full well knowing what that implies in terms of philosophical belief and that stuff, I was simply not a believer in the divine.

While my parents specifically were believers, we didn't subscribe to any faith tradition, really. I always tell people, "I see myself as a cultural Jew." If you grow up in New York City and in Brooklyn, from my generation and perspective, I am of the Jew from the mold of Woody Allen or Carl Sagan, very into arts and culture and open to things.

I always surrounded myself with people of that perspective.

Jacobsen: You wrote *Godless Grace*. How did that background influence it?

Orenstein: *Godless Grace* was almost a catalyst for something that Christopher Hitchens always used to say, 'Tell me something a religious person can do that an atheist cannot.' One is, "Well, we can't create fault lines." [Laughing]

But there was always this position and maybe it is in religious marketing as well that, "You can only be good with God." Knowing my personal history as a nonbeliever, knowing that I always felt that my humanity came before any faith doctrine, I knew that there would be many other people out there without faith that do good for the sake of goodness and human empathy.

I started writing this work as an ethnography. I am an anthropologist. I looked to people who I knew in the nonfaith community and through tons of introductions to other people, my co-author, Linda Blaikie and I were able to put together a book of interviews of people who are doing wonderful human and civil rights work as well as environmental justice work around the world.

They're really doing the goodwill and the good work of healing the environment, and helping people who don't have, or are speaking out for human rights and against violence. My goal was to use this book, to use those stories, that atheists are not the bogeyman and bogeywoman that a lot of religious people like to paint us as.

I wanted to move the conversation away from the ideas that nonbelievers are intellectually vapid, morally bankrupt or even physically violent people and that being without God meant we must be all murderers. No, not only can we live a moral and just life without faith, but we can do it

one step better because we're not doing it to please anyone *per se* but for the love and sake of humanity – knowing we have only 85 years on the earth for better or worse.

In essence, that if we don't speak up now for our rights no one else will and that our nonbelief activism and humanitarian work can build a better world. A just world, a world of human rights, a world of environmental justice, things that are equalized not in the name of the Lord but in the name of Humanity.

Jacobsen: If you look at the landscape of those who lack a formal faith, of those who lack a religion, in other words, it is a rapidly growing population, very rapid. What can organizations do or temporary coalitions of people to accommodate this rapidly growing population who are often very young – 18-35?

Orenstein: I think there are a lot of really good things being done, because in order to have a supportive community we have to transfer our culture and values to the next generation. We need to have different types of leadership within all of our non-theist organizations now.

We can have thought leaders. I consider myself a thought leader. I write. I do public speaking. I connect other people. Then there are boots-on-the-ground activists. Those are the people in my book. Then there are the people who don't have the time to be activists, but they can support our organizations with finances. There shouldn't be one way anyone is told is the right way to contribute to the movement.

Also, we certainly have to lead by humanist, atheist and secularist example. For example, what comes out of Camp Quest, the secular summer camps, is one generation wanting the next generation to have a secular experience and be together in their youth. This really does build the next generation of leaders.

On college campuses, even in New York City, you would be surprised at the number of students who think, "I don't really believe what my parents believe. But I'm too shy or afraid to say anything."

I have had students come to speak to me privately about this. It is about giving counsel as well. It is also about supporting student organizations in high school and even in middle school. Downwards, it is making sure all of the local chapters of national organizations have at least some element of a young person's having the opportunity to gather at least once a month.

That's the wonderful thing about technology like YouTube and Meetup. People can get together, express themselves, and see that they are not alone. It is important because we are not a monolithic group. People my age or people who are even Baby Boomers don't have the same needs as atheists or humanists who are 20-somethings.

We are different stages of our lives. So if we only program for people who are only of a certain ethnic group, or a certain age group typically, then you will not get the next generation of activist leaders every organization needs to move into the future.

If you are not building the next generation of leadership you are not making the next link in the chain and whatever good you've done won't be there for the future. We must pass the baton onto someone. Or, let me put this in evolutionary terms, Extinction is forever! It also means you've got to let go as to what you see as the priorities because the next generations coming up might see things very differently.

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

In the Heart of the Catholic Education Trans Controversy – Anonymous Interview with Trans Child Mother

October 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What were some of the first moments of strange responses from the school and the community, if any, about the young trans student, your child?

Mother of Trans Child: There were no strange responses from the community at all. Her friends thought nothing of her living as her authentic self and their parents were all very supportive. The strange response was from the school admin itself. We first had a meeting in January where an unnecessary number of people were in attendance, including a priest.

The biggest resistance we received from the school was that what washroom she would use. I insisted on the female washroom and that was declined. It was then determined by the school that a single stall washroom would be deemed the “everyone washroom” all the kids in the school had the option of using what washroom they wanted the gendered washroom or the “everyone washroom”. My daughter’s choice was taken away and she was required to use the “everyone washroom only”. When I pressed about this, I was given reasons such as:

It violates the rights of the “real girls.”

There are no doors on the stalls in some schools, so she wants to gain access to the girls.

It’s not segregation to force one student into a separate washroom. (Not only was she forced, she required an escort to attend the washroom with her. This was one of two of her closest friends).

This, of course, is the *Coles Notes* version of event... we could write a book with everything that has transpired over the last three and a half years.

Jacobsen: How did this become a ‘flash-point’ issue with the Catholic school system in that sector of the province?

Mother of Trans Child: After much debate between the school and I, and when they made their decision final to only allow her to use the “everyone washroom,” I went to the media as I was not going to allow my child to be treated differently. This is when one of the trustee’s, Patricia Grell, learned what was really going on in the school system. She came out confirming that my daughter should be able to use the female washroom. The school board and admin’s response was terrible citing such things as ‘God chooses the gender not the person’. After public criticism, my daughter was “granted permission” to use the female washroom. The story really blew up in September of 2015. There was a school board meeting that went astray. The meeting was to implement a policy allowing transgender students to use the washroom of the gender they identify with. This was truly one of the most disgusting displays of human behavior I have ever seen. It was this meeting that made the story international news.

Jacobsen: What were the feelings of your child, if I may ask, as well as yourself based on the reactions of the hierarchs in the school system and the publicity in the media over it? What has been the most hopeful, as well as difficult, part of the situation?

Mother of Trans Child: At the time my daughter was only 6 just turned 7, so her and her friends did not have access to media outlets and were not aware of what was truly happening. She knew that she was not “allowed” to use the female washroom and couldn’t understand why. Here I am trying to tell her, she is normal and there is nothing wrong with her and her response was, ‘Why then am I not allowed to use the girl’s washroom?’. She was confused on that part; when she was ‘granted permission’ to use the female washroom, she was elated. She was getting to truly live as her authentic self. It’s truly been amazing to witness.

My feelings are a different story, lol. I was sad that a faith-based group would be so quick to judge and discriminate. That sadness turned into disbelief witnessing the corruption in the Catholic faith and listening to the accusations made about myself by the school administration (child abuse, money hungry, being divorced, and wanting a daughter so forcing her to do this). That sadness is now just disgust, how such bigoted individuals are allowed to teach and lead children is beyond me. Time, and time, again, we have seen the arrogance and disregard this system has for LGBTQ children as well as the Education Act. Yet, nothing is being done by our government to correct this.

There have been hopeful parts of this. It has been the people that I have met through this process. Some of my closest friends are my friends because of my amazing daughter. The most difficult part is now I suffer from bad anxiety as a result of the treatment by the school board. I find it hard to socialize and speak to people due to the anxiety I now have as a result of the last three and a half years of dealing with this. I truly understand why we are the first family to have filed a complaint against the Catholic school system in regards to this topic. They will do everything to attempt to beat a person down to the point where they just switch to the public system.

Jacobsen: Who were some faithful allies for the family?

Mother of Trans Child: First and foremost, Patricia Grell, she risked everything for a little girl she had never even met. She embodied what it meant to be a “good Christian.” She saw a person being hurt and accepted that person as they were. She would not and has not stopped fighting for my daughter. I know how difficult it was for me. I cannot even imagine having to work with those people and deal with that day in and day out. Grell truly is my family’s guardian angel.

Thomas Lukaszuk is also another big ally for us; I brought him the situation just before the election happened. While working on his campaign, he still advocated for my child. After the election, and when he had no vested interest, he still continued to advocate for her.

The former director of the Pride Centre Micky Wilson, who is now one of my closest friends, has always been willing speak to anyone who seeks understanding on this topic.

Dr. Justin Petryk and Dr. Lorne Warneke are also huge allies, and then many friends and family as well.

Jacobsen: What do you think should be done moving forward?

Mother of Trans Child: Moving forward, I think the government needs to take a more aggressive approach. To date, they have had consultations and conversations. However, the Catholic system still finds ways to challenge the authority. They truly believe that religion is above basic human rights and have shown that they do not have the best interest of the child at hand. The Minister of Education needs to amend the Education Act to outline any confusion the Catholic school board and any religious figure may have about human rights. One might say well that’s is what the Human Rights Act is for... my response is, “Yes, I agree. However, the school

system keeps referencing the School Canon Law, which is tied into the Education Act. There is no harm in having it (human rights) outlined in more than one place.”

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts?

Mother of Trans Child: I just truly hope that the NDP step up and act as they promised they would. So far there has been nothing up empty threats by the government. Now, with a new school board and trustees pledging their responsibility to the archbishop rather than the students, we are going to need more than just words. We see the arrogance as recently as this week; after the minister has said, “No,” to a Catholic teaching sexual education program. A release of said program was still leaked. This type of teaching is extremely harmful to an already vulnerable group of children.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time to share your story.

Speaking of One School System for All: What About One Sexual Education Curriculum?

October 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

There has been discussion over a long time with some ‘flash-points’ about one publicly-funded education system in Canada. Organizations such as Civil Rights in Public Education (CRIPE), One Public Education Now (OPEN), One Public School System for Ontario, One School System, OneSystemSask, and others, presumably (CRIPE, 2017a; OPEN, 2017; One Public System, 2017; One School System, 2017; OneSystemSask, 2017).

Even with a brief scan of some articles, it continues to be a topic of interest to the general Canadian public, active members at any rate (Gee, 2017; Pascal; 2014; Emann, 2016; Brown, 2017; Mang, 2010; Ostroff, 2016; Roden, 2017; French, 2017a; Medicine Hat News, 2017; Schuklenk, 2014; Ramsay, 2017).

The call comes from the desire for one public education system for all. A recent news item talked about the proposal from the publicly-funded Catholic education school system for a separate, not only school system but, sexual education curriculum.

Intriguing, at a minimum.

As reported by the Edmonton Journal Editorial Board (2017), a publicly-funded Catholic school system set of superintendents have been developing, in essence proposing, a sex-education curriculum in parallel to the current one in the publicly-funded schools. In the development of a separate sexual education curriculum, the implicit message seems to be that the current one is wrong or flawed in some fundamental ways – enough to justify, to the Catholic superintendents, the need for an entire overhaul and proposal of another one.

The one in development by the superintendents would stand in the place of the provincial health and wellness curriculum. The provincial government “rejected the request to fund its development but the project is still going ahead in hopes the province will agree to it” (Ibid.).

That hope is a faith, for sure.

Granted, the Alberta Act of 1905 (Government of the Province of Alberta, 1905) provides the privilege to one religion, the Roman Catholic Church, to form a separate publicly-funded school board; also, apparently, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario fully fund a Catholic separate school system (Edmonton Journal Editorial Board, 2017). But should this separate system exist in the first place? Roman Catholicism is the dominant faith in the country. It has declined in dominance over decades.

1905 onwards, these were the times of its dominance, the Residential School System, and so on. I will grant, in the discussion, ignoring the historical over one century-long series of crimes by the Roman Catholic Church against the Indigenous populations within the borders demarcating Canada.

Nonetheless, one-quarter of the Canadian general public identify with no religion (Statistics Canada, 2017). Only ~39% of the Canadian population identifies as Roman Catholic, so a publicly-funded separate religiously-based education system based on only 39% of the

population, in a country with an increasing number of people lacking formal religious belief or have no religious affiliation (Ibid.).¹ Does this move against the larger demographics, something like a tacit or implied will, of the people in our democracy?

Possibly, almost certainly.

Aside from the apparently outdated reasons for a separate school system, misalignment with the demographics of the country – or the desires of the general population for a single publicly-funded education system (as apparently found by Civil Rights in Public Education with about 54% of the public wanting a single publicly-funded education system), what is the justification for the difference from the provincial health and wellness curriculum in the separate, religious sexual education curriculum from the Roman Catholic superintendents in development (CRIPE, 2017b)?

The Catholic School Superintendents found the future sex-ed lessons “problematic” (Edmonton Journal Editorial Board, 2017). That comes out as one reason. The provincial health and wellness curriculum will include the following: “promotion of homosexual relationships and lifestyles, teaching of gender identity as disassociated from biological sex, masturbation and anal and oral sex” (Ibid.).

Those come out as others: disagreement with Roman Catholic morays, norms, and theology.

David Eggen, Education Minister, rejected the substituted curriculum as an idea. Eggen said, “I can assure Albertans that, under our government, any curriculum changes will be inclusive of all students — no matter their gender identity or sexual orientation.”

All schools in the province of Alberta *must* follow the universal program of study set out by the Government of Alberta, including Roman Catholic educational institutions. One curriculum for all. I love the statement of the Edmonton Journal Editorial Board:

It makes no difference that it's the forthcoming provincial human sexuality curriculum that the Catholic superintendents want to replace with their own. Whether it's math, language arts, social studies or sex education, the principle is the same: there is one curriculum for all. In the case of sex education, that concept is particularly important.

The point of including human sexuality in the curriculum is to ensure that children get accurate knowledge and respectful instruction on a subject matter historically fraught with misinformation, angst and stigma. (Ibid.)

This becomes a subset in the national discourse about separate educational curricula and institutions with the preferential treatment of one authority structure grounded in faith apart from the general public even as most of the general public do not identify as that faith, nor do they likely, as a simple majority, want a separate publicly-funded school system.

A discourse on one publicly-funded sexual education curriculum. As Eggen stated, and as others have echoed, such as Janet French, Alberta Premier Rachel Notley, President of Alberta Teachers' Association Local 80 for Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools Brice Unland, Alberta Teachers' Association Spokesperson Jonathan Teghtmeyer, a spokesperson on behalf of the Red Deer-based Trans and Non-binary Aid Society (TANAS), Red Deer Public Schools Trustee Dianne Macaulay (who has been arguing for one public education system), Alberta Liberal Leader David Khan, Luke Fevin of Edmonton Atheists and A PUPIL, and others probably, a single publicly-funded secular school system is needed and the proposal for an alternate Roman

Catholic sexual education curriculum is “completely unacceptable” (French, 2017b; The Canadian Press, 2017; Hall, 2017; Simons, 2017; Franklin, 2017).

Not only in Alberta, but nationally: we can make the change too.

But it'll take work, not hope.

¹12,810,705/32,852,320 or Catholic/all others equals 38.9% or ~39%. Statistics Canada. (2017, February 14). 2011 National Household Survey: Data tables. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=0&PID=105399&PRID=0&PTYPE=105277&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2013&THEME=95&VID=0>.

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On the Periphery of Bill 62, Quebec National Assembly's Crucifix

October 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Aside from governments telling women what they can wear and can't wear around the world, minor political activist efforts come in at a consistent pace, on the periphery of the news cycle. Some even have sole article reportage (Peritz, 2017).

As noted in the *Freedom of Thought Report* from the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), Canada has symbolic inequality with preferential treatment with explicit religious symbols – some of the most important in this case – in the Quebec National Assembly (IHEU, 2016). In the section called Provincial Privileges, it states in full:

A crucifix hangs at the National Assembly of Quebec, right above the Speaker seat, and protocol rules give higher ranking to Catholic prelates than to elected ministers. Buildings used for worship or other religious purpose in Quebec are taxed at a much lower rate than others.

Also in Quebec, the mandatory course on "Ethics and Religious Cultures" is supposed to give all primary and secondary schoolchildren an understanding of the main religions. However the term "Atheist" was deemed to be too "negative" to be included in the course. (Ibid.)

The symbol has been "thrust into the centre of the province's roiling debate over faith and state secularism" (Peritz, 2017). This is about symbol and reality at the same time, which has some humor to it. As talked about in *First Principles Activism* – how lovely, I quote and reference myself, (Jacobsen, 2017) some documents can help guide activism, even political forms of it. These start small and become big. This seems symbolic: small.

As has been asked before by others, in a passive tone, is the government – municipal, provincial, territorial, or federal – neutral on matters of faith? Matters in the broad sense, e.g., symbolic and political matters. The question arises for the neutrality of the government in the context of normal political life in Canada. How would one of the non-faith individuals or faithful individuals feel about unequal representation in the Quebec National Assembly?

Now, those without a formal religion tend to lack religious symbols. That leaves two options and one equal option. Either all religious symbols permitted or none: if all, then non-faith lacks representation, so leads to inequality; if none, then non-faith and faith alike lack representation, so equality via neutrality. The government as neutral creates equality. The government as all in on religion makes for inequality for the irreligious; the government pro only one religion becomes unequal too, to all other religious and irreligion

I, as I assume you as well, would want government as neutral, in the interpretation of government out of matters of faith altogether: true secularism with separation between places of worship, symbols, rituals, and so on, and the government.

"Now it's time to talk about the apparent secular nature of the most important institution of Quebec democracy, the National Assembly...For us, there's something profoundly contradictory

in the fact we've been debating secularism all these years without having the political courage to take action on the crucifix," Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, an MNA with Québec Solidaire said (Peritz, 2017).

Some claim the crucifix unfairly targets faiths such as Islam, minority faiths. In short, government pro one faith or all other faiths, or lack thereof.

It is past 1936, when the Christian or Roman Catholic symbol was installed, and the Quiet Revolution happened and the province secularized. The province remains mostly Catholic, but if many are not – either through adherence to no formal religion or another formal religion – then the fair option is to remove the object because one main argument is that it's a representation of all Quebecers.

If many aren't, then that's false. It's a symbol of the majority of Quebecers harking back to the time when only Roman Catholic Christians could settle in New France. A colony, mind you, that was well-known for slavery in this country of both Indigenous peoples and blacks (Henry, 2017). Christian European-Canadian slave owners of Indigenous peoples, the Pawnee Nation, and blacks. Do we want to represent this as a heritage as well in the Quebec National Assembly? If not, while still wanting the crucifix up, does this mean only the positives of one colonial religion become represented?

It seems more reasonable to remove it:

The motion by the left-leaning Québec Solidaire to debate the removal of the crucifix requires the support of the governing Liberals to move ahead. The main two opposition parties, the Parti Québécois and Coalition Avenir Québec, support the motion. The PQ says that if it were in government and all parties agreed, it would be open to removing the crucifix. The CAQ says it is open to discussing the issue, although its historic position is to leave the crucifix. (Peritz, 2017)

This remains one small arena for political activism for secularism. What about religion as an exemption to anti-hate speech legislation? What about the blasphemy law? What about the wedding licenses for humanists? How about interpretations of "sincere beliefs" and "reasonable accommodations"? How about Catholic school privileges? Or the anti-GSA, or Gay-Straight Alliances, activities of some Catholic education? Or even the big symbol with the Preamble to the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* talking about the "supremacy of God"?

All of these are subject to question and secularization. The crucifix as wholly inappropriate could be a signal to activists across the country for further secular activism. It seems reasonable to me. I would support it.

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Conversation with Mark A. Gibbs – Managing Editor, Canadian Atheist

October 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Mark A. Gibbs is the managing editor (my boss) and contributor to Canadian Atheist. He's a big deal. Here we talk about him!

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was there much religion in family upbringing?

Mark A. Gibbs: My relationship with religion growing up was peculiar.

Where I grew up, Christianity was the only game in town, and it was *everywhere*. Every day at school we said prayers at morning assembly, and there were mandatory religious studies – read that as “Christian indoctrination” – classes. And they weren’t just for show; people *really* believed. I started a band at school with my friends, and the music teachers actually arranged an intervention to warn us about demonic influences in rock music. My closest friends growing up were a family of American missionaries, and I went to weekly Bible studies with the parents for many, many years. I still have the old Bible I used to have to carry around regularly, adorned with *Transformers* stickers.

But within my immediate family, there was virtually no consideration of religion. I was baptized *twice* within weeks, in two different Christian sects, to satisfy the two branches of the family – that should illustrate how important religion was to the people around us, while at the same time how *unimportant* it was to my parents. I didn’t even learn my mother was atheist until after she died. Religion was simply never discussed, neither positively nor negatively. It was just something that other people did; it was their “thing”, and that was fine.

My parents just didn’t care about religion. They’d support anyone who needed it. When I was a kid, we actually had people stay with us who had been “disfellowshipped” from the Brethren – they’d been kicked out of the Church and lost their friends, their families, their jobs... everything. My parents let them stay with us until they got back on their feet in secular society. On the other hand, my parents *also* helped people who were recovering drug addicts who were trying to put together a Christian recovery ministry. Whether it was helping people *start* a ministry or escape from one, all that mattered was that people needed help.

In fact, my brother went through a phase where he was very seriously considering going to seminary and becoming a priest, and my parents gave him their full support, even going so far as to arrange interviews with ordained clergy to talk about what the job was like... and then a few years later that same brother was playing bass in a heavy metal band with Satanic imagery, and my parents were totally supportive of that, too, with my dad teaching him metal licks on the guitar and lending equipment. Whether it was religion or irreligion, my parents just didn’t care.

Jacobsen: Was the part of Canada in which you grew up religious or more irreligious than the national average?

Gibbs: Most of my growing up was in Barbados. It’s hard for me to measure how religious the areas of Canada I’ve lived in were compared to the Canadian average, because my own

impressions are spoiled by my Bajan experience. I don't think *anywhere* in Canada is even *remotely* as religious as Barbados.

Jacobsen: How did you become formal irreligious, an atheist, in Canada?

Gibbs: I was born an atheist, and never spoiled. But for most of my life I identified as “Anglican”. I don't know if ever even set foot in an Anglican church, and I couldn't even tell you what the uniquely Anglican tenets are. But I needed to call myself *something*, and the only things I knew from growing up were Christian denominations, so I figured I had to be one of them. Wasn't Catholic, didn't seem to be Baptist, and so on; I eventually narrowed it down to Anglican just by process of elimination.

I don't think my transition to explicitly atheist was something that happened in a single event. In university I got involved with a number of social justice groups of various stripes, and I guess I realized over time that they were *all* struggling against religious oppression in different ways. Religious groups just never seemed to be on the side of right. So somewhere along the way I decided that I couldn't keep identifying myself with organizations and beliefs that were so intolerant, irrational, and odious, so I stopped calling myself “Anglican”. That was *just* before the rise of New Atheism, so I think I called myself “agnostic” for a while before the New Atheists inspired me to start using the label “atheist”.

Jacobsen: What is your best argument for irreligion?

Gibbs: The *best* argument for irreligion is simply parsimony – Ockham's Razor: there's no evidence for religious claims, so there's no reason to believe them.

By my *favourite* argument for irreligion is the moral argument, based on William Kingdon Clifford's essay “The Ethics of Belief”. The idea is that it's actually wrong – *morally* wrong – to believe things without evidence. I don't buy the argument *completely*, but up to a point it's hard to argue against. Ockham's Razor can only tell you that faith is unnecessary; Clifford shows you that it's outright immoral.

Jacobsen: What is the long-term future, say 50 years, of religion in Canada?

Gibbs: I think the future is very bright! Assuming nothing globally catastrophic happens, religious influence will continue to fade. I doubt religion will be *completely* eliminated from Canada in any foreseeable future, but we'll probably come to a time where it's so niche that it won't have any impact on most Canadians' lives. If I had to speculate, I'd say that fifty years from now we'll have a few provinces with more than half the population having no religion, and a couple of provinces with atheist premiers. (An atheist Prime Minister? *Possible*, but the odds are just slightly against.)

Jacobsen: What is its near-term future?

Gibbs: I don't see any major changes in the short term. We're making such good progress, both socially and legally, that it's in our best interests to just let things continue to advance at the current pace. It's probably unsatisfying for some atheists to have such gradual improvement, as opposed to the rather rapid social progress made by other groups, like LGBT people. But moving gradually means we don't have to face the kind of active hostility and opposition those other movements face. Instead, every time we win a new battle it sorta slips just under the radar and just becomes “normal” before the haters even realize we've made progress.

The other problem with trying to push too hard too fast is that we might get careless and swing the pendulum of injustice the other way. Right now we're (mostly) on the side of right, fighting against religious oppression... but if we're not careful we could start promoting policies that change the dynamic to where nonbelievers are actually the ones doing the oppressing of believers. There are already worrying signs of that happening in other countries, and even hints of it here. We need to make sure that we're fighting for our own fundamental rights and for equality... not fighting to take away fundamental rights from believers.

Jacobsen: Why did you begin work through Canadian Atheist?

Gibbs: I started out as a commenter taking issue with some of the things being said on CA. This was just about the time that the Québec *Charter of Values* was first being introduced, and I was appalled by some of the reactionary and downright irrational arguments being offered in support of it. I challenged the rhetoric, and that caught the eye of the managing editor at the time. I was already writing for a couple of other sites at the time, and I was really stoked to be able to contribute to CA.

Jacobsen: What things do you do for it?

Gibbs: As managing editor of *Canadian Atheist*, I try to find new voices interesting in contributing to the site. We're always looking for new contributors. CA's editorial policy is very liberal – I never tell anyone what to write or censor their contributions – so most of my time is spent doing technical work to keep the site running smoothly, and to catch the attention of search engines so that we can reach more people and have more impact.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with it?

Gibbs: Basically anyone who wants to contribute content that will be of interest to Canadian atheists and can demonstrate an ability to write, draw, or record clear, coherent, and relevant content is welcome to join the team! Just drop us a line using [the contact form](#) on the site and introduce yourself.

Jacobsen: What is the state of not only atheism but also irreligiosity writ large in Canada?

Gibbs: I think we're actually on the cusp of a very big change. In the past, atheism and non-religion in general were always *there*, but generally ignored and not given any particular respect by politicians or established institutions, like the CBC. No politician could be arsed to pander to nonbelievers – or even mention them – and institutions like the CBC treated us like this weird freak show on the fringes of Canadian society.

But a couple of things are happening now that might change the game. The rise of the Canadian far-right has made religious-based hate (in their case, it's usually Christians specifically targeting Muslims) headline news, and it's leaving a sour taste in Canadians' mouths. I don't think Canadians have made the connection yet – I think they're still seeing it as plain racism, not religious discrimination – but there are other things, like M-103, that are putting religion on the discussion table despite the Canadian tradition of not talking about religion publicly. And now we've just elected the first non-Christian leader of a major, Federal political party. We've never really had to talk about the religion of potential Prime Ministers before... now we might.

Canadians generally take a “don't want to deal with this” attitude toward potential conflict, and pick the path that seems to lead to the least strife. If religion becomes a flash point for conflict, I

think most Canadians – who are already virtually atheists; they’re certainly not particularly religious – will decide that non-religion is the path to peace.

Maybe? We’ll see.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to non-belief in Canada?

Gibbs: Canadian apathy and the tendency to stick with the status quo.

We don’t suffer from a lot of focused hostility in Canada. Rather, we suffer from passive, almost “bored” discrimination – historical methods of discrimination that Canadians just can’t be arsed to do anything about. Even many Canadian nonbelievers don’t care; the discrimination isn’t so bad that it’s intolerable, so they’d rather not rock the boat.

I don’t see any plausible path to things getting *worse* for nonbelievers in Canada... unless Canada goes batshit insane like the US and elects a Trump-like PM, which is not likely (but not impossible!). So it’s really just an issue of things not getting *better*. It took us until 2017 to get a bill to repeal the blasphemy law (which still hasn’t passed!), and we’re still forced to plead to God in our national anthem, and to listen to our elected Parliament praying. There are plenty of things that need to be fixed, but for now I’m not really worried about regressing.

Jacobsen: What are the bigger areas of social discrimination against nonbelievers in Canada?

Gibbs: It may just be that I’ve lived only in fairly progressive and tolerant areas of Canada, or it may be that I’m spoiled for making a decent comparison by my Barbadian experience, but I can’t see I see much social discrimination against nonbelievers in Canada. Oh, sure, no doubt you can find pockets where the ignorance and bigotry runs hot. But broadly speaking, I think Canadians are fairly ambivalent toward irreligion and irreligious people.

At least in my personal experience, whenever I “out” myself as an atheist, the response I almost always get is simple bemusement. People respond by asking me questions about atheism or my personal atheist experience. Some of those questions are the kinds of ignorant questions that make atheists roll their eyes, like, “do atheists believe in nothing?” or “how can you be moral without god?” But I honestly don’t think they are being asked from a place of hate... I think they’re genuinely curious about something they don’t understand, and have been lied to about all their lives. So I try to answer patiently, with a touch of humour and humility. And I’ve found that generally, people walk away thinking better of atheists than before we talked.

Now, I have to be careful to say that that Canadians seem generally ambivalent and curious about atheists... the same is not always true for *atheism*. I have noticed mildly negative views of atheism – as an ideology or movement. But I think what we’re seeing there is not *actual* hate of atheism, but rather annoyance at atheism for being activist, and for rocking the boat. Canadians generally want people to keep their heads down and not stir the pot or create conflict... but as an activist movement, atheism *has* to create a bit of a ruckus to get anything accomplished; only the squeaky wheel gets the grease, after all. I believe that if all of our political and social goals were accomplished, so that atheism no longer had to be politically activist, Canadians wouldn’t have anything against it at all.

Jacobsen: What are the bigger areas of political discrimination against nonbelievers in Canada?

Gibbs: While I don't think there is a lot of active political discrimination against nonbelievers in Canada, there are a handful of politicians who routinely say bigoted, intolerant, and, frankly, stupid things about atheists that they wouldn't say about any other "religious" group. The fact that those statements are considered acceptable, and usually ignored by the mainstream media, illustrates that we still have work to do.

But the real problem is *subtle* forms of discrimination, or "micro-aggressions" against atheism. Most of Canada's public institutions are essentially "old boys' clubs", with the same-old gang doing things the same-old way they've been doing them for many decades. They're still mired in old-school thinking – which is usually heavily religious, at least in affiliation – and they don't really have any voices from the demographics that you'll find a lot of atheists in, like younger people. To give an example, just a couple years ago, the CBC aired a discussion panel that asked whether atheism was any good for Canada. Can you *imagine* them doing a discussion on whether Judaism or Sikhism was any good for Canada?! And then to add insult to injury, they didn't include a single atheist voice on the panel... and instead had invited a Catholic priest. Again, can you imagine Canada's national broadcaster airing a discussion on whether Judaism was any good for Canada, then not only neglecting to invite any Jewish people, but instead inviting a representative from an antisemitic organization?! There was simply nobody in that "old boys' club" who had the wherewithal to notice how wildly inappropriate that was.

This is not just an atheist problem. We *badly* need more diversity in our public institutions, because several groups are simply being ignored or misunderstood.

Jacobsen: What are the bigger areas of legal discrimination against nonbelievers in Canada?

Gibbs: In 1982, Canada basically got a brand, spankin' new Constitution, complete with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Prior to that, there were numerous laws on the books that were very discriminatory toward atheists. But the *Charter* changed everything. Those old, discriminatory laws remained on the books... and many still remain to this day... but they're now dead letter.

However....

There is still one particular area of legal discrimination based on religion. It doesn't *specifically* target atheists, but at least in Ontario, Catholic schools enjoy a specially protected "right" that other religions – and non-religion – do not. And not just that, they have the legal right to refuse to hire atheists (or anyone who is not Catholic) as teachers. Doesn't even matter if it's a math teach – what does math have to do with Catholicism? The hypocrisy is astonishing; Catholic schools will refuse non-Catholic teachers... but happily accept non-Catholic students – after all, they get paid for the latter. The majority of Ontarians oppose the public Catholic system, but there's just no political will to do anything about it.

Jacobsen: What are the positives of religion?

Gibbs: I'll flip the question and say what the *negatives* of religion are, and there are only two: faith (which I define is belief without or in spite of reason or evidence), and authoritarianism. If you take those things away, religion becomes benign, and possibly even positive.

There are a lot of features of religion that could be put to such wonderfully positive social and cultural use if they weren't tainted by belief in supernatural or mystical nonsense, or unquestioning obedience to religious authorities or doctrines. It's a nice way to define and bind a

community – it provides a shared identity, shared customs and traditions that can be celebrated together, and a focal point for community organization. It's not really the silly claims that make religion bad, because the claim that a man lives at the North Pole with elves and travels around the world with flying reindeer to hand out presents is not causing any harm, nor are the customs or traditions associated with that story that we celebrate. It's the *belief* in irrational claims that's the problem; it's *faith* that is the problem, as well as the authoritarian idea that the claims must be respected and obeyed without question.

Of course, it's arguable that if you take the faith and authoritarianism out of religion, whether it's still "religion". And none of the positives associated with religion actually *require* religion; not even watered-down non-faith/non-authoritarian "religion". We could, in theory, replace every beneficial feature provided by religion with something completely new. But since religion is already extant, and ubiquitous, maybe if we could take the faith and authoritarianism out of it, maybe it would be easier to harness that existing power for good, rather than trying to make something new from scratch.

Jacobsen: Who are people attempting to move the conversation within religion to a higher plateau, a more progressive platform?

Gibbs: Within religion, I honestly don't know. I was born without religion and never got sucked in, so I'm a bit of an outsider to the whole scene. I can only give a few names, that I vaguely know of via the media. For example, there's Gretta Vosper, the former United Church of Canada minister who came out as atheist. But I'm not sure how much she can be counted as "within religion" anymore, since they kicked her out. There are also people like Malala Yousafzai, and so on ... but there are a lot of people who wouldn't consider Yousafzai to be a True Muslim™, and so on.

Honestly, I am fairly disinterested in efforts to "reform religions from the inside". I don't *oppose* them, and I'll even support them if they ask for my assistance, but I just don't find "reform" efforts to be compelling pursuits. I don't see it as coincidental that religions are a lot more conservative, dogmatic, and aggressive about their beliefs now than they were fifty years ago. To me that's the natural result of the growth of nonbelief. In times past, religions were very often at the vanguard of the fight for human rights (not *all* religions, but every major human rights movement had strong religious support)... but not any more, and probably never again in the future. The people who walk away from religions are going to be the more moderate reasonable people, leaving only the more extremist, unreasonable people behind... thus it's to be expected that religions are becoming more extremist and unreasonable. As this trend continues, I don't expect reform efforts to be particularly fruitful in the long term.

Really, the only thing I hope for from reform movements is that they just keep the religion sane (relatively speaking) and non-genocidal long enough until its membership has withered away to make it no longer worthy of serious concern. If they also manage to make the religion tolerant and reasonable, that's great... but I'm not going to bet anything on them managing that.

Jacobsen: Who is a personal hero for you?

Gibbs: Oh, I don't believe in heroes anymore. Too many of them have proven themselves to be far too human. But there are people I respect, and I follow their opinions because I find them to be usually far better informed well thought-out than the average.

Off the top of my head, focusing on Canadians, in alphabetical order:

Ian Bushfield, Executive Director of the British Columbia Humanist Association;

Eiynah, who writes as *Nice Mangos*;

Spencer Lucas, aka *The Positive Atheist*;

and of course, all of the contributors to *Canadian Atheist*, past and present.

Jacobsen: Who, naming names, are attempting to either argue for the traditionalist, even fundamentalist, religion in Canada? Also, who are closet religious-minded individuals who are attempting to rebrand religion, especially Christianity, and sell it to the modern generations such as the, as they're automatically labelled, Gen Xers and the Millennials?

Gibbs: I am not a fan of naming names, for the simple reason that it gives them too much power. Oh, certainly when I'm addressing someone or their arguments specifically, I'll address them directly – that's only civil; I'm not suggesting dehumanizing our opponents by refusing to name or acknowledge them. But I prefer not to raise particular people or organizations up as symbols of things I oppose. When you create a boogiemán (boogieperson?), you make it too easy to attack the boogiemán itself, and not their ideas. And it's their ideas that need to be challenged.

I don't think, though, that there's anyone doing a particularly good job of repackaging religion for the young. Younger Canadians are growing up more skeptical and less religious than any generation before them. And they're particularly unimpressed by the bigotry, intolerance, and stubborn opposition to science and reason displayed by most religions. Most every attempt I've seen to "sell" religion to the young have tried to avoid that core problem; they've tried to pretend there's really no problem with intolerance and ignorance in religion, but young Canadians have seen enough evidence to the contrary that they're not buying. Nowadays there's simply nothing that religions have to offer younger Canadians that they don't already have – they get their community, their support, and their understanding of the universe from the Internet. With no benefits and with that nasty stain of association with bigotry and ignorance, it would take a pretty brilliant marketing campaign to make religion attractive to younger Canadians, and I'm just not seeing it.

Jacobsen: What are your major initiatives the irreligious movement in Canada in the coming months?

Gibbs: *Canadian Atheist* is going through a bit of a renaissance right now, and that should pick up even more steam in the coming year. We've just rolled out a new back-end infrastructure that will allow us to build some really cool new features.

The first one that's probably going to see daylight is something I've called *Rosetta*. The idea is to create a collection of the documents and writings most important to Canadian secularism, humanism, atheism, and freethought (SHAFT), and translate them to all Canadian languages. All Canadian languages; not just English and French. That means translating the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* to Plains Cree, translating the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* to Inuktitut, translating the *Amsterdam Declaration* to Ojibwe, and more. *Rosetta* will also include a translation dictionary, so one day you may be able to translate "I am an atheist" to every Canadian language.

Ultimately the goal is to make *Canadian Atheist* less of a platform that a select few can use to shout their opinions at the community, and more of a community hub with an egalitarian ethic –

a place where everyone can hear and share their opinions about Canadian atheism. But that goal is a bit of a ways off yet.

Outside of *Canadian Atheist*, I think the biggest thing happening in Canadian non-belief right now is that are a hair's breadth away from finally getting some of the most pernicious religious-based discriminatory laws repealed. One more push, and Canada may no longer have laws against blasphemy, witchcraft, and other such things.

Another thing I think is brewing, but has not yet coalesced into a single, organized initiative, is opposition to publicly-funded religious schooling in the provinces of Ontario, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. There are some court challenges in flight that could change the landscape completely, and force the government to end funding for separate, religious schools. It's something I'm keeping a close eye on for 2018.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Gibbs: I just want to say that I really believe in the foundations of humanism: reason, compassion, and hope. I believe that if we use those ideals as a guide, we'll be on the right path – a path that our descendants can look back on and be proud we took. We shouldn't define ourselves by the things we disagree with or hate; we should not define ourselves as “anti-religious” or “anti-theist”. We should define ourselves by the things we aspire to.

Thanks for hearing me out!

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Mark.

Changes to Criminal Code

October 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to The Canadian Press, the Canadian Criminal Code (Government of Canada, 2017) is too narrow, as in exclusive to too many:

Justice Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould says the fact that it is against the law to disrupt a clergyman or minister — but not an imam or a rabbi — is one of the reasons she wants to modernize the Criminal Code.

This spring, the Liberal government moved to rid the Criminal Code of sections that are redundant or obsolete. (National Post, 2017)

Bill-C-51, as proposed, may lead to the removal of one section of the Criminal Code. The section is about making “it a crime to use threat or force to obstruct a clergyman or minister from celebrating a worship service or any other duty related to his job.”

At present, an assault on a clergyman on travels to or comes from such duty is an indictable offence.

Wilson-Raybould stated religious freedoms are protected in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom and other sections of the Criminal Code. Presumably, the removals make the protections less redundant.

Based on the language, the Justice Minister sees reasons for change too, as in the references to males only and Christians. The reasoning is the restricted inclusivity and explicit exclusivity of the statements towards, for example, women and other faiths – and those without a formal religion.

Rob Nicholson, a Conservative MP, used the provision in the Criminal Code in April of this year. There was, apparently, a charge of vandalism of a St. Patrick’s Basilica (Ottawa) statue (Pringle, 2017).

Regardless of the vandalism, which I deplore and condemn as well as the Christian members of community in Ottawa near St. Patrick’s Basilica, the provision for more inclusive statements – to give a ‘face lift’ to the Criminal Code – seems apt.

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Saskatchewan Largest Catholic School Expansion in Its History

October 26, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Catholic school system has undergone one of its largest expansions in provincial history. All funding has been paid for by the province at public expense for the schools. In a province mostly consisting of some Catholics and then everyone else, about 32% to 68%, this seems unfair to the citizenry of Saskatchewan (Statistics Canada, 2005).¹

A court order in April declared the province could no longer fund non-Catholic students in Catholic schools. The Premier, Brad Wall, used the notwithstanding clause to overrule the decision in order further instantiate Catholic education in the province.

“Despite some initial fears that the ruling could result in Catholic school closures, the opposite is occurring. Parents, free to choose a school system for their children, are choosing Catholic,” Siedler said (2017).

Within days of the decision in April, Premier Wall said that his government would use their constitutional power to protect the Catholic separate publicly funded educational system – in a province with only 1/3 of the population as Catholics, one might add.

The Chair of the Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools, Diane Boyko, described the results of further Catholic school growth as a sign of the trust in the Catholic educational system on behalf of families of all faiths in the province (Ibid.).

Siedler goes on to reference the case in Alberta:

It's a different story in Alberta. Some high-profile Albertans, including former education minister Dave King, have used the Saskatchewan court ruling to campaign for the abolishment of Catholic divisions.

King's cause has been joined by former Edmonton Catholic school trustee Patricia Grell, who has called for the merger of the public and Catholic systems.

I have talked to Grell (Jacobsen, 2017a; Jacobsen, 2017b). This is true; she believes in the merger of the school systems. Why? She has said, “I do not believe that Catholic schools are any better academically, socially or even spiritually than their public counterparts” (Siedler, 2017).

But there's a background, too, founded in hard experience and courageous campaigning as a trustee in the Edmonton Catholic School Board in Ward 71 (Jacobsen, 2017b).

With declining relevance, the Roman Catholic Church seems to work to entrench more in the public, especially the minds of the young, the Saskatchewan case with the use of the notwithstanding clause appears to be another example of it.

¹Catholics comprise only 305,390/963,150 of Saskatchewan's population.

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Conversation with Prof. Imam Syed Soharwardy – Founder, Islamic Supreme Council of Canada and Muslims Against Terrorism

October 27, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Prof. Imam Soharwardy is the founder of Muslims Against Terrorism (MAT). He founded MAT in Calgary in January 1998. He is also the founder of Islamic Supreme Council of Canada (ISCC).

Imam Soharwardy is the founder of the first ever Dar-ul-Aloom in Calgary, Alberta where he teaches Islamic studies. Prof. Soharwardy is the Head Imam at the Al Madinah Calgary Islamic Centre. Imam Soharwardy is a strong advocate of Islamic Tasawuf (Sufism). and believes that the world will be a better place for everyone if we follow what the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (Peace be upon him) has said, "You will not have faith unless you like for others what you like for yourself." He believes that spiritual weakness in humans causes all kinds of problems.

Mr. Soharwardy can be contacted at soharwardy@shaw.ca OR Phone (403)-831-6330.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did your family come to Islam? What was its impact on your own personal development?

Prof. Imam B. Syed Soharwardy: I was born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan. My father was a famous scholar and Imam in Pakistan. Millions of Pakistanis knew him personally. He passed away in 2001. He established a religious institution in Karachi, where he was the principal.

This is our family tradition. that we always send our children to religious schools. Once they graduate, they start the religious education. I went to this Madrassah. I learned my Islamic studies: The Quran, the Hadith, Arabic language, and so on, and the Islamic sciences and jurisprudence.

I also graduated from the University of Karachi with a bachelor of arts degree. Then I got another degree in religious studies. I started studying as the assistant imam at 17-years-old in the mosque, where my father was the head imam. I was an assistant imam for him.

I was, at that time, studying myself in grade 10. Afterwards, after I finished the religious degree, I went to my engineering education. I graduated in electrical engineering from the University of Karachi. I came to the U.S. for my education.

I got my masters degree in industrial engineering management from New Jersey. I got another masters degree in project management.

Jacobsen: You founded the Supreme Islamic Council of Canada and Muslims Against Terrorism. What was the inspiration for founding them? What tasks and responsibilities do you do with those positions?

Soharwardy: I established the Muslims Against Terrorism in 1998. I was inspired by the media about some American tourists in Malaysia. A group from the southern Philippines called themselves Muslims and kidnapped them in Malaysia.

There were already some news items about some Muslim groups saying bad things about Jews and Christians and gays in America and elsewhere. I know Islam. But when I heard the news, I don't care if Christian, gay, atheist, or whatever.

You don't kidnap people. So, when I heard this news, I thought, "Nope, not anymore." So, I established it. I wanted to establish it for a long time. When I heard about the kidnapping and then asking for ransom by 'Muslims', I decided to found it. I did that, way before 2001.

After the tragedy on September 11, this Muslims Against Terrorism got spread out more than 23 Muslim/non-Muslim countries including Australia, UK, and so on, like wildfire it spread after the tragedy of 9/11.

The Islamic Supreme Court of Canada, I established The Islamic Supreme Court of Canada in the year 2000, before 9/11. The Muslims Against Terrorism not on religious grounds, but on humanitarian grounds. It had some flavor of Islam in it.

I wanted to reach out to non-Muslims and include them in this organization and sending the message of unity. That we human beings are together. That Muslims are leading this organization and showing we can live in peace with other human beings.

It was founded on anti-violence, anti-extremism, anti-terrorism, and with Muslims and non-Muslims working together. When all of this extremism was still rising, especially Taliban, it started creating atrocities. I saw those pictures on TV when Taliban was hitting a woman because she was wearing white socks.

That news item disturbed me, bothered me, so much. These people were committing those crimes in the name of Islam. I decided to create a channel to reach out to the Muslim community here and explain to them that what the Taliban are doing in 2000 here is absolutely horrible, criminal, un-Islamic and a sinful activity.

That was why the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada was a purely Muslim organization, to reach out to Muslims across Canada and through Canada, of course, to other parts of the world and to explain that these fanaticism and extremism and hatred towards women, Jews, and non-Muslims are not Islamic in any way, shape, or form.

It has not been endorsed by any Islamic scholar. Muslims have never done this the same as Al-Qaeda was trying to do in 2000. We are trying to focus on Muslim community with the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada while Muslims Against Terrorism had a focus on everybody together as human beings.

Jacobsen: What would be your one message for those concerned about loved ones who may be engaging in anti-social activities that could potentially lead to small tragedies such as murders from which they claim religious grounds for those murders – often these are men?

Soharwardy: My message to those people. Since 1998, almost 20 years now, my message is to those committing those crimes in the name of my faith, Islam. They are dead wrong! I invite them to talk.

I will explain to them that in Islam there is no room for violence, hate, or misogyny, and intolerance for any other group of people who disagree with Islam.

Yes, Islam disagrees with Christians, Jews, Sikhs, atheists, and Hindus, and generally, those other groups disagree with Islam. It has the beauty that we different people with different beliefs. It does not mean we should hate or hurt each other.

People misinterpret the Quran and think they shouldn't make Jews and Christians friends. It is not a mainstream Islamic interpretation. It is a narrow misguided radicalized interpretation of Muslim scripture as in the Quran and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

I was born and raised in a very, very highly religious family in Pakistan. I am not saying these things because I am in Canada. I was taught the same beliefs. My father taught me the same beliefs. We cannot kill civilians.

We cannot be hateful to any part of society. We can have a difference of opinion. Yes, we can strongly disagree. Yes, we can go against something that is strongly against our belief system.

But we should reach out to human beings and convey the message of Islam. Islam doesn't condone violence against any person, except when you are attacked then you have the right to defend yourself.

In defense, yes, there is not an organization or group that can call *Jihad*. *Jihad* is a noble cause. *Jihad* and terrorism are different beliefs or traditions, or actions. *Jihad* has certain ethics. You cannot kill women and children. You cannot defy places of worship of any religion.

Now, these terrorists are killing women and children, which is not the fundamental value of Islam. The fundamental value is the sanctity of life and the freedom of all humanity.

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

Merge Catholic and Secular Public School Systems Petition

October 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Serious activist efforts can change the landscape of an entire province, even a country. Some are symbolic, but I do not see even these as minor either.

One particular petition of note is the e-petition by Doug Thomas, President of the Secular Connexion Séculière, called e-petition 1264, or E-1264 (Jacobsen, 2017; House of Commons, 2017; Secular Connexion Séculière, 2017).

The petition is about the discrimination against nonbelievers in Canada.

Another petition relates to discussions happening for a long time now. Those conversations with the decrease in relevance of formal faith including the Roman Catholic Church to Canadians – especially so for younger generations, national and even international controversies over an alternate sexual education program proposed by the superintendents of a Catholic school system, and the desire for a merger of the Catholic separate publicly funded school system and the regular public system in Alberta (Boswell, 2012; French, 2017a; French, 2017b; Mehta, 2017).

The sex education system alternative proposal appeared to have differences of intrigue. Hemant Mehta, a prominent online atheist, noted:

Their curriculum said sex was only permissible within marriage (and never before), downplayed “consent” as the main prerequisite for having sex, ignored condoms and birth control, and only spoke about various types of sex and masturbation in negative ways. (Ibid.)

The Government of Alberta officials didn’t agree. Mehta punctuated the article with the conclusion:

The Alberta government officials deserve plenty of praise for taking this strong stance against misinformation and ignorance. It won’t stop the Church from trying to spread its irrational beliefs, but it will put some giant hurdles along their path. (Ibid.)

In short, the hasty moves to reinstantiate Roman Catholic Church authority in the province diminished it. Hence, the decrease in Catholic Church relevance once more, in some ways.

Enter IDEA and King: Inclusive Diverse Education for All and Former Alberta Education Minister David King, respectively. The organization tied intimately with King, regarding the two school systems, says, “At the beginning of the 21st century, this duplication is obsolete, unnecessary, expensive, and contrary to what we understand about personal and religious freedom, and the religious neutrality of the provincial government” (IDEA, 2017a).

IDEA has a petition, which garnered over 1,000 votes in under 48 hours (King, 2017). It is for a referendum on the merger of both school systems in Alberta. In the midst of the controversies, present, and the crimes, past, of the Roman Catholic Church in Canada, this seems like another decent step for secularism. If this doesn’t work this time, we can try again, from another angle.

You can sign [here](#).

Also, please see the E-1264 petition [here](#).

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Renton Patterson – President, Civil Rights in Public Education

October 30, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Renton Patterson is the President of Civil Rights in Public Education (CRIPE). Here we talk about the history of the separate school system, violation of the Charter, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Why is there a separate school system in the first place?

Renton Patterson: A brief account of how and why we have a Roman Catholic separate school system:

Any discussion of the separate school issue and what to do about it to-day must take into account the origin of separate schools, over 150 years ago.

In 1841, when Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec) were joined together in a legislative union known as the United Province of Canada, the Day Act provided that “any number of Inhabitants of any Township or Parish professing a religious faith different from that of the majority of Inhabitants of such Township or Parish” may “dissent from the regulations” and set up their own school.

At a time when religious intolerance was widespread, provision for a religious minority to “dissent from the regulations” and therefore from the religious majority, was a solution that suited the time.

The intent, then, of the original legislation, was to establish social harmony by allowing antagonistic faith groups to separate in different schools. The original intent was not to elevate any one faith group into a position of privilege.

Despite the above, subsequent legislation made it easier to establish separate schools for Roman Catholics but more difficult to establish them for others.

One piece of such legislation, the Tache Act of 1855, applied only to Ontario, but was introduced into the Legislature by a member from Quebec, and was passed on the strength of Quebec votes.

Similarly, the Scott Act of 1863, which turned out to be the basis of today’s separate schools, applied only to Ontario, but was presented each year for four years before it finally passed – again because of a solid Quebec (Roman Catholic) vote. The vote was 76 to 31 for the Scott Act, but the Ontario vote was 31 to 21 against.

These two acts demonstrate that Roman Catholic legislators of the United Province of Canada, being a majority, voted into law, a privilege, for the Roman Catholic citizens of Upper Canada (Ontario).

In the early years, the Legislature was held alternately in Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec) during the winter months. Many legislators were farmers, and when the Ontario legislators met in Quebec, and the session ran into spring, many returned home to tend to their land before the legislative session was over.

It was not unheard of for legislation to be introduced late in the session when a number of Ontario members had left for home, legislation which Ontario legislators may oppose.

In a flurry of activity prior to Confederation, both the Quebec Protestants and the Ontario Roman Catholics tried to improve their respective school provisions, which failed. It was instead agreed that the settlement of 1863 should be embodied in the new federal constitution of the Canadian provinces.

Thus, section 93 of the British North America Act ensured that any change to the school provisions must be made with the approval of the federal government which ensured that school privileges could not be removed prematurely, nor in a frivolous manner.

MINORITY RIGHTS

Some writers refer to the laws which govern Roman Catholic separate schools as “minority rights.” It stretches the imagination to view the largest religious organization in the province as a “minority.” The “minorities” are more properly Hindus, Jews, Serbian Orthodox, Muslim, Anglican, etc. and they, as religious minorities, have no rights.

Politically, a “right” is an entitlement enjoyed by all citizens as outlined in charters of rights. A “privilege” is an advantage (or immunity) enjoyed by an individual citizen or group of citizens.

These “minority rights” (as some call them) are really privileges, they are advantages or immunities enjoyed by a group.

MAJORITY PRIVILEGE

Publicly-funded separate schools for Roman Catholic citizens represent a privilege given to the largest religious organization in Ontario — the majority.

When talking about publicly-funded Roman Catholic separate schools, we are not talking about minority rights, we are talking about majority privilege.

No charter of rights would ever grant a privilege.

Privileges are anathema to rights.

Jacobsen: Why does the Supreme Court of Canada confirm the existence of the publicly-funded separate school system as a violation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (CRIPE, 2017)? Yet, the separate school system persists in the country.

Patterson: The Supreme Court agrees that the public funding of the Roman Catholic separate school systems is a violation of the Charter. This is the result of a Supreme Court Reference re Ontario’s Bill 30, the Bill to extend the public funding of RC schools to the end of high school.

In the Bill 30 decision Justice Estey wrote: “It is axiomatic (and many counsel before this Court conceded the point) that if the *Charter* has any application to Bill 30, this Bill would be found discriminatory and in violation of s. 2(a) and s. 15 of the *Charter of Rights*.”

However, Justice Wilson wrote that “The *Charter* cannot be applied so as to abrogate or derogate from rights or privileges guaranteed by or under the constitution.”

Her reason for saying this is spelled out through no fewer than 12 references to the “confederation bargain”, one being the statement: “The rights or privileges protected by s. 93(1) cannot be prejudicially affected.....both are immune from Charter review.....because the

whole of s. 93 represents a fundamental compromise of Confederation in relation to denominational schools.”

The “confederation compromise” is spelled out in s. 93(2); Ontario must provide separate schools for Roman Catholic and Quebec must supply the same for Protestants. Through the decision on Bill 30, the Supremes turn the Charter into a bare-faced lie. No federal political party finds this bothersome – why????

In most cases in a developed society, new laws automatically over-ride older laws. Our Charter or Rights and Freedoms was introduced, but the Supremes won’t let its terms get in the way of how they wanted to rule in the Bill 30 case. Heck, they didn’t even consider section 32 of the Constitution Act, 1982 with the title “Application of Charter”.

They didn’t have the fortitude to consider it because it would blow away their reasoning for allowing Bill 30 to be implemented. It reminds me of a statement by Pierre Trudeau, who is responsible for our Charter: “When each citizen is not equal to all other citizens in the state, we are faced with a dictatorship, which arranges citizens in a hierarchy according to their beliefs.”

Jacobsen: The International Convention on Civil and Political Rights is a United Nations document, which Canada both signed and pledged to uphold as a United Nations member state (General Assembly of the United Nations, 1966).

However, Canada, nationally, and Ontario, provincially, have been admonished four times. Why? The reason is simple: “non-action of both governments to correct the abuse” (Ibid.). What is the non-action? Why do both governments refuse to act? What are the consequences for the general public from the non-action? Frankly, four times is a lot.

Patterson: The non-action is the refusal of either Canada or Ontario to abide by the “views” of the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which stated: “....the Covenant does not oblige States parties to fund schools which are established on a religious basis. However, if a State party chooses to provide public funding to religious schools, it should make this funding available without discrimination.”

It would be extremely easy for Canada to abide by the ICCPR by simply invoking its power of disallowance – section 56 of The Constitution Act, 1867. Mr. Justice LaForest, (former Justice, Supreme Court of Canada), in his book on disallowance stated that “The makers of our Constitution, in order to prevent the local legislatures from abusing their legislative rights, granted to the government the power of annulling provincial legislation.”

Why do both governments refuse to act? Their answers just refer to a certain section of the Constitution Act, 1867, section 93. But since there are avenues they may follow to make things right, I, personally, have concluded that they are both corrupt. Blatantly corrupt. Just listen to the rhetoric about human rights from both – window dressing? Just propaganda? Or absolute lies?

The consequences are that neither government can claim to be democratic, because one of the bases of a democracy is the rule of the majority. See the latest poll entitled “The Vector Poll on Public Opinion in Ontario” – attached. Any honourable government would see the results and respond.

Consequences include the fact that both Ottawa and Toronto support a two-tier citizenship for Ontario, and also support the absolute waste of over \$2 billion each year. That \$2 billion doesn’t count the interest on that borrowed money nor the social cost to the disadvantaged – the

homeless, the hungry, the disabled, etc., etc., – who do without because the government “can’t afford it.” Separate schools in Ontario are a social disgrace and an economic disaster.

Jacobsen: The Civil Rights in Public Education organization agrees with Article 26 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, which “ensures individuals equal treatment and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion” (Ibid.; General Assembly of the United Nations, 1966).

How do documents, such as the convention or other ones representative of international law, impact Canadian law and the Canadian Constitution status regarding the publicly-funded separate school system – especially alongside the Convention and its Article 26?

Patterson: International law, in my limited experience with it, does not seem to have any impact on Canadian law, and when it seems obvious to others that it should, it appears that the Supreme Court just ignores it.

When international law is mentioned in a case, it seems to me, that a mention by the Court is only when that law agrees with the Court’s decision. International covenants are binding on countries that accede to their terms, but federal politicians will say it is not binding whenever the government finds itself in conflict with its policy, so the terms are ignored. If the Supreme Court in the Bill 30 case considered the terms of the ICCPR, it would have to do a lot of squirming.

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

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Scott Douglas Jacobsen founded In-Sight Publishing and In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal.

On Faith, Interview with Jon King on Christianity

November 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Jon King is an acquaintance through a mutual friend. He is Christian. Here we talk about faith and Christianity.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We came into contact through a mutual friend. You are Christian. Let's start with a definition and brief story. What sect – or if not sect, then set of beliefs – defines your Christianity? How did you first come into contact with that form of it?

Jon King: Presently, I am ordained as an Apostle just like Paul, Peter, or John from the New Testament. I do not align myself with a sect or denomination because I understand that there is only “the way” as it is written. This is the example by faith and works as well as by affiliation that Jesus showed us according to example in His three-year ministry. This was validated not just by speech but in the deed of the active ministry of His Apostles as they would go to fulfill what is known as the Great Commission, therefore establishing the early roots of the Church. I have learned that God is not a God of denomination but He is the truth. The truth is not in part and certainly does not align Himself according to our fake box with an artificial ceiling. So, as Jesus walked I walk. As He lived I live. I only do what I must and the example of His life unlocks many of the hidden secrets to how being a Christian or follower of Christ is to be successfully lived out. Every day since my conversion, I have read the Bible, spent time in prayer and doing good works as they demonstrate the faith I have in the need for truth to change the world. This is not a religion, this is a revolution. And the Bible is my roadmap with the direction of God through His Spirit.

My conversion to walking in the way of truth like Christ officially transpired on the evening of 9/11/2014. I was sitting on my couch in Arlington, VA and all of this sudden, I just knew that God's presence was consuming me. In that knowing, my faith started to grow and reveal to me the Trinity and how God was communicating with me through His Spirit by the finished work of Christ. I didn't own a Bible, attend church, or for that matter give any thought about God or my relationship with Him. I was just living however I wanted and had this sort of burning bush consumption and my heart began to melt in sorrow as the presence of fear and trembling mixed with peace and understanding came over me. Right about then, I was overwhelmed like a secret door in my being was opened and I knew it was Jesus by name. I would spend much of that evening in tears and by the time I went to bed, I knew that following Jesus despite the cost was my only option. I was certain in a way that I had never experienced before. I realized my life was being spared and that there was purpose in everything that had occurred before in my life. It was incredibly powerful and humbling. God was speaking to me like He spoke to Moses and my mind was blowing but I knew it was real and it was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I saw a vision of the Church falling away into this kind of corporate black hole and then I saw the rising and falling of nations. I knew in an instant that I must go speak to the church I was a part of as I young teenager, though it had been about 15 years or so since I attended a service. Within 60 days, I would commute from my place of work as a strategic advisor working national programs for Defense and Intelligence to my hometown to share a seven-minute prophetic message about change. No sermon but me standing on a stage looking out into a crowd in a full house (no one believed it was me) sharing a message about changing and preparing to fight as

warriors in this present crisis of darkness. There was weeping and I called a veteran friend from childhood out of the crowd and had him stand. It was Veteran's day so I had them all stand. Before I knew it, I was going from one person to the next laying my hands on them and speaking truth into their lives. I felt whole and since then, I have been doing ministry everywhere I go. A seed was planted inside of me and on it is written, "truth." The seed came from God when I was younger but on 9/11/2014, God pointed at it and commanded the rain to grow it. That was the day the fire roared inside of me.

Jacobsen: I want to split this into formal argument, so philosophy, and informal sentiment, so experience. To the former, what arguments – as much detail as you wish – make the best case for faith in general?

King: We all exercise a great degree of faith. What separates us on this journey is what we are putting our faith in. To make decisions based off of what we cannot definitively prove or see is to follow some degree of faith. Whether you believe Jesus is Lord and follow Him or believe in humanism or Buddha, you are deciding to place your smaller decisions in the figurative hand of a worldview. And to exercise your free will to satisfy a form of belief leaves us in a vulnerable place. That is unavoidable, as even the Big Bang has to have an originating author, because everything comes from something. So, why not acknowledge that we just are exercising faith in some sort of originating way. "In the beginning...God created." That is a huge step if we believe that. Those two things together beg for us to go further. If He is God and has purpose for everything, then why did He? What does it mean for me? What relevance does believing or not believing this have in my life journey? Think about it but either way, you will have to accept that you cannot prove or disprove what you are putting your faith in when it comes to answering these worldview questions. Not to have the desire to have faith is death man. Because with faith comes the will to hope and hope inspires man to keep walking towards that dim light on those dark days so that tomorrow can be freer than yesterday. Look around at this creation and see it all growing towards that infinite sky and think back to those experiences where you just knew something divine was occurring. Believe because your soul is begging to swim in that life.

One day this machine down here is going to slow down significantly then stop. Then what? Deep down, we all think about that potential life in eternity where it will all be different and without the same complication as this time in the dirt is. There are many beliefs, religions, faiths, and cynicism out there. So much so that over time we have started to worship not believing with all of who we are as some sort of badge of courage but I tell you to do the very opposite is to do the title of one of my favorite movies, "Into the Wild." You have to find out who you are for real and be set free from unbelief so that you can live in the presence of peace and walk in those mysteries with God that make this life worth living. It's not that weak people need to make a case for faith. It's that faith made a case to people who had the desire to listen to Him. That case was closed when Jesus came out of that tomb resurrected from the death of a criminal. I believe in that and I have that faith because I decided to let my preconceived notions about God and myself go. I say to you, there is a God and He is in three parts. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He loves you man and you're worth it. Believe because there is no better place to go. Believe and have faith because that is where greatness resides. This isn't a conversation about rational. You can't rationalize thoughts of the heart. But you can meditate on their significance. The mind will follow the faith that is in the heart. The roots of your faith are life producing or death. We believe that where the root is planted, the tree will grow. That's because we have faith in the process of life. To live this life and depend only on intellect would defy the number one thing

that every human is willing to fight for, love. Love cannot be measured or seen but we feel Him and we know it's so important. In fact, we die for it every day. We didn't create love but we hunger and we thirst for His riches. So I dare you to believe friends. To have faith is to live and not just survive.

Jacobsen: What arguments – as much detail as you wish – make the best case for Christianity in general – as well as your own?

King: No argument makes the best case for Christianity. All I can do to make the case for Christianity as the best option for those who want to live a life in truth is to reason with their hearts and minds, hoping that the grace of God instructs them where they are open to absorbing that goodness. Even within the ranks and files taking up territory within the evangelical Christian church, you will get several different answers to this question. But I am more concerned with what God through Christ would say, or better yet, what He would do to best inform the reader. I am convinced that Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father by the saving power of the Holy Spirit because I exercise this faith in my life every day and the fruit of this belief has completely transformed me in every way possible. So much so that I sold my possessions to the poor, got on a bus and came to Washington D.C. with only a bag and a hot fire burning inside that produced the fruit of prayer. Leaving all I ever knew and losing every relationship I had in order to follow this invisible but personal God. He commanded my soul to be refreshed in His presence and gave me tremendous purpose. “Go teach them faith with your life.” That is the apostolic calling He gave me, more or less. I have been full-time in ministry now for over three years operating mostly individually and I’ve experienced so much truth, love, and hope all over this hurting nation. I have gone without food for days at a time, slept in the open while it was raining, walked up to thirty plus miles to get around the next corner and be a part of real miracles. I have come back from my own grave following a Judas kind of betrayal and been persecuted in a U.S. court (2nd circuit court in Plymouth, NH) for my radical faith in Jesus and the way as written in the Bible. One year ago today to be exact. On Halloween of 2016, my accusers stood before me and asked me inside quotes to explain to them my conversion to following Jesus, so I stood up in the power of courage as they scorned me and testified the gospel of God until my liberal judge spoke into the microphone, “blessed is he who does not take offense because of Me.” I heard her and knew it was God with me so I said “Amen” and spoke the scriptures until my spirit was retired and they had no questions left to ask. Looking into the eyes of my wife at the time, I knew I was choosing my faith over everything else. So they said I was crazy because I did not defend myself but shared the truth of who God is. I lost it all that day and I gained it all that day. As I walked into the cold street following, I joined the ranks of those who made it possible for me to understand what Christianity truly is. Following that day, I was rejected and cast away by everyone and anyone I ever thought I knew. So I thought about Him while He was walking to that mount to be killed for my sake and I wept with a bitter joy as I asked, “Father! Why have you forsaken me?” He said, “My grace is sufficient for you my son.” So I said, “glory to God. Forgive my unbelief Father.” And then I knew for certain that one must die to live. We choose to die for a time now and then live or we live for awhile then die forever. When I decided it would be better to die than to forsake the Jesus I know, I knew that I believed. That is everything I could have asked for.

I share this sequence and story with you because it's the evidence that makes the case. So I reason with you my friends but I cannot argue because believing in Jesus is not an argument but it's being connected to the truth. That's above reproach and it's magnanimous in nature. It's a

supernatural work in natural circumstances that point to the power and nature of God. Many call God by many names but from the thunder I hear Him say, “this is the way, walk in it.” He was 33 when He was put to death for us and He didn’t complain at all. We owe Him our best. That’s why I’m here right now. I have to finish the work of Him who sent me.

Jacobsen: What experiences speak to the heart of the Christian faith? How do these attest to the truth of the faith?

King: When you see someone love in the face of hatred, you are seeing the faith of God overcome by grace the darkness. That is the faith of Christ which is the epicenter of the Christian faith. That really is interchangeable for the heart of God. Not Catholicism or Mormonism or any other kind of mimicking religion that claims to represent the equity of an infinite God who is present with us in spirit and in truth can claim it is Christianity. When you are forgiven for doing what you know was wrong, that’s the evidence of God’s heart in the Christian. To be a Christian is to share in the heart of God and respond like Jesus as it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives within us. Those who feed the needy and shelter the poor. They are them that represent the heart of the Christian. The guy you see walking down the street in meekness while giving the five dollars he has to someone who claims to be poor but isn’t is that Christian heart in action. Because that guy knows that he is rich in faith and in faith exists the opportunity to receive everything. He would rather give away his last five dollars to know he is representing Jesus than to spend it on the dollar menu. He just screams inside for the world to look up and see the character of God for who He rightfully is. The woman at the well Jesus spoke to in the book of John is such a great illustration. She was living in adultery and wasn’t even a Jew but Jesus walked a good distance with no water to connect with her at that historical well. So he prophetically connected with her in spirit and spoke truth into the core of her being. Then she believed Him and went and got her friends and He showed them the way like Joe Cocker says in his song, “With A Little Help From My Friends.” We are called to go and do that same thing and we know it’s the truth because we see these things happen everyday. When someone is living a certain way and the love of God comes upon them through someone else being used as a vessel, the radical impact it has is the testament and evidence of that faith’s power. The trick is discerning the regular product that faith produces. If it’s forgiving, patient, kind, selfless, humble, faithful, it’s Christianity. The staying power of Christ to transform the lives of everything and everyone He touches is not rivaled. That’s why He has the most contested name on earth (still). There is only one God and no one gets to the Father part of Him without going to and becoming like the Son part of Him. And that only happens when we believe and receive that third Holy Spirit part of Him that instructs and teaches us how to do it and win.

I spend my days spontaneously responding to the direction of God in much anticipation of His epic plans for each day. He has shown me how to live a completely submitted life as Jesus did and go where He wants when He wants so that I will do what He wants and be satisfied with my contribution to the greatest mission of all time. The mission of love going forward and conquering death. Most of my interactions are unplanned and I only speak what I must. My actions follow that prophetic speech and become a part of changing broken things into better things. Some people see and believe. Some people see and become fearful and don’t believe. But this is the tradition of what it is to be a Christian. We do it because it’s who we are, not because it makes us feel good. We live as servants because that is the way to freedom. We want to be free all the time and to do that we have to look closely at the character of God at work in people. Those who are most like Jesus provide the best evidence for why this Christianity is so

wonderful. It's not our job to "save everyone." It's our job to live like Jesus in faith and trust God to do His will in all that we are a part of.

Jacobsen: What do you consider the strongest atheist arguments against Christianity?

King: I'm not an expert apologist but I'll give you a couple insertion points that I believe atheists are trying to commonly promote. It has been made known to me through multiple engagements that the average atheist wants to believe in God but has not experienced a life yet where the case for God's love has been made known to them. So, they do their best to undercut His existence so that they do not have to subject themselves to His mission. Because if you believe God is real then you must consider what it is He created you for and then dissect what it is He is asking you to do. Atheism is dead. Literally, it is a dead spirit that is being oppressed by unbelief and pain at its core and it desires to multiply its product because that's how power works. Whether good or bad, power goes out looking to multiply itself. Atheists try to use evolution but it doesn't quite stand firm when you start to poke at its genesis. If that doesn't work, atheism is really good at getting philosophical so that you will get trapped in a horizontal or worldly angle of perspective and start to compare and contrast dissimilar things. But at its core, I really believe that atheism's strongest case against Christianity is the same as most cases against Christianity. It all has to do with who Jesus is and his role in our lives by His sheer state of just being worthy due to His set apart holy nature as God and man. Atheism is a good way to exercise selfishness which is human nature without letting your conscience get too wrapped up in things like accountability or consequences. And that's great if you just want to consume and maybe feel good because you donate to puppies or recycle because going green is trendy. But atheism is terrible at defending the importance of love and its relevance on the global stage. Because love stems from the center of Christ, there is a division that cannot be reconciled unless the atheism is willing to believe God is who He says He is. Love cannot reside outside of truth so atheism may try to sell you the same fake version of love that Hillary or Obama does. I can make the case for a triune God in the first two chapters of the Bible, which has much historical and archaeological evidence to support it. At least more than "nothing" or atheism does. Atheists think believing in Jesus is absurd but aliens are no problem because I guess they live in outer space with Zeus and emo-ism. This may come off a little sharp but I'm trying to stir a bit for the sake of getting us to ask what validity atheism really has in general. Not to mention that comparing the thought of atheism to the evidence of Christianity is like comparing dust and a fruit bowl. They're just very different things but I know one of them is just better and grows from the source of life and the other was created by life for a purpose but doesn't taste as good.

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

King: Scott, it's great to connect with you and I really enjoyed sharing with you and the readers from my core. I made it a point just to share it how it's coming to me as the best things in life are inspired.

On Atheism, Interview with Rome Bethea – Administrator, Atheists

November 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Rome Bethea is an administrator of an atheist Facebook group: Atheists. Here, I ask him some questions about background, views, and hopes.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's dive little bit into your background. What was family life like? Was religion a big part of it? What were some individuals in your life that you note as influences on you with regards to theological beliefs? Whether or not you held them, those that were of influence.

Rome Bethea: Growing up in Detroit I was raised a Baptist Christian, my whole family is Baptist actually. We weren't really a church-going family until I was about 10. My mom would take me, my sisters, and a couple of my cousins that spent the weekend over at a church called Universal Praise Center. I was even apart of their choir.

I didn't really like going to church but whatever mom says goes. A couple years had past and she let me leave the church. After that, I haven't found a church home until I was 16. Called New Haven's rest I went two times and I remember this day like it was yesterday.

The bishop said he saw that they have a couple of new faces and would anyone like to get up and introduce themselves. I got nervous as the mic got closer and closer to me. Finally, it's on me. I say my name and how good it is to be around good people.

The bishop put me on the spot and asked me have I been saved? I told them the truth and said, "No." So the whole church started talking together and told me to go sit in this chair up front and get saved.

We go through the whole, "So I accept Jesus," stuff and when I got up they told me to come back next weekend to be baptized. I came back and got baptized December 19, 2009. I kept with that church until I realized they're no good. The first lady was telling people's secrets and the pastor was hitting on women. So I left but still believed in (the Word) up until I was about 21.

Jacobsen: Can you recall a pivotal moment or series of experiences that instantiated a lack of belief in God or gods?

Bethea: I went jail over unpaid driving tickets and I called my mom and she said this is a good time to read the Bible and get right with the Lord, so that's what I did, well tried to do. But as I read the Bible I started to see verses that the church never said anything about.

God being Okay with slavery, women must be quiet and submissive and cannot teach men. I thought maybe I'm just thinking too much on it. And I tried reading it from the first page to the last, hoping hopefully I can make sense of this and I see in Genesis it says God made the sun on the 4th day and that's where I believe I started to question it all.

It doesn't take and a rocket scientist to know a day cannot pass without the sun. Lol. That's when I started to watch YouTube videos on religion. And my friend from across the street, Darnell,

was showing me how the Bible contradicts itself and has no historical data for things the Bible says happened on Earth

Like the Chinese were keeping track of their stuff around the same time Noah's ark supposedly happened. The fact that we had rocks and trees older than what the Bible claims the Earth to be just set everything in stone for me, really.

Jacobsen: What books would you recommend for those that are first questioning your faith?

Bethea: Yes, *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, of course. And *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris. Great books.

Jacobsen: What individuals would you also recommend?

Bethea: David Silverman, it's cool and funny but he doesn't play around and stay on point. Richard Dawkins again and I'm sure I don't have to say why lol also Michael Shermer, once you made it this far you should be an atheist by now lol.

Jacobsen: Would you consider some of the more toxic aspects of some branches of atheism in the late 20th and early 21st-century?

Bethea: I know some people may come off the wrong way but if you stop and think about it they don't mean any harm. You have people fighting for gay rights, people fighting people of color. They're just fighting to be equal. They might come off the wrong way but sometimes to be heard you must scream.

Jacobsen: What do you consider the good aspects of religion? How does the nonbelieving community compensate for those to provide a better community?

Bethea: I think some people are good people but just don't know any better. I know a handful of churches that give back to the community but it's also a lot of them putting money into these banks that's trying to kick poor people like myself out of our neighborhoods. I think it some good people in religion. But all together we need to kill religion and just be good people.

Jacobsen: How did the group Atheists start?

Bethea: I actually just started helping with this page but I'm doing my best to spread the word and get everyone back thinking.

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for its growth? What are your hopes for the atheist movement in general?

Bethea: I'm hoping to get as big as we can! I want all 7 billion people on the same page as us (atheist) but, baby steps.

Jacobsen: Thanks for the opportunity and your time, Rome.

Bethea: Thank you for the opportunity to be interviewed with you. Hope that helps and wish you the best with everything.

Payette: It's a Joke, Folks

November 5, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Governor General of Canada, Julie Payette, spoke to a room of scientists on November 1, regarding climate change, evolution, horoscopes, and bad science in general (Moscrop, 2017). She was the keynote speaker at the ninth annual Canadian Science Policy Convention in Ottawa (CSPC, 2017).

Payette targeted evolution, climate change, horoscopes, and alternative medicine in the speech. Some quotes, on climate change from human activity:

Can you believe that still today in learned society, in houses of government, unfortunately, we're still debating and still questioning whether humans have a role in the Earth warming up or whether even the Earth is warming up, period? (Persian Mirror, 2017)

On evolution by natural selection, unguided:

And we are still debating and still questioning whether life was a divine intervention or whether it was coming out of a natural process let alone, oh my goodness, a random process. (Ibid.)

On alternative medicines:

And so many people — I'm sure you know many of them — still believe, want to believe, that maybe taking a sugar pill will cure cancer, if you will it! (Ibid.)

On horoscopes:

And every single one of the people here's personalities can be determined by looking at planets coming in front of invented constellations. (Ibid.)

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau supported the remarks by Payette. (The Canadian Press, 2017).

I read prominent commentators, even nationally so, on Payette's speech. I feel concern about these public intellectuals, journalists, and writers now.

I feel as though each took the same script, and then played their role as they were cued to come stage right and read their lines to the public and exit stage left. In short, I am disconcerted and annoyed at the uniformity of the media in misrepresentation.

Payette broke the mold of the culture around governor generals, as this was seen to "rankle" via the "tone" of the speech (Moscrop, 2017). Moscrop argued, and 'can understand,' the position of those citizens' feeling that the Governor General, as a role, should be non-partisan.

But I find this misses the point, as the Governor General listed scientific truisms: well-substantiated theories backed by facts, or rejection of ones lacking those characteristics. Science *is* non-partisan.

Does evolution amount to a Libertarian or a Socialist perspective? Do horoscopes remain Conservative or Liberal? Does the Green Party hold sole ownership of climate change?

Apparently, Moscrop is concerned about the effects of Payette speaking scientific truisms, e.g., the questionable persistence of the human species if action is not taken regarding climate change. It is a concern around faux feelings of insult about *a joke* around denialists because these points of science are “accepted as fact.” He states:

As for the substance of Payette’s message—that climate change and evolution are real, and that sugar pills are bunk—she might as well have been acknowledging, as political scientist Emmett Macfarlane pointed out, “the existence of gravity.” Indeed. But the controversy seems to be less about Payette’s recognition that climate change, evolution, and the value of mainstream medicine are accepted as fact, and more about her pointing out that, in the 21st century, there are Canadians who doubt that. (Ibid.)

I can understand Macfarlane’s and Moscrop’s positions, as some say. I can understand that they are articulate, educated, and wrong. As written by *CBC News* (2016), the scientific literacy of Canadians exists as a concern.

They note this about a survey by the Ontario Science Centre (*CBC News*, 2016). 2/5 Canadians think the science on climate change is unclear (Ontario Science Centre, 2016). 1/5 Canadians trust intuition over science regarding genetically modified organisms (*Ibid.*).

1/5 think there’s a link between vaccines and autism (*Ibid.*). On those points, the general Canadian public – at least 2/5, then 1/5, followed by 1/5 Canadians, respectively, based on the prior survey results – hold empirically false beliefs. Payette spoke her mind. The Ontario Science Centre states:

Climate change is a highly charged topic hotly debated by politicians and industry. But in the scientific community, there is a substantial consensus on the factors that contribute to this global issue. (Ibid.)

Moscrop continues:

Still, while stating facts is one thing, criticizing those who don’t believe in those facts is another. Those are different sorts of utterances and therefore different sorts of acts. The question is whether and when the governor general ought to cross that line. To the former, I say “yes.” To the latter, I say “sometimes.” That’s the wisdom of good governance: knowing when to speak, how to speak, and what to say. (2017).

Payette – for the when, how, and what – can speak this way when in the company of scientists as a keynote speaker at a science policy convention (when), so able to speak directly and with humor about scientific matters including science literacy (how), and speaking about concerns such as denial of scientific truths or acceptance of pseudoscientific falsehoods (what).

She did nothing wrong and made a joke. The next was *Postmedia News*.

Postmedia News published an editorial (2017). They say, “Canadians hold a diversity of views on religion and climate change and the GG, who on behalf of the Queen represents all Canadians, has effectively suggested those who disagree with her views are ignorant.”

Nope: she relayed the views of the science. Science provides explanatory frameworks of the natural world. It’s great. You can know which beliefs are more probable or improbable, or simply wrong. Many of the diverse views on climate change in the public are wrong, not by necessity brought about by ignorance. Canadians have a variety of wrong beliefs about climate change, evolution, and horoscopes. Variety relates little to truth.

Postmedia News continued, “The world’s full of nitwits with Twitter accounts who think they have licence to lecture those they disagree with. Our Governor General shouldn’t be one of them.” Duly note, she was the invited keynote, who spoke to a room of scientists at a science policy convention. Not exactly Twitter, a lecture, or lay people, or an informed editorial for that matter.

Following them came Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, who, in the prominent and highly respected media forum of Facebook, said:

It is extremely disappointing that the prime minister will not support Indigenous peoples, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Christians and other faith groups who believe there is truth in their religion...Respect for diversity includes respect for the diversity of religious beliefs, and Justin Trudeau has offended millions of Canadians with his comments. (Wherry, 2017)

Insofar as I know, believing something to be true, regardless of tenet or premise of a religion, faith, or way of life, doesn’t make it true, but showing something empirically to be true, repeatedly, does increase its probability of being so, Payette’s speech comes from science.

Scheer’s comments are as cynical as they are insulting. Cynical through twisting meaning, then insulting because the turn of meaning is directing the majority resentment and prejudice of many religious – already extant – against the large minority, the formal irreligious or formerly religious, for the points in the intangible economy of politics.

The joke was not at religion at large. It was at the notion that can be in some religions – often asserted, unproven, and a matter of faith – of divine guidance for humanity, whether young or old Earth creationism, or purported directed evolution.

The scientific consensus is unguided evolution. That is, no divine guidance in the birth, maturation, decay, and death of organisms, or in the reproduction, perpetuation, and speciation of species. Besides, why should empirically false beliefs deserve respect? They are beliefs, like $2+2=5$ or squares are circles, or the Sun orbits the Earth.

The people holding them is another matter. Scheer did not say irreligious people can hold wrong beliefs about climate change and horoscopes, too, not simply “Indigenous peoples, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Christians and other faith groups.” Did he even see the full speech or think about it, or did he simply observe a political opportunity?

Therein lies the cross-points, the crucifix, of the notion or narrative throughout the news coverage, ‘Payette targets religion, especially religious individuals’; whereas, the truth is the targeting of empirically false beliefs with a joke while in the community of professional scientists.

Of course, the media misrepresentation seems like a politically convenient maneuver, so Scheer used the opportunity to score political points by bravely targeting, not Payette directly but, Trudeau. Easy, expedient political currency, if cynical enough, why not? Next was the long-time Canadian commentator Rex Murphy.

Murphy made note about religion and science not being in conflict: how cliché and delightfully vague. What is meant by religion?

It depends on the contents of the religion to an individual. Some see “the good” in religion as a motivation for protests outside abortion clinics, killing abortion doctors, holding signs saying, “God hates fags,” killing homosexuals, criminalizing atheism with the death penalty, even

suppressing women and denying rights, and so on. Others see the same good in religion through self-sacrifice for fellow human beings in disaster areas, or for the donation of their income to those in most need.

Payette's statements point to empirical claims about the natural world without evidence, not religion. Unless, the religion's specific tenets or beliefs contain empirical claims in conflict with scientific evidence, to the individual religious person, but this remains different than religion at large.

If the religious tenet or belief remains in conflict with the evidence about the natural world from the science, and if the religious tenet or belief asserts an empirical foundation, then the religious claim is dust, nothing, or simply wrong.

Murphy queried the reader, "In this wonderfully diverse Canada that Ms. Payette now represents, was it her intent to ridicule the religious beliefs of so very many faiths whose cosmologies include a divine creation, some as myth, some as a fact of faith — as opposed to a fact of science?" Nope.

The fulcrum for Murphy's teeter-totter is Payette claiming umpire status, tacitly in his opinion at least, on faith and religion. Here's a question: Who made Murphy umpire on the interpretation of the meaning of the Governor General's words?

Payette iterated a series of the strongest theories backed by the empirical evidence discovered by science, e.g., climate change or global warming is real, human activity is a major contributor to global warming, horoscopes are bogus (sorry, Georgia Nicols), and humans arose via the principles of unguided evolution, and so on.

Murphy noted the "truths" of religion without a statement, again conveniently, of what exactly, I wonder. If moral codes, these amount to heuristics for behaviour, evolved (without divine intervention, to Payette's point).

Then came the epithets, I was waiting for one: "Scientism." A dishonourable history of what I consider "terms to defame to dismiss." Use a word, give it bad implications, apply against an enemy, you don't need to address the claims anymore. It's perfect.

Then there's also only implication of terms to defame to dismiss, where some conceptions behind terms are well-instantiated in the society without need for direct reference, e.g., elitism. Payette, by the insinuation of Murphy, is elitist talking down to the general public, especially non-college education and non-science types.

Case in Murphy wrongness, she spoke against elitism, saying, "We will be able to claim as a people, as a nation, as humanity. That we are a science literate species. By science literacy, I don't mean we should all have a math degree" (Persian Mirror, 2017). The point isn't higher education. The point is science literacy.

Also, speaking of condescension, Murphy quipped, "A backhand dismissal of religion is a sophomoric indulgence." I feel under the stronger impression that belief without evidence and backhand dismissal of fundamental empirical truths *is* such an indulgence.

Following Mr. Murphy was Mr. Levant, Ezra Levant, of *Rebel Media* fame, dove into the public discussion as well. In a video entitled "Ezra Levant: Governor General equates religion with superstition," he decided to be ambitious by being wrong from the start, from the title (Rebel Media, 2017).

His opening salvo starts with a mediocre jab with the common tactic of misquotation of a great individual in history, in this case the little-known historical figure and scientist named Albert Einstein.

Levant quotes Einstein, “Science can only ascertain what is and not what should be” (Ibid.) Of course, Einstein also said:

It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it. (Einstein, 1989).

As well as:

The word God for me is nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honorable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation no matter how subtle can [for me] change this. (Jones, 2015)

It is a fun game, and easy too. Levant moves next into the purported equating of God and superstition by Payette. Only if your definition of a God somehow implies horoscopes, anti-evolutionism, and global warming denialism, which seems like the problem to me.

The definition of God, in the context of the Levant video, amounts to a God defined by a metric of rubber inches. Somehow, by any means, this God will be fit into the appropriate category to imply Payette being a) anti-religion and b) anti-religious people.

For quotation of Payette, the research team at *Rebel Media* didn’t selectively quote as much, as in the case of Einstein, which is nice. They quote Payette on the Search for Extraterrestrial Life or SETI.

Background: Frank Drake, who is alive, created the *Drake Equation* to estimate the probabilities of extraterrestrial life. If life arose by nature here, what odds elsewhere? The equation, depending on the values given to the parameters in the equation, calculates the estimate.

As a former astronaut, I am certain Payette knows about the equation, incorporates this into her worldview, and likely answers questions about extraterrestrials, or aliens if you will, in that context.

The difference between the superstitions and the aliens is the evidence. Life exists here, on Earth. It arose, naturally. Then you can ask, “What parameters need to be taken into account to calculate those probabilities?”

The superstitions or false beliefs lack evidence, or are overwhelmed by the vast majority, the preponderance, of evidence. That points to the – ahem – point of Payette’s statements and joke about divinely guided evolution, horoscopes, and climate change denial.

Levant moves into a complete *non-sequitur* about God creating the universe, extraterrestrial intelligence, and then insinuating Payette said that you’re a kook if you believe the former but not the latter. Of course, Payette never said anything of the sort.

Another individual in the media personalities with concerning popularity playing the cynical, if purposeful, or ignorant, if accidental, game “Missing the Point” is Chris Selley. He noted 53% of Canadian citizens believe God is active in this world. What’s their evidence?

Argumentum ad numerum is the Hail Mary, or argument by the majority. The response: the majority can hold false beliefs. Quantity, in people, does not determine veracity. Again, this was not a jab at religion, so Selley was playing in another baseball field: with other Canadian media personalities while Payette was absent.

Mia Rabson of *Global News* did a good job. She represented the speech with honest intent to relay what Payette said, and meant, to the audience at the Canadian Science Policy Convention (Rabson, 2017).

The argument remains imaginary, though, as with the insinuation of the narrative throughout the prominent media, generally. Payette didn’t jab religion. She jabbed empirically false claims or assertions without evidence. That is not anti-religious; it is pro-empirical truths. So Moscrop and Emmett, *Postmedia News*, Scheer, Murphy, Levant, and Selley (and I assume others) miss the point, then run on steam or tirade oil.

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News in History: Persecution and Discrimination Against Atheists, Still Relevant

November 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to Reuters, circa 2012, those who lack formal religion, atheists, or the unbelievers, face bias (Evans, 2012). The bias can manifest in discrimination to outright persecution of atheists.

Those atheists in Islamic countries, apparently, face the most brutal treatment by both the government as well as adherents of Islam.

The report, also, points to the discrimination in many European countries as well as the United States, which are in direct favor of the religious and against atheists. The report is called the *Freedom of Thought Report* (IHEU, 2016).

Atheists can be denied rights of existence, restrictions on their freedom to believe and express themselves, have the ability to lose their citizenship, even have the possibility for restriction or elimination of their ability to marry.

In a brief introduction by the UN special rapporteur here on the freedom of religion and belief at the time, they noted that atheists have global human rights covered by various agreements, but the knowledge of or the awareness of them was highly limited.

Based on the survey at the time, there were seven countries out of 60 where the expression of atheist views or leaving the official religion of the state are given the capital punishment.

Even if an individual citizen does not want to adhere to one of the formal religions of the state, they are forced to have to take on the veneer of belief in one of the official state or stated religions of the government by signing off on one of them.

This can typically include only Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In other words, non-believers must live dual lives. Public lives of saving faith. Private lives of truly being non-religious.

The report goes into further depth (and has been updated) as to the ways in which the prejudice and bias and discrimination and persecution of atheists is pervasive throughout the world, to such an extent as in some places serving the death penalty to “unbelievers.”

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Coming Out, the New Way

November 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In some ways, coming out gay is so 80s, the new coming out, likely, is as someone without a formal religion. This can be in media. This can be in politics. This can be education and within families.

No matter the means through which an individual comes out for the area of life that they choose to do it in, it is a difficult thing to do because of the standard stigma against those who come out.

Think about some of the most difficult areas for people to come out such as those in The Clergy Project, in this initiative, those pastors, preachers, and ministers who lost faith while at the pulpit have difficult choices to make (The Clergy Project, 2017).

Those choices involve family, as well as community and income. How will they make a living? How will they find a community? Will their current community accept them still? If lucky, as with Greta Vosper, you will be accepted.

One lawmaker in the United States has come out as an atheist. He does not believe in God. U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman (D-Calif.) used to decline statements about his formal or informal religious beliefs (Boorstein, 2017; Mehta, 2017).

He went from the California state government to Congress. Of the 535 members in the United States Congress, Huffman was one of nine who chose to leave their markings of religious belief blank.

Huffman has been active during the time of President Donald Trump, the Trump Administration, Roy Moore, and the campaign of Betsy DeVos to move Public Funding for schools into religious schools. He notes that religion has now been used in such a negative way.

He has now stated openly that he is a humanist with an ethical life focused on reason compassion and science, while explicitly rejecting the supernaturalistic outlook on life. We have the Natural Life Here and Now.

Insofar as religious identity is related to Congress and a member's existence in it, Huffman appears to be only the second in the history of Congress. *This is coming out*. I would argue this is probably coming out more explicitly than gays in the 80s, where the closet is much, much deeper.

Although, as Eddie Murphy quipped in a different context, some have skeletons in their closets; others have cemeteries. The first member of Congress in the United States to state their identification, religiously, as unaffiliated was U.S. Rep. Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.) in 2013.

Huffman makes an explicit point that he is not hostile to religion or judgemental of other individuals' religious beliefs. Religion is not central to his political life. Rather, he focuses on an ethical life in the natural world here-and-now. That's that.

How's that for coming out?

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Religion: Glimpses of its Future

November 14, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Something of interest to me in terms of the sociological analysis of religion in Canadian society is the futurist perspective or the futurism perspective on religion. I do not mean science fiction.

I mean the potential streams in the evolution of religion in light of modernity as well as kinds of selection for faith. How will it change the future? What will be the variables or factors that select one stream or another for the set of possible futures of religion?

In British Columbia, for instance, we find New Age spiritualists and practices formalized or disjunct. Formal New Age spiritist groups emerge with complete, and incoherent, worldviews. But I also see individual movements based on practices or beliefs disjunct from a complete worldview, which amount to weekender New Age practices groups.

In the nation as a whole, we find a distaste for religion in general, increasingly. So, religion, especially Christianity in many contexts, takes on a ‘He-who-shall-not-be-named persona.’

The religious leaders understand this to some degree. Some prominent academics understand this too, I suspect. So, they want to proselytize to the new, younger generations, which they know are far less religious – where this becomes particularly important when religion is a political tool in Canada (and everywhere else).

That leaves the need to take a new marketing and advertising approach to religion. As far as I can tell, it is mainly taking Christianity – its principles, ethics, worldview, and central figures especially Christ – and then re-selling it to the younger generations without calling in Christianity: keep an eye out for it.

In the irreligious community, we find the Sunday Assemblies, Calgary Secular Church, and the newly founded Oasis Network. But for those that this fails to appeal to, we find an emphasis on arts and culture, as well as an emphasis on stewarding the next generation and nature *a la* Margaret Atwood. Granted, she is an agnostic.

Another possible path of interest to me was something that came up in an October 24 news article by Jeff Walters (Walters, 2017). In it, he looks at two religions in one church with one reverend. (It sounds like the setup to a bad joke.) It is Emmanuel Anglican United Church. It is for the Anglican religion as well as the United Church of Canada.

This dual religion has happened for *four decades*. With an inability to sustain one faith because of a decline in numbers, they decided to merge.

I see hints of this with the Eastern Orthodox Church Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Roman Catholic Church Patriarch Pope Francis meeting together. I’m intrigued as to the mergers that happen, which seem to occur because of declining numbers or simply less religiosity.

So, we have formal leaving religion with alternate community groups arising. We have efforts to teach, even impose, faith-based worldviews on the secular culture through not stating it as a faith-based worldview because faith and religion have a negative connotation in Canadian culture at times. This is especially true for younger generations.

There are efforts to be an individual in Canadian society who focuses on environmental efforts as well as the development of a community of arts and culture while leaving religion behind without much thought. Something that may appeal to atheists. Then for the declining religions, often the more moderate ones, they merge.

I would love to see a more formal study into this as an academic discipline. If you see anything, please send to my email: scott.d.jacobsen@gmail.com.

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Moratorium on Catholic School Construction

November 14, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

ourIDEA is calling for a moratorium on Catholic school construction. A press release was published today (ourIDEA, 2017a). They make an explicit series of calls.

Former Alberta Education Minister David King has made the call. Earlier in November, he made a petition calling for a referendum on the continuance of separate Catholic school boards (ourIDEA, 2017b).

This is an exciting time in Canada, in Alberta. The call is for the merger of public and Catholic school boards. It is to keep things up to date regarding human rights practices. In addition, it will save money.

There are three main points in the press release. One is the moratorium on construction of the Catholic separate publicly-funded schools pending the outcome of the Saskatchewan court case, which is a recent case.

The second point is that they call “on the provincial government to issue a Moratorium pending the completion of a comprehensive and transparent review of the criteria that determine approval of new school construction” (ourIDEA, 2017a).

Lastly, they then “insist that the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association (ACSTA) rescind their non-cooperation policy demanding stand-alone Catholic schools.”

There will be a special event on November 27, which is a panel discussion and conversation about the future of separate school boards.

David King will present, Luke Fevin who is a parent advocate will be there, and the former Catholic School Board Trustee Patricia Grell will be there as well. You can RSVP to attend at the University of Alberta in Telus Building Room 150.

All information in the reference link.

We invite Albertans to join us in a campaign calling for a referendum on the unification of Public and Catholic school boards. From Milk River to Keg River, and from Lloydminster to Blairmore, it is time for a thoughtful conversation, involving every interested Albertan, about why we duplicate administration and services, and operate under-utilized schools, to preserve a denominational privilege that is out of keeping with current human rights practices and may no longer be relevant.

The recent provincial budget revealed serious on-going financial shortfalls for the provincial government. In education, this raises questions about duplicating administration and infrastructure costs when the money could be re-directed to the classroom for better service to students or reduced costs to parents. Imagine how much further school fees could have been reduced without the current cost of duplication.

David King, Former Education Minister

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Conversation with Sophie Shulman, M.D., Ph.D., D.Sci. – Director, CFI-Victoria

November 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Sophie Shulman, M.D., Ph.D., D.Sci. is the Director of CFI-Victoria. I wrote two articles based on two petitions by and for CFI-Victoria. I reached out to Dr. Shulman for an interview. She agreed. By the way, she is retired.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like? I want to touch on the language in the home, the culture of the community, the religion of the area, and expectations for women time.

Sophie Shulman, M.D., Ph.D., D.Sci.: I was born in pre-WWII Stalin's purposefully pauperized Russia when 'steel and guns replaced shoes and butter' as the official goal TO CATCH UP WITH AMERICA at all costs. The costs for the population had been grand, but so was the ultimate reward: the victory over Nazism.

My parents (both MD), my nanny and myself as a child, all lived in one room of a communal apartment (7 rooms, 7 unrelated families of all walks of life, one shared kitchen with two electric ovens with 8 hot-plates, one communal bathroom (each family had their day of a week for family bathing and by-hand laundry; clotheslines crisscrossed the air under high kitchen ceiling) and a telephone on the corridor wall); all families struggled to make the ends meet. Our next door neighbor was a known lawyer with his wife, an aspiring concert-singer, the next one – a single seamstress, then a factory worker with his family, an accountant with wife, etc.

Russian culture and Russian language exclusively. The Soviet Union was officially a secular state; my parents were secular, no religion in my childhood.

Feminism was 'in the air' and I had been sensitive to it: as a pre-schooler, I objected that my last name was my father's name: "unfair, it should be both, hyphenated father's and mother's names!"

Jacobsen: You are a retired medical doctor. Why did you pursue this professional training? Why did you pursue this career? How much did medical quackery, as it sometimes called in a derisive tone – sometimes meanly, factor into the medical community at the time?

Shulman: I had always liked medicine as a branch of science; my parents were both MD (an internist and a pediatrician). Quackery was not on the radar.

Jacobsen: How did you come into contact with the skeptical community?

Shulman: I searched for them, volunteered: it is so encouraging and comforting to be among those who think alike with you.

Jacobsen: What values do you take away from the skeptical movement as well as worldview or methodology for investigation of the world?

Shulman: SAPERE AUDE or DARE TO THINK FOR YOURSELF. I agree with Kant that this is the [noblest] motto of the entire Enlightenment and as such – the major guiding light for me too.

Jacobsen: What advice would you have for young people entering into the medical disciplines?

Shulman: Well chosen, good luck! But do not just pursue ‘big’ money, there is so immeasurably much more in medicine!

Jacobsen: Center for Inquiry is typically secular humanist in orientation. How does this influence you if at all?

Shulman: It suits me well: I’m a secular humanist, have always been.

Jacobsen: What is your favorite book? Who is your favorite thinker?

Shulman: Too many to be listed: they differed at various periods of my life. As for historical figures – Marquis de Condorcet, the Gracchi brothers.

Jacobsen: What medical problem do you consider the most difficult to solve within the medical community, having entire career to observe this?

Shulman: Dissociation between the need and availability, such as in organ transplantation (who get it and who equally needs but doesn’t).

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

Shulman: Thank you, Scott.

Indefinite Delay in Ecclesiastical Court Hearing for Minister Gretta Vosper

November 16, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Minister Gretta Vosper is in the news, once more, circa November 14, as the ongoing review of suitability for the position in the United Church of Canada has been delayed, *indefinitely* (Perkel, 2017). It has been postponed, without a reason or a specified date to reschedule the “unprecedented ecclesiastical court hearing” (Ibid.).

Vosper was ordained in 1993. She took the ministerial position at West Hill United in 1997 (West Hill United Church, 2017). Over time, several years, she lost many beliefs in the faith. She is the “Ye” in “Ye of little faith.” She self-defined as an atheist in 2013 (Vosper, 2017).

It was public for some time. Some congregation left her; others stayed. Why? She came out as an atheist. An open atheist in the ranks of the religious leadership, ministering to United Church of Canada members at West Hill United Church.

As those aware of The Clergy Project (2017), nothing new to this, but threatening to the leadership, possibly – and if so, likely embarrassing to them, too.

Because coming out in the midst of what is seen as a cultural monolith begs questions for some of the membership, “Who else in the church doesn’t believe? How many? Do the congregation know about it? Do the leadership know about it? Has it been covered up? If so, why? Also, if covered up, how long has this been the case?”

The church is seen less as a block without problems and more as a series of shards. The question then, “Which one might cut?”

Her review, according to the committee, is based on lack of belief in a supernatural interventionist God, the divinity of Christ, and the existence of the Holy Spirit: hence, the “a-” part (Johnston, 2017; Perkel, 2017). As Seinfeld would say, “So, what’s the deal?”

The deal is, this makes Vosper questionable, in the eyes of the United Church of Canada in terms of her suitability for being a minister – almost a liability.

From a personal sympathetic view, for Vosper, that’s stressful enough: being out as an atheist, losing congregation, being put in the national news, and placed under suitability review, and then to have this public in the national news – live.

Perkel (2017) wrote:

“It is now clear that the panel will not be established in time to hold the hearing on the dates that you are holding in November 2017,” according to the church letter sent to her.

Acting on complaints about Vosper, a United Church reviewing panel in September last year recommended in a split decision that Vosper be defrocked for her beliefs. The hearing scheduled for this month was to make a final church decision on her fate.

“I understand the judicial committee executive has not finalized dates for the hearing,” Mary-Frances Denis said this week. “The parties are still working on a number of

preliminary matters that need to be addressed, including finding dates that would accommodate everyone's schedules."

Vosper has her own views. She thinks the reasons run farther than scheduling problems. She thinks it is a challenge for the United Church of Canada to create and coordinate an unbiased committee to meet the standards of civil courts. The notoriety of the context around Vosper makes this a possibility.

More to come, I assume.

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Conversation with Reva Landau – Co-Founder, Open Public Education Now

November 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Based on research, \$1.25 to \$1.6 billion could be saved if we have a single public school system based on two languages. But we continue to have a separate Catholic school system. It is expensive to have a religious separate school system. How is this prejudiced against the non-Catholic majority of the Canadian population?

Reva Landau: Education is generally a provincial responsibility in Canada, and you have to talk about provinces, not Canada. Only three provinces, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta give public funding to separate schools. Some provinces such as New Brunswick, give no public funding to any private schools, including religious schools. This does not discriminate against the non-Catholic population in their province. Other provinces, such as Quebec, have a non-denominational public school system, and fund any other schools that meet certain criteria (including non-religious schools) at a lesser rate. This also does not discriminate against the non-Catholic population of these provinces [though personally I prefer public funding of only one public non-denomination (two-language) system]. Alberta and Saskatchewan fund separate Catholic schools at a comparable level to public schools but also fund other schools that meet certain criteria (including non-religious schools) at a lesser level. This discriminates against non-Catholics to some extent. I will speak only about Ontario because that is the only province on which I have done extensive research and its discrimination is the most egregious.

Only Ontario fully funds Catholic separate schools at the same, or a greater rate, than they fund the public non-denominational school system, and does not fund any other religious or philosophical school system at all. This discriminates against the non-Catholic population in several ways. Parents who want their child to have an Anglican, Baptist, Buddhist, atheist, etc. education have to pay for their schooling entirely out of their own pocket, as well as pay through residential property and other taxes for a publicly-funded school system they do not use.

If Ontario separate schools were paid for entirely through the residential property taxes of separate school supporters (which they are not), it would still be unfair because non-Catholics who want their child to have a particular religious (or humanitarian, etc.) education have to pay residential property taxes to the public school system and pay for their child's schooling themselves. But in fact only less than 8% of the operational and capital funding for Catholic separate schools comes from the residential property taxes of separate school supporters.

About 72% comes from general provincial revenues, that is from the taxes of all, Catholic or non-Catholic, religious or non-religious. About 15% comes from the property taxes of businesses (they cannot control where their taxes go) and 5% from other sources. So non-Catholics are being forced to fund a particular religious system with whose policies on, for example, abortion or the right of gays to marry, they might not agree.

The current Ontario system also discriminates against non-Catholics because of the separate school system, for several reasons, receives more in funding from general revenues per student,

than the public school system so funding the separate school system is costing non-Catholics more in taxes than if we had only one public non-denominational school system.

The current Ontario system discriminates against non-Catholic parents because Catholics, as of right, can send their child to a separate school or a public school. Non-Catholics at the elementary school level, can ask for their child to go to a separate school (because it is closer, or newer, etc.) but they do not have the right to send their child. Many non-Catholic parents would not want their child to go to a separate school even if it was closer, and no parent should have to choose between their child going to a school nearer them or their child having a non-denominational public school education, but non-Catholic parents do not even have their choice. Some elementary separate schools admit non-Catholics if they have room, some do not. At the high school level, all students have the right to attend separate schools and to be exempted from religious courses, though some boards are more co-operative than others in granting these exemptions.

The current Ontario system also discriminates against non-Catholics for teaching positions but that is covered in the next question.

Jacobsen: Catholic schools require teachers to be Catholic. How is this prejudiced against the non-Catholic population in Canada, especially the teachers?

Landau: See my point under Question 1 about education in Canada being generally under provincial control so can't speak about discrimination in Canada, just by province. Again, I am talking only about Ontario.

Catholic separate schools can legally discriminate against non-Catholic teachers. The application form for Catholic Boards requires a Personal Reference Letter from a priest. Catholic School Boards may occasionally hire non-Catholics if they cannot find any Catholic with the qualifications to teach, for example, calculus but they will never become a head of department, superintendent, etc. [See (*Daly v. Ontario (Attorney General)*), 44 O.R. (3d) 349 for a court case upholding separate school right to discriminate]. Some boards also require educational assistants and library assistants to be Catholics.

So Catholics, who are about 31% of the population of Ontario, have access to 100% of teaching jobs. Non-Catholics, who are about 69 % of the population of Ontario, have access to only 69% of the jobs. Catholics have about twice the chance of non-Catholics of getting a teaching job in Ontario.

Jacobsen: How can the Ontario government abolish separate school funding, completely?

Landau: Ontario could pass a resolution through the Provincial Parliament asking for the federal government to amend the *Constitution Act, 1867*, so subsections (1) to (4) of s.93 of the *Constitution Act, 1867* which guarantee the rights separate schools had in 1867 in Confederation no longer apply to Ontario. Quebec did this in 1997 and within 7 months of Quebec's resolution the *Constitution Act* amendment had gone through Parliament and been proclaimed into law by the Governor General. Newfoundland also abolished its requirement for separate school funding in the same way. Quebec now has one public (two-language) school system.

Jacobsen: How much more money do separate schools receive in operational funding from the provincial revenues?

Landau: From 2002-03 to 2014-15, separate schools received about \$1,500 more in operating revenues per student per year than public schools (about \$1,600 more from 2011-12 to 2014-15). They received about \$1,700 more per student per year in combined operational and capital funding per year from 2011-12 to 2014-15. I am using the figures from 2002-03 to show this is a steady persistent pattern, using the recent figures to show this pattern continues, and using the combined operating and capital figures to show it is not that public schools somehow receive more in capital grants.

Jacobsen: Those who support public schools also support separate schools through grants. The separate schools received almost \$1600 more per student per annum. How is this economic privilege for religious schools still extant?

Landau: There are two main reasons. One is that the three main political parties keep on saying: “it is a complex constitutional issue about which we can do nothing”. They ignore that Quebec abolished funding for separate schools in 1997 by a resolution through the Quebec National Assembly (or Provincial Parliament) asking for the federal government to amend the *Constitution Act, 1867* so subsections 93(1) to 93(4) no longer applied to Quebec. Within 7 months the amendment had gone through the House of Commons, the Senate, and been proclaimed into law by the Governor-General. Ontario could do the same thing. It would be even easier because Quebec has set an example for us. But most people don’t know this so they just accept the excuses of the three main political parties/

The second reason is most people don’t realize how much the current system costs us. They say Catholics pay for separate schools through residential property taxes. I know residential property taxes cover less than 8% of the operational costs (and none of the capital costs) but most people don’t. Separate school supporters say we would need the same number of teachers and school supplies, ignoring all the administrative costs which our duplicate system incur. Even if you look at the cost of transportation, separate schools spend way more per student busing students because they have fewer students over the same area. Same goes for trustees and superintendents, and schools not fully utilized in both systems. As people have commented, suppose we had two fire departments, one which served Catholics and hired Catholic firefighters, and another one which served everyone else, and hired firefighters of all religions. Think of all the duplicate administrative costs. The Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods of Ontario did a study in 2012 which estimated that 1.25 to 1.6 billion dollars would be saved yearly if funding for separate schools were eliminated but most people don’t know about it.

Jacobsen: Circa 1867 only 25% of Catholic students, or 5% of all students, went to separate Catholic publicly funded schools, but at the present, 31% of all students attend these publicly funded separate Catholic schools. How did this come to be? How can this be reversed?

Landau: About 25% to 30% of all Catholic students went to separate schools in 1867. This was about 5% of the student population. First of all, only about 15% of the school population was Catholic in 1867. Now it is about 31%. That is one difference. But the biggest difference is the funding. In 1867, separate schools received only about 62% to 66% of the funding per student as public schools. There were several reasons for this but two important ones. First of all, public schools received funding from the local municipalities. About 20% of their funding came from local municipalities. But municipalities did not contribute to separate school funding. Secondly, property owners could only direct their rates to separate schools if they swore an affidavit saying

they wanted to contribute to separate schools. An incorporated business cannot swear an affidavit. So while owners of small businesses could direct their taxes to a separate school, incorporated businesses, of course, cannot swear affidavits and could not direct their taxes to separate schools. There were other reasons, but these were the main two explaining why separate schools had 62% to 66% of the funding per student as public schools.

Catholic parents, like non-Catholic parents, wanted their children to have a good education. They realized that in general children would receive a better education at public schools, partly because of the funding, but also because they would be as Dr. Ryerson, the Superintendent of Education, put it, measuring themselves against the majority and not receiving an isolated, inferior education.

So what has changed? As I said, now there is a larger percent of Catholics in the Ontario population (about 31% are Catholics) but I do not think that is the main reason. Ontario separate schools were funded at a lower level than public schools for many years. Various changes were made such as allowing incorporated businesses to estimate the percent of their shareholders who were Catholic and contributing to public and separate schools on that proportion but it made little difference.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's, it appeared Ryerson's prediction that separate schools would fade away because of their poorer tax base was coming true. Separate schools had to set higher mill rates (education tax rate on property) which alienated Catholic ratepayers or they matched the public school mill rates and had lower salaries, less qualified staff, higher pupil-teacher ratios and narrower programs. Most chose the latter. In Toronto, up to 50% of Catholics were in public schools.

But in 1963 Premier Robarts (Conservative Party) announced the Ontario Foundation Tax Plan. This Plan had a commendable goal of helping poorer boards, often rural. But by treating separate school boards as poor boards like any other poor board, it greatly increased their funding and Robarts is credited by many with saving the separate school system. Unqualified staff were replaced with qualified staff, etc.

There were other steps that increased funding for separate schools. In 1978, funding was greatly increased for grades 9 and 10 in separate schools. In 1985, grades 11-13 which had not been funded for separate schools, were funded. In 1997, the *Fewer School Boards Act* and the *Education Quality Improvement Act* changed the entire basis of funding of all school boards. While its intention may have been (or not been) to give students the same level of funding based on their needs regardless of where they lived, the result was to greatly increase funding for separate schools. Businesses were forced to direct their property taxes on a per capita basis to the public and separate school boards in their area. The owners could be Anglican, atheist, Sikh, etc. It made no difference.

As separate schools raised less per student in residential property taxes, they were given more funding per student from the provincial government in general revenues to make up the difference. As separate schools generally have fewer students over the same area as public schools, they are given more money in administrative grants to pay for busing, administration, etc.

So now, unlike 1867 when separate schools received only 62% to 66% as much per capita as public schools, they receive more per student yearly than public schools. And this is even though

public schools have in general more students who have English as a second language or special needs. So it is not surprising, aside from any other reason such as priests pressuring parents to send their children to separate schools, or claims by groups such as the Fraser Institute that separate schools have better results (which they generally don't especially if the number of ESL and special needs students are taken into consideration), that Catholic parents send their children to the better-funded and often newer schools.

The only way to reverse this is to stop funding for separate schools altogether or reduce the funding they receive. OPEN's legal challenge will try both these strategies.

Jacobsen: What can Canadians in their municipalities, provinces or territories, and across the nation do to either eliminate the separate publicly funded school systems, merge them with the regular public school system, or defund of them for those that don't want them?

Landau: Again, we have to talk about provinces, not Canada, as I made clear in Question 1. In Ontario, Canadians should donate to the legal challenge by OPEN (One Public Education Now) at <https://open.criweb.org/aboutOpen.html>. We welcome donations from across Canada. To make it clear, we do not want to "merge" the separate and the public school system. The physical buildings might remain, but there would be only one publicly-funded non-denominational two-language school system. Any teachers hired in the future would be hired as they are currently hired in the public school system, without a preference for any religion (or no religion). Teachers would no longer spend about 11% to 13% of the school day teaching the Catholic religion. Any teaching about religion would be based on the principle that no religious or philosophical outlook (including atheism, humanitarianism, etc.) should be promoted as superior. Students would go to the closest publicly-funded school, which would all be public.

The three main political parties, the Conservatives, Liberals, and the NDP all claim it is a "constitutional issue" about which they can do nothing. People in Ontario could vote for the Green Party, which is the only party that wants to stop funding separate schools. They could go to public meetings in the run-up to the June 2018 election and ask all candidates if they would support a resolution similar to Quebec's, asking for the federal government to pass a resolution saying s.93(1)-(4) no longer apply to Ontario, and say they will not vote for a candidate that does not support this resolution. But I think given that the three major parties all support the status quo, that donating to OPEN (One Public Education Now) is the best strategy for Ontario.

Alberta and Saskatchewan may have different strategies, but someone from these provinces would be better able to comment. I know that in theory separate schools are funded at approximately the same level as public schools in these provinces and private religious or non-religious schools that follow required rules get funding at a lower level but someone from these provinces would be better able to describe how it works in practice and what the best strategies for these provinces is.

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

Janet French on the Catholic Education System

November 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Janet French is a Reporter for the Edmonton Journal. Here we talk about Catholic education and the sex ed curriculum.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did they currently come to the controversy in sex ed? What is some of the history of it?

Janet French: It was in Spring or early Summer of 2016 that the Government of Alberta announced a complete overhaul of the K-12 curriculum. It was the first of its kind in Alberta. Curriculum in the past has been piecemeal, “Now, we’re going to redo social studies.” It would be done in isolation from other topics. They would rewrite all of social studies K through 12.

Another interesting element is that it in different languages at different times. There is also a Francophone element. They would do social studies, implement it, and then do the Francophone version. I think many Francophone people felt there was not a lot of Francophone input into the system.

Now, they are putting Francophone in the rewrite as well as including a lot of Indigenous people in. There are people from Nunavut and the Northwest Territories too because many people use the curriculums from Alberta in their curricula.

There are either 6 or 8 broad subject areas about this, like math, social studies, English, French, sciences, and the health and wellness, which is where the sex ed comes in. In Alberta, most of the sex ed comes between grade 4 and grade 9.

In high school, there is a course called CALM 20. it stands for Career and Life Management. It has been around forever. I am old. You can take it any year in high school. it covers just like it sounds, career and life management. It teaches you to apply for a job and to get a resume done. Then it teaches sex ed.

Jacobsen: At present, there has been some mild back-and-forth within the news about a proposed alternative sex education curriculum. What have been some of the proposed additions or changes by the Catholic superintendents?

French: What is weird about this is that we don’t know what’s going to be in the curriculum yet, I am going to talk a little technical about curriculum writing. There seems to be some general public misunderstanding about what it takes for a curriculum.

They had these huge teams, like 300 and something, even 400 sometimes, mostly volunteers such as teachers and professors spending their own hours on this as well as people employed by Alberta Education.

They work on those 6 or 8 areas depending on who you talk to. They depend on who you talk to. They have written something called an introduction, which is – “What do we want to cover in each grade or each subject?” – the Scope and Sequence. They are very, very broad and high level.

They are almost like themes that they want to touch on. I haven't looked at the health one. The one in Alberta that has been the one of the most debated has been the social studies one and people argue if there is enough history in it. Same with the math one about serving kids well.

We didn't hear much about the sex education or the wellness one. back in April or May of 2016, when Alberta Education Minister David Eggen introduced this idea of a curriculum rewrite, he said, 'One of the elements will be teaching consent.' Updated sex ed would be part of it, already, if you were a private religious school board or Catholic school board, you would be asking if this would be like Ontario's. it was revealed in 2015.

It has been very controversial. many parents pull their kids out of public schools as a result of it because they didn't want their kids learning some of the outcomes, there were rumblings or rumors about this being a problem.

So, I heard in June. There was a small organization called Accessing Information Not Myths. They put out a press release in June saying, "We're hearing that the Catholic school boards want to run their own curriculum."

But they didn't have a lot of evidence. There were rumors. They were reading into things that were in annual reports and newsletters from various Catholic education groups. There wasn't a lot of solid evidence.

I emailed the president of the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association and said, "Is there any truth to this? I talked to the Ministry of Education. it looks like you're submitting something that is parallel and would replace what would be in the new health curriculum."

She said, "No, we're just writing resources. Basically, documents that help the teachers teach the curricular outcomes. Those exist right now for the current sex ed curriculum. But then, I filed a Freedom of Information request because I wasn't sure who was telling the truth.

What I got back was a series of documents that you can see on the website, what I got back you can see on our website, there was a bit of a back and forth between the Council of Catholic Superintendents of Alberta, which is, like it sounds, the superintendents who work at the different Catholic school districts across the province.

Also, people who work for the Ministry of Education. What they did was apply for a grant, I don't have the documents at home with me. It says to write a parallel sex education curriculum that is from a Catholic perspective.

The Deputy Minister wrote back in March and said, 'Sorry, no sorry, we don't pay for religious education. That is in your wheelhouse. There are other resources you can draw on nationally to write religious curriculum. That is not our job.'

When I interviewed Karl Germann from the CCSSA, he said, 'We're going ahead with it anyway.' I said, 'How are you going to pay for that if you need \$66,000?' He said they will be using time from people who are already employed in various Catholic school districts.

Doing it in a way in Grand Prairie, where he works, taking somebody who doesn't work in a classroom, so they don't have to pay for a substitute teacher, so it is more cost-effective for them. What they wanted to do was to second some teachers outside of the classroom to have them be able to work on the curriculum.

The next thing they wrote, which seems to be causing a lot of tension or debate, is that they sent in this document, and they say Alberta Education requested this information, but this did not turn up in my FOI.

I didn't have an email that said, "Send us all your concerns." I don't know that for sure. That's what they were saying. That they were asked to explain what their concerns were about the upcoming sex ed curriculum. That's where they went through the listing, 'Okay, here is our subject headings that concern us.'

'Consent: We don't think consent should be the minimum bar for having a sexual relationship with somebody. It should be consent but within the context of a marriage.'

'We can teach about different kinds of contraception, but we can't promote contraception.' Then there are certain things they say they can't teach at all, 'We can't promote a homosexual lifestyle.' Yes, they used the word "homosexual."

'People experience same-sex inclinations, but they would have to be taught that the Church's teaching is that they should live a life of chastity or I guess abstinence. Some other things that they touched on were that they didn't want to teach about anal or oral sex because in their belief the Catholic teaching is you should have sex to make babies and that doesn't make babies.

There was a section that talked about 'sexualization of girls (and boys).' It is interesting that boys are an afterthought in that discussion.

Jacobsen: I am piecing together some of the narratives from some of the things noted in the response, so if I can relay some of the things that you said with regards to the changes. They would view the regular sex education proposal as promoting certain things rather than simply teaching them.

French: That's what they're concerned about. Yes, they're saying there are certain things they can teach. And they don't go into much detail about how they would teach or how much detail they would teach it into, but it is saying, 'We can teach about what different kinds of contraception do, but we can't promote it because the Church does not smile upon it.'

One thing they say they will flat out not teach it. The language in the document is very closed off to the idea of what they call "modern gender theory." They say, 'God's Plan or vision is that your biological sex matches your gender identity. Full stop. We can't promote anything that would teach biological sex as different from gender identity.

Jacobsen: So, the idea would be the promotion or teaching of a lifestyle of abstinence, sex only within a marriage, non-promotion of homosexuality (gay, lesbian, or bisexual), as well as rejection of more modern gender theory with a preference, in other words a full stop strong preference, for 'God's Providence' – so to speak – or 'God's Plan' with biological sex and gender being one and the same.

French: Yes. It all has to be discussed within the appropriateness of a marriage between a man and a woman. That phrasing was in there repeatedly. There are ideas about contraception: 'We believe that when you have sex it is full giving and you are not fully giving of yourself if you are holding back the life making portion of it.

Jacobsen: What has been proposed as some of the next steps in terms of the conversation between the Government of Alberta, the Catholic education schooling system within the province, as well as the regular school system?

French: So, what happened was, after I interviewed Karl from the CCSSA (he's the president), he said that they were concerned about the Ontario sex ed curriculum. This document outlining all of their areas of concerns, which was a proactive outreach step to say, "When you write your learning outcomes (what you have to teach), they want to be as vague as possible to be able to teach it from their perspective."

It would have an influence not only on what Catholic students learn but on what all Alberta students learn no matter where they went to school. Education Minister David Eggen said, "This document is unacceptable. Schools are not going to teach that being gay is wrong or that God has a moral judgment about it."

The problem is the Catholic superintendents haven't put out their alternative sex education plan. That hasn't happened yet. They say that's going to happen sometime in November. The health and wellness committee or the working group working on the provincial curriculum haven't written their outcomes explaining what they think students should learn.

We probably won't see that until Spring. Karl said that in his conversations with the Ministry, not the Minister but the people who work in the government such as the civil servants said this is not going to be a big problem.

We're not going to have a big conflict here. But when I hear the Minister and the Premier talk about how their perspective is not acceptable, I do not see how that can be the case. They're probably going to butt heads about this for a while.

I imagine there are a lot of conversations happening behind the scenes after all of the attention that this got.

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

Interview with Monica Miller – Senior Counsel, AHA Appignani Humanist Legal Center

November 26, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Monica Miller is Senior Counsel for the American Humanist Association in the Appignani Humanist Legal Center. Here we have a chat, enjoy.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family background – geography, culture, language, religion/irreligion, and education?

Monica Miller: I grew up in a non-religious household in Northern California. My mom is “spiritual” but not tied to any denomination and my dad is generally agnostic. That said, my sister and I were put in a nearby Catholic school (a beautiful school in Sleepy Hollow, Marin) from pre-K through eighth grade, which I started to resent around middle school but am now grateful for the experience, as I think it helped shape my atheist views. My parents agreed to let me go to a public high school. I took an elective course at our community college on world religions and it was there I discovered I was definitely an atheist. It wasn’t until college I learned about humanism.

Jacobsen: Graduating from Pitzer College in 2008, and from Columbia University in 2009 with a MPA in environmental science and policy, and *cum laude* from Vermont Law School (2012). What have been the personal and professional benefits from this in work advancing humanism?

Miller: Humanism teaches that we must use science and reason to solve our world’s problems. I’ve always been an animal rights advocate (deciding to go vegetarian by third grade) and now I work for the only civil rights organization in the country that is using litigation to secure legal rights for nonhuman animals (rather than animal welfare). (The Nonhuman Rights Project). I’m fortunate to be able to work for both the NhRP and the AHA. During my senior year at Pitzer College, I took a first-in-its-kind course, “Sociology of Secularism,” taught by Phil Zuckerman. Now Pitzer has created an entire Secularism Studies program. Through that course, I learned more about humanism and issues concerning separation-of-church-and-state. Then at Vermont Law School, I started my own Secular Legal Society student group. I later discovered American Humanist Association and my career took off!

Jacobsen: What are perennial issues and battlegrounds to maintain a solid line between church and state, or any other religious institution and state?

Miller: The most common church-state-separation violations we encounter are government religious displays (the cross, nativity scenes, Ten Commandments), and school prayers.

Jacobsen: What have been more recent, difficult battles?

Miller: The most recent battles I’ve been fighting have been over two giant government Christian cross displays, one in Pensacola, Florida and one in Bladensburg, Maryland. The Florida District Court ruled in our favor, and ordered that the cross be removed. The City has appealed the decision to the Eleventh Circuit. In the Maryland case, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals also ruled in our favor, and the county is talking about trying to take the case to the

Supreme Court. I do not believe they'll be successful, as the federal courts have been virtually unanimous in finding government cross displays unconstitutional. I also recently filed a petition for certiorari in the Supreme Court asking it to take our case challenging school prayers in Texas.

Jacobsen: Women's rights, especially reproductive rights, in America are under direct, and indirect, attack. How can grassroots activists, and legal professionals, fight to maintain those new and fragile rights from the historic norm of religious violations of women's bodies?

Miller: From a legal standpoint, we support the efforts of Planned Parenthood and stand ready to file or co-sign friend-of-court (amicus) briefs in their cases. So far, we haven't had to get involved but are prepared to do so. And obviously, we (AHA), joined the Women's March last January. Grassroots activists can also support the AHA's Feminist Humanist Alliance. The Feminist Humanist Alliance is a multi-issue movement powered by and for women, transpeople, and genderqueer people to fight for social justice.

Jacobsen: What are non-humans are non-human rights applied to most often? How can people get involved, even donate to, organizations and individuals fighting for their rights?

Miller: Right now, at least in our country, nonhuman animals have no rights. Despite the commonly used term "animal rights," animals are considered mere "things" under the law and are therefore not considered rights-bearers. At the Nonhuman Rights Project, we are trying to change this, at least for autonomous animals (such as chimpanzees, orcas, and elephants). You can support our work here: <https://secure.everyaction.com/w968uwjsAUK2ommJxs0LHg2> and learn more about our work here: <https://www.nonhumanrights.org/who-we-are/>

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Miller: Thank you for the interview!

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

Losing Our Religion Documentary Film

November 27, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Members of The Clergy Project were featured in the documentary film called Losing Our Religion. It was shown October 13th and 14th at the Carlton Theatre in downtown Toronto. The documentary was made by Leslea Mair and Leif Kaldor, who come from Zoot Pictures.

Other prominent individuals in the film are Katherine Dunphy, Linda LaScola, Daniel Dennett, Dan Barker, and Phil Zuckerman. Several other prominent individuals within the formal irreligious community appear in the film.

As a feature-length documentary, it is about preachers who are no longer religious believers. The Clergy Project has about 600 members. With the documentary film, this is an exploration of some of their stories. For many people, the loss of faith can mean the loss of family, community, work, income, and hope and meaning from the belief in a hereafter.

Without these life assurances, life can become difficult, uncertain, and even shatter the individual preacher, where even the support from a regular traumatic life event can be taken away, such as job security, and family and community.

This raises personal questions, such as, “How do I make a living? Will I have contact with my family at all? Where can I find meaning in life? Can I even find another community?” Or simply, “What do I do?” These are important questions that arise in the context of losing one’s faith as a leader in the community, potentially.

Now, there are even experiments with communities that have a form of religions and religious ceremony without having the supernatural tenets and beliefs associated with them, including the secular churches, Sunday Assemblies, the Oasis Network, and others.

There will be another showing at 12250 SW Denney Rd in the Southminster Presbyterian Church in Beaverton, Oregon. This will be on November 30 at 7:30 PM, which is a Thursday.

Bamidele Adeneye on Death Threats in Nigeria

December 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Bamidele Adeneye is a friend from Nigeria. Here he, kindly, recounts threats to life: his.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have had threats to your life. What have they been, my friend?

Bamidele Adeneye: Well, it all started in 2014 when I had a video interview challenging miracle healers and pastors in my country, Nigeria. I didn't even know the video would be aired on TV. Then the calls started coming in. I even noticed that friends and people I did business with started avoiding me.

Then I had to rescue a gentleman from death in Kano because he denounced Islam and his family were going to hurt him. That made me famous to not just Christians but Muslims as the face of atheism in Nigeria. My phone number was listed on my social media account and I guess that's where they got my number from. I would receive calls from strangers saying things like they were going to kill me.

Online messages promising to "show" me. It was a very disturbing experience. I became paranoid because it's Nigeria. I am surrounded by people who see me as an agent of the devil, even relatives. I lost friends as well. Because of the situation, I had to change my daughter's school. My sister's who live abroad are always worried because they are the threats online and even get told by people they know to warn me that I should be careful.

Jacobsen: Can you recall some examples?

Adeneye: There are quite a number of them. I was as recently as July physically attacked by a group of strangers while I was trying to get back to my car. They called my social media name and when I mistakenly answered, I was attacked. They kept saying I'm the agent of the devil all the while they were beating on me. I had to escape. I was so afraid.

Calls at odd times of the day from hidden numbers issuing threats, promising attacks on me and my family. I had to get dogs to protect my home at some point before I later decided to move them to a safe location. It became difficult to live as a family as we couldn't go out together in public anymore. We spent our holidays at home most of the time because I was afraid of potential attacks on us.

Jacobsen: You are traveling. Are these threats part of the reason for the travels?

Adeneye: Definitely. It became necessary to stay away from my home and my family. I took long breaks away from home for peace of mind. I had to create a space between myself and my loved ones for security reasons. My younger brother who looks exactly like me has been targeted as well. He had to deactivate his social media account because of backlash from people who thought he was me.

Jacobsen: What countries did you visit? What did you expect in terms of the social and cultural aspects of religion entering in these countries? What was the actual experience there?

Adeneye: I took trips to the UK to see my family and friends. It felt normal being an unbeliever there. I also went to the USA where I met those who were exactly like the ones back home. Although, unlike Nigeria where you're judged even at work by your religious beliefs or otherwise, you're protected by law somewhat by the law in the USA. I'm planning to visit Canada to see what it truly means to live in a liberal secular state.

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

Adeneye: You're welcome, Scott.

Atheism in Kenya with George Ongere of CFI-Kenya

December 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

George Ongere is the Director of the Center for Inquiry-Kenya, and a colleague and friend. Here we talk about atheism there.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How prevalent is atheism in Kenya?

George Ongere: Atheism is currently gaining popularity in Kenya. The media has gained interest at the rate through which young people are currently abandoning religion. In her article in the Daily Nations, which appeared on July 3rd 2013 with the title, *The Rise of Atheism in Kenya*, Vera Okeyo brought the stunning reality of how young people were abandoning religion and embracing Atheism. It became public trending rage and talk in the weeks that followed with religious personalities claiming that young people in the country were being misled to embrace unethical realities. Even though the article received negative comments condemning the young people who had abandoned religion, the article made three different hallmarks in Kenya. First, it introduced the term “Atheism” to the general public where Kenyans, even at the rural, came to the reality that there was an alternative life stance to religion, where people could live without believing in God and any supernatural entities. The importance of this popularization is that a good percentage of the population started to distinguish the term with other confusing ideologies like devil worshipping. They understood that Atheists did not believe in anything supernatural be it Satan, Witchcraft or God. Secondly, it gave rise to militant Atheism in Kenya. It gave courage to personalities like Harrison Mumia, the President of Atheist in Kenya, to start militant atheism in the media. Third, it popularized organized Atheism, where one of the organizations that got fame during that time was Freethinkers Initiative Kenya (FIKA) since it was featured in the article. Lastly, because of the interest of Atheism, live debates between religious people and Atheists started to be hosted live in the Kenyan televisions.

With the rise of technology where many young people can gain access to the internet and find reading materials that gives alternative view to religion, young people are embracing skepticism, humanism, Atheism and other radical ideologies that makes them non religious.

Jacobsen: What is the state of atheism in social life in Kenya?

Ongere: Atheism is still a life stance that is still looked at with suspicion in many Kenyan cultures and societies. Many people who have embraced atheism still fear to come out of the closet for fear of being dismissed by their relatives and friends. The challenge is the way religion has corrupted Kenyans to believe that it is the best model to all the realities. Religion has captured all institutions including marriage, family, work, and institutions of higher learning where most people socialize.

Whereas many people, even close relatives, might be aware an individual is an atheist, they might not be comfortable around the person. Particularly areas that challenge atheists who are still in their youth are relationships and dating. Most women tend to believe that people who subscribe to religion will make good husbands than those who are atheist. Particularly, marriages in Kenya still follow the traditional procedure where the parents play important roles in marriage, where they have to know the people engaged to their sons and daughters by doing background check. It means that people who do not believe in God might be trapped where the

parents refuses their child to be married to someone who does not believe in God. Additionally, most Kenyans still believe that a perfect acceptable wedding is a religious one that includes a wedding presided over by religious personnel.

Nevertheless, young people in Kenya are trying to change the situation where religion does not influence relationships and friendship anymore. The social media have brought free flow of information where the youths get a lot of materials concerning atheism and they are starting to accept it as a reality. I am optimistic that religion will not be of much influence to them.

Jacobsen: For those in North American culture, or Canadian culture, what is something that they will not be likely to know about irreligion in Kenya?

Ongere: Most people in the west still have the belief that finding Atheists in Africa is fictional. “Africans are notoriously religious” a renown quote by John S. Mbiti, who was is an authority in Africa religion, believed that Africans will at no time abandon religion. The quote has shaped western scholarship and judgment about Africa religiosity such that they cannot imagine of some Africans living without religion. However, what most people in the west do not know is that scholars like Mbiti used short-sighted binoculars that could not see the future clearly. Mbiti did not know that technology could expose people in Africa, mostly the young to alternative views to religion. One of the best happenings in Kenya is that the Atheist movement is courageous and they have challenged some of the doctrines of religions, talked about separation of church and state, the removal of compulsory religious teaching in primary schools and they have also put the government to pressure to have then registered. The government refused to register the Atheist Movement in Kenya arguing that the group was unconstitutional since Kenya was founded on religious principles. The case is still in court where the movement has accused the attorney general and the head of register of society of denying them their fundamental rights of registration.

Jacobsen: How has Christianity hurt Kenyan citizens and the development of the country?

Ongere: In Kenya, people who subscribe to Christianity are the majority and are estimated to be about 84.4% and followed by Muslims who are about 9.7%, 2.4% to non religious people and the other remain to traditional African religions and others. Thus, Christian religion is dominant in the country thus most of the current cultures are influenced by Christian principles.

Christianity has hurt the country in many ways. To start with, the country is suffering from the HIV/ AIDS scourge. In the current times, about 1.6 million people are living with HIV and there are about 62, 000 new infections. In 2016 alone, about 36, 000 people died of AIDS related deaths. Moreover, about 64% of the adults infected were on antiretroviral drugs and about 65% of children were on antiretroviral treatment. In this way, the people diagnosed with the disease are amongst the vulnerable population that has been targeted by Christianity. There are many cases where Christian denominations have carried out healing crusades and advised these people to abandon taking antiretroviral drugs and this has contributed the many deaths that would have otherwise be living happily. Moreover, religion has brought about stigmatization of people with the disease. Mostly, most religious people believe that people who prostitute are the people who should have the disease. As such, many people would not come in the open and declare their status for fear of being discriminated. In this way, Christianity has thwarted the efforts to prolong the lives of HIV/ AIDS.

Moreover, Christian belief has made many poor people to be exploited through healing missions that involve trickery. The best case in Kenya was that of a re-known rich pastor of the Salvation Healing Ministry Victor Kanyari who was conning people by using trickery. Through radical journalism, the pastor was exposed of conning people by using magical tricks. Un ware, the followers of the church sold their properties to get such healings. There are many Christian denominations who still used these tricks to exploit their victims and driving them into poverty.

To add on, Child trafficking has been linked to many religious organizations. One of the prominent cases in Kenya was that of UK-Based Televangelist Gilbert Deya who was famous for the miracle babies. Deya claimed to give people miracle babies that were given by God to people. However, it was discovered that the Deya was in a network of a scheme that linked themselves with cartels that stole children in delivery rooms and trafficked them abroad. Currently, the preacher is in the toughest prison in Kenya; the Kamiti Maximum Prison.

It thus demonstrates how Christian religion as a belief does not help Kenya progress in any way.

Jacobsen: Has it helped develop in anyway?

Ongere: It would be biased to say that Christianity has not helped Kenya in any way. First, many great institutions of learning were launched in Kenya through Christianity. The missionaries in Kenya, who were in their mission to spread their religions, did many positive things to the places they were involved in. They even penetrated the rural areas and built schools that gave rural folks a chance to get educated and improve their lives. Moreover, religious institutions have also been involved in many social justice issues. They have helped the poor, orphans and built hospitals that have helped many Kenyans.

However, when looked deeply, even though Christianity brought help in Kenya, their motive behind such efforts discredits the assistance they brought to Africa. Christianity was a tool that was used to colonize Africans and they did not even intervene during the harsh rule that Kenyan underwent under the colonialists. The education and the help they brought were to tame Africans not to resist the subjugation that they were being put under. This was even captured by first Africa President and Desmond Tutu. They said, “When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said ‘Let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land”. As such, it is inevitable that most Kenya would not be impressed much by such efforts.

Jacobsen: Where are some educational, political, and social-cultural initiatives on going to improve the knowledge about an acceptance of atheism in Kenya?

Ongere: Campus Activism, organizing of debates and workshops on topics of Atheism, science, reason, free inquiry and humanist values are some of the initiatives that are going on to promote the acceptance of atheism in Kenya. When I became the director of the Center for Inquiry in Kenya in the year 2007, Atheism was still strange to many people and the atheist movement had not even started actively in Kenya. I knew I had a big task to steer the development of skepticism and rationality at the institutions of higher learning and in the community using the youth organizations that I was involved with.

The first step was to start an On campus group at the University of Nairobi. I knew it was going to be a challenging task but with the help of CFI, I managed to hold the first workshop successfully in 2008 and the turn out amazed me. I noticed the youth were in dilemma about religion and wanted to find out if there were other alternatives. I invited speakers like Leo Igwe

of Nigeria, Deo Sessitoleko of Uganda, and Betty Nasaka of Uganda. They were experienced by then and they help spread the humanist message to the groups I have formed at the campuses.

Moreover, we have also used humanism message to start social justice programs in the rural where irrational beliefs like religion and witchcraft have thwarted human progress. In the year 2012, we came with the Humanist Orphans Program. In the rural of Kisumu, we witnessed unreason that was threatening to gag the future of the young generation. Practices like wife inheritance were spreading HIV/ AIDS and the result was that many parents were dying leaving behind children who faced a bleak future. Moreover, religion was also contributing to this demise where instead of educating the people about taking Anti-retroviral drugs, they organized healing crusades and cheat the people that they had been healed. Thus, it made the people in the rural to rule out taking anti-retroviral drugs. With many orphans left behind without any means of survival, most of them went to the streets turning into prostitution and some went to become sex slaves. We believed that with the help we got from CFI Transnational, we could help save the situation. In this way, we started the Humanist Orphans Kenya a program that educates abandoned children; provide them with uniforms and other basic materials. Saving the future generation to lead better lives is one of the humanist messages we have passed across and this has helped in the acceptance of humanism in the village.

Justice, Fairness, Compassion and the Criminal Justice System of Canada

December 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Something of note: the Canadian Criminal Justice System opened for suggested reforms, “The Government of Canada is undertaking a broad review of Canada’s Criminal Justice System to ensure that it is just, compassionate and fair, and promotes a safe, peaceful and prosperous Canadian society” (Government of Canada, 2017).

It feels like a good opportunity for a Christmas present to the country from citizens. Five topic areas in the call for recommendations for the changes to it: victims’ experience, Indigenous over-representation, mental health and addictions, restorative justice, and court delays.

For means of involvement, the government set the number at four. An Online Choicebook, online discussions, Twitter townhalls, and email submissions for those with an interest in it. As a public consultation process for those with an interest in the possibility for slight reduction in long-term suffering of some citizens, here’s a chance, deadline: January 15, 2017.

One month.

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The New 7 Dirty Words

December 17, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

ATLANTA, GEORGIA, Dec. 17, 2017 /INGSOC/ – The Ministry of Truth, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Health and Human Services (HHS) branches, spoke on the recent work to protect the American citizenry and to help with funding.

Not to be listed here, so as to protect the reader from threatening words, dangerous thoughts, our ignorance is a strength after all. The CDC and HHS announced the ban in a public information release. The potential for a higher-order command from Emmanuel Goldstein for the banned words remains uncertain.

“I do not know if this came from the HHS or the CDC, but I assume this came from the HHS,” a former official of the CDC said, “as the HHS officials make the budget. Some words can confuse, even discombobulate, those with budgetary concerns. So, why use them?”

A current spokesperson for the Party commented, “Look at what happens on colleges and universities now, they want to restrict our freedoms. They are anti-Party. We of the Party are the real and true freedom of speech people, but not for thoughtcrimes.”

Some current CDC officials complained about pressures from the Inner Party since their instantiation after the revolution. But if Big Brother can’t watch your words and you in your place of work, why not simply watch yourself for Big Brother? Be the best representative, especially if involved in budgetary works.

Be prole, be free.

Diego Fontanive on EOF, Memetics, and Critical Thinking

December 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Diego Fontanive founded EOF. His background is in sociology, psychology, and critical thinking. Here we talk, briefly, about some of his background and work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your background, so people know where you're coming from?

Diego Fontanive: I never had a religious background. Nevertheless, I grew up in Venice, Italy. The society there has a religious background, Catholic or Christian. My parents were not really religious. But they did send me to the church for a couple of years as a child because they said this would help with social skills.

I do have a background in sociology, psychology, critical thinking, and memetics or the study of memes.

Jacobsen: How did you become more involved with the skeptic movement in general?

Fontanive: I always struggled with the issue somehow. The acknowledgment of how people who are not really that and who can think decently critically can think these things. Even when they claim to be atheists or secular, or even skeptics, we do know critical thinking is an unnatural way to think.

We are biologically prone to be fallacious. Nonetheless, I think we should go beyond critical thinking and try to integrate methods of study such as the study of memes or memetics. This is what triggered me.

Also, I saw people who were people even supposedly trained in critical thinking didn't actually apply that in their own lives. I think that was the main trigger for me. I grew up in a non-religious family, but throughout the five years in the primary school. I had a teacher. She was religious.

I used to question her a lot. She completely discharged and refused to approach my questions critically. That was probably the trigger. That instead of questioning beliefs that people would rather protect them. Even though, they know in the back of their minds that something is wrong with it.

To explain that in a superficial way, it is existential security. That was a trigger.

Jacobsen: How did this lead to the End of Fear Project or EOF?

Fontanive: I am no longer comfortable with the full name, so that is why we use EOF. End of Fear sounds a bit bombastic and can open the door to misunderstandings. We do distinguish between natural fears, biological ones, such as the fear of others and so to defend oneself and those that are irrational fears.

The thing is to end irrational fear such as fear of God. If Jesus, then the fear of Jesus not loving me anymore, or irrational conspiracy theories. We have a lot of irrational conspiracy theories. Even with the further crazy beliefs, we promote magical thinking.

This is the aim and mission and vision of the project, which is to try and erase irrational fears – true logical fallacy detection, understanding of memetics, and also what I call metamemetics which is the understanding of fallacious and conditioning memes.

Jacobsen: What would you recommend for others to gain a little grounding in skepticism?

Fontanive: I would recommend *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, which explains the relationship between genes and memes. *The Selfish Gene* explains quite beautifully how memetic evolution cares about its own replication and adaptation and doesn't care about critical analysis of itself. I would say Richard Dawkins because of his approach.

I would recommend Susan Blackmore. I am not comfortable with Blackmore regarding her approach to spirituality. I believe spirituality is a meme. It doesn't exist. We have no evidence of it. Spiritual experiences, we can call them merely highly emotional experiences. But I would definitely recommend Richard Dawkins.

Jacobsen: What projects are you going to engage with EOF and others, for yourself?

Fontanive: What I am working on now as a priority alongside initiatives, we are working one-on-one with other people. We have work with artificial intelligence. We are developing programs for high schools and universities, for students and teachers.

The programs are a combination of critical thinking, metacognition, and the understanding of memes. I have done, recently, a speech or lecture at the European Skeptics Congress in Poland. The talk was about metamemetic thinking and the possibility that skepticism could be a meme in terms of many people calling and thinking of themselves as skeptics.

But their priority, cognitively speaking, is to seek a sort of identitarian shelter. For the next 2-3 years, I want to undertake this project for education. It goes back to education.

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

Fontanive: It was a pleasure.

Roman Catholic Church Unable to Compensate Sexual Abuse Victims

December 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Gabrielle Fahmy of CBC News reported on the inability of the Roman Catholic Church in New Brunswick to compensate sex abuse victims (2017).

Numerous Moncton archdiocesan priests were involved in sexual abuse cases, which is a liability for the finances of the church. In New Brunswick, based on reportage from the CBC, 56 lawsuits have been brought against the church.

There was a reconciliation process several years ago. Therefore, this number may be lower than it might have otherwise been in non-reconciliatory circumstances. Judge Michel Bastarache talked to victims between 2012 and 2014, privately.

109 victims were paid \$10.6 million while the Bathurst diocese paid \$5.5 million to 90 victims. The compensations ranged from \$15,000 to \$300,000.

The criteria were the age, extent, and severity of the sexual abuse within the archdiocese. Major cutbacks were inevitable for the church based on the multimillion-dollar expenses.

Moncton diocese staff were but from 19 to fewer than 10. Two were kept full-time. The rest were not full-time, even if kept on staff. The Dieppe diocesan center was sold. It was the home of the archbishop at the time.

With Bastarache, about 200 victims were given settlements based on abuse within the Roman Catholic Church within New Brunswick. Based on finances provided by Canada Revenue Agency, the Moncton archdiocese has been operating at a deficit for the past 2 to 4 years.

The church is now in confrontation with its insurance company saying that the insurance company should be paying for some of their compensation expenses to the sexual abuse victims.

The Archdiocese of Moncton is in a civil lawsuit, since 2015, with Co-Operators General insurance company, totaling \$4.2 million. The insurers accuse the church of knowing about the abuse and doing nothing to stop it, while at the same time failing to inform the insurance company even after knowing about the ongoing sexual abuse within its church.

Other churches, such as those in the United States, have shut down before in the wake of sexual abuse victims coming forward and then being embroiled in lawsuits.

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Waleed Al-Husseini on Fundamentalism and Reform in Islam

December 21, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Waleed Al-Husseini founded the Council of Ex-Muslims of France. He escaped the Palestinian Authority after torture and imprisonment in Palestine to Jordan and then France.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What about the pressing concerns of the moment? Miniskirts can make headlines. What are the fundamental issues right now?

Waleed Al-Husseini: The fundamentalism is the headline for this moment. What I mean in terms of fundamentalism is not only the jihadists who are bad, but also the miniskirts making the headlines in the media and making everything amiss in one country, this then takes over social media.

This is the fundamental issue. Every time, you will find something: summer coming soon. So there will be people discussing the issues around the Burkini. You will continue to see these headlines that make it seem like the Dark Ages.

Exactly, Muslims in there mini-society in Europe and the USA live in the Dark Ages. They live it in Arabic and Islamic countries.

Jacobsen: What about Muslim leaders who want an internal-to-Islam reformation? Is this a possibility? How far will it go?

Al-Husseini: This is our problem. Even if some Muslims need it, the population will not accept it. Last year, Jordan wanted to change the school's lessons plans, reform it, but what happens often was people not liking this because they want to learn Sharia!

That is why even at this time it's impossible for reform in Islam. Now, it's like reform in Nazism, in their time when they have the power. Islam has the power. The religion has the connections and the money. So, it is impossible. Maybe later they can! In this time, yes, it is impossible.

Because the 1st religion to have a revolution of light was Islam in the time of Mu'tazila. That time was one of the best things about everything! Because they were looking for Quran at most as a historical document and nothing more!

So, we have problems because they believe this Quran is for every time and everywhere!

And for me, anyone can believe that he is a terrorist.

Jacobsen: What part can the ex-Muslim community play in the reformation of the faith and providing a safe way out for those trapped by religion and culture?

Al-Husseini: We are the reason for making many Muslims use the term moderate because of us. Because they don't accept killing us, the non-believers or ex-Muslims! We know more from the inside.

Most of us know the Quran through its original language, in Arabic, which is the strongest translation of the Quran! And we know the ways of them, and will never be in these traps.

We showed and explained this. We can be part of a united Muslim front, who really want to help against the fundamentalists. And try it help our pal to be in the modern life, not stay there in the 7th century while we are in 21st.

Jacobsen: Insightful and cutting once again, my friend.

Critical Thinking About New Age Spiritualism With Jessica Schab

December 22, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

This Interview has been edited and updated from the original.

Jessica Schab went from being a spiritual New Age leader to being a skeptic. She began to think more critically about the claims of the movement and has been working to educate others about the falsehoods in the New Age movement. She is a Co-Founder of the EOF Project.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: To begin what was family background regarding faith?

Jessica Schab: I was raised in a cult. It was a combination of Christianity, Judaism, and Jehovah's Witness. It was known as 'The World Wide Church of God.' The church did not have a building of its own.

Its services were held in a high school that we attended every Saturday. We weren't allowed to eat pork, seafood, or things like this. We were also not really allowed to talk much to people who were not in the church.

The church taught that when you died God would resurrect you. God would bring you back to earth, but only after the planet is destroyed. Then the world would have peace for 1,000 years and then after that, well, no knows.

I was encouraged to learn the teachings of the church by heart. It instilled in me the importance of being a good person and helping no matter what, even if it meant sacrificing myself for the greater good. I remember having to always pray for the church leader, who I had never even met. His name was Herbert W. Armstrong.

Then when I was 14, my dad decided to leave the church. I was upset with him because suddenly all of our friends were no longer our friends because, sadly, I found out they only like you if we believed what they believed.

I later found out, not long after we left, that the church was shut down due to some scandal. Only recently, it has returned as 'The Restored Church of God'. After we left the church, I started to explore other churches.

I searched for ones that I could attend, but none of them felt right. So, I started to explore other religions. Yet, none of them felt right too. What I ended up doing, instead of choosing one over the other, was to embrace them all because they seemed to say the same thing: God is love, be a good person, and so on. This was a Segway into New Age beliefs, as they claim to embrace or mix every faith into one.

Jacobsen: How did you get into the New Age?

Schab: Mainly, because of multiple tragedies I went through, the first was my sister died when I was 16. Then my dad had a stroke. He started to make claims: that he talked to beings of other dimensions – angels, aliens, and stuff like this. He told me that he could talk to my sister.

That she wasn't really dead. That she was alive in another realm and was a bridge for us. There to help us with our mission on Earth. Then my dad told me aliens were interested in me. That they are preparing me for a very important mission.

I was upset because I wanted to be normal. I was rebelling against all the things my dad was saying. Though, looking back, I think it was his way of comforting me.

At age 21, my father died from a massive brain hemorrhage. If this was not painful enough, just a week before he died, I said horrible things to him. So, I had this huge amount of guilt. What made it worse, it had been drilled into me: our thoughts create reality.

So, I convinced myself. I was the one who killed him with my words. I resented myself for this. Especially when I realized how much I missed my dad, I wanted to be close with him. That's when I decided to embrace his spiritual New Age work.

My dad said I was a leader. I would help many people...one day. I never thought of myself as a leader, but I would become one if it meant I could accomplish his mission, save the world, and make my dad proud on the 'other side'.

I felt people needed real-life examples, not fictional characters in movies and books. So, I decided to be an example. As the desire started to grow in me to find and help like-minded people, to let them know they were not alone, I started making videos on YouTube.

I developed interest and support. People were telling me that I changed their life. I was even healing illnesses. I was invited to attend the Nexus Conference in Australia. That is where I was introduced to Project Camelot.

They were well-known for interviewing people on conspiracy theories, reptilian people – and basically all things woo. They ended up interviewing me, introducing me to the world as a 'Crystal Child'. I became famous overnight.

Shortly after that interview, I became invited to speak all over the world. I had convinced myself that my spiritual message/beliefs were truth. Thus, I was able to convince others. These beliefs were also the solution and answer to everything for me.

However, as time went on, I started to realize how something wasn't quite right with them. These beliefs were becoming filtered information that came into my mind. They were not helping me with my problems,

They were making them worse, but I was not able to see this at the time. It was too scary to confront that head-on because it was who I was. It was my job, my life. My entire world was comprised of these beliefs.

It's hard to question something so close to you. That's done so much for you. But then, when I started to notice how it was affecting other people, the way they think and not wanting to think or to question it.

I was burned out from always trying to help people, to heal them, to make videos. It felt never-ending. I started to get burned out. Shortly after, I became involved in an abusive relationship.

The guy was manipulative, controlling, and exploiting my followers and me. I could not take much action to get out of the relationship because my beliefs had convinced me. I can change him with my love and such, but the more loving and forgiving I was, the more the abuse amplified, the more he could get away with.

I was frustrated that my beliefs were not able to help me with my problems. I knew there was something wrong, but I did not know what it was. All I knew was that I had to get away from the relationship and have a fresh start, to get my mind clear and heal myself.

Jacobsen: How did this transition into the EOF?

Schab: I decided to go all over Asia and right before the 2012 ‘end of the world’, I went to Bali, Indonesia and set up a workshop to prepare people for the big shift in consciousness. That is where I met Diego Fontanive, the founder of the EOF Project via couch surfing.

He was the first person in years I spent time with that did not have the same beliefs as me. At first, I took what he had to say as: *“Ok, that’s your perspective; I respect that. I am open to discussing our differences in views.”*

I felt sad for him that he did not have a connection to his spirit. At one point, I wanted to help him with this. Yet, it was the opposite in the end. It was him who helped connect me back to my rational, sober mind.

He asked me questions that started to create doubts about my beliefs. He wanted me to understand the mechanics of the mindsets, especially the self-deception. He would ask me things like, “Are you sure this is true?”

If I said, “Because I feel it to be true or had certain experiences.” He would then say something like, “Are you sure your emotions and experiences are as reliable as you think? Who are you with your beliefs? Can you think outside of them for a minute?”

But there was one question he asked me, “Are you sure you are helping by spreading these type of ideas?” That got me the most out of all of the questions.

The more he got me to question and think about things, the more I was able to see how these beliefs were harmful. I was able to see how I was a drug dealer/addict. I did not even know it. This realization made me feel awful.

The way beliefs and mindsets can prevent us from thinking and questioning. The way they create a war with reality.

I wrote in great detail about my experience in Bali and with Diego. I call this my Bali Blog series. For a long time, I thought Diego was an advanced being from another dimension because he was so mysterious, which I interpreted as mystical.

I had him on such a high pedestal. I would have to face this pattern later.

Later, Diego admitted playing along with my ideas about him, in the hope that it would help me to see how I manipulate myself. Since I saw everything and everyone through a filter of mysticism, it was my language. Diego felt he had to learn it in order to get through to me.

No one wants to admit they were duped. That they duped themselves, nor do they want to admit that they could be wrong in following something for many years. People want to think of themselves as smart, but actually, this idea is what gets in the way of people being able to see that they have been deceived.

This is what is known as ‘The Dunning Kruger Effect’. Diego showed me how to develop my logic and reason. I worked those muscles every day. These tools are so vital to have in life in

order to be able to think properly and make better decisions, to not have them is to be like driving drunk.

You are bound to crash sooner or later. Why risk it?

I decided to share my concerns and new realizations with my followers. They ended up turning on me. They said I was a traitor, a liar, and compromised. Diego was evil. They thought Diego had brainwashed me, but I kept sharing.

I thought people would understand and see it. I was naive thinking it would be so easy for people to question things that are so near and dear to them. But I kept on sharing, and more and more people started to understand what I was saying. They saw their own problems that were coming from these beliefs.

Diego and I set up the EOF Project. It uses critical thinking, metacognition, and memetics to help people via coaching and courses, to have a better understanding of the mechanics of irrational fear and flawed thinking.

The project focuses on helping people to transition from being a believer to a skeptic/thinker, and how to be both logical and emotional at the same time.

I later started to speak about my transition at a skeptics' conferences. It was challenging and humiliating to show people how credulous I had been! However, my determination to prevent others to fall in the same mental traps was stronger.

Now, I find it fascinating how I used to think and it's quite therapeutic to make fun of my old self and to use blasphemy on beliefs that used to have such an authority over me.

Working on improving our thinking skills, being savvy to our blind spots is not easy, unfortunately, critical thinking skills do not happen naturally. It's everyday work on our mental muscles that show results. It is one of the hardest things I ever had to do, but also the most fruitful as well.

Now, I am working on a documentary about my transition from mystic to a skeptic. I hope that with my story people will be able to see their patterns and biases, so as to prevent them – and for them to see the importance of being able to think in a healthier way. My documentary is called *Memoirs of a Former Mystic: Caution too much love and light will make you sick*.

<https://www.Jessicaschab.com>

<https://www.eofproject.org>

<http://www.memoirsofaformermystic.com/>

Angelos Sofocleous on Being President-Elect of Humanist Students

December 22, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Angelos Sofocleous is an agnostic atheist, skeptic, and the president of the University of Durham's Durham Atheist, Secularist and Humanist society. Recently, he was elected as the President-elect for Humanist Students in the United Kingdom. I reached out to congratulate him, and to talk about the recent election. He is also a friend and colleague (Conatus News).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We're colleagues through writing and friends through constant interaction and united in common cause in the youth activist sector. Happily, you were elected the president-elect of Humanist Students, recently. First, I want to say, "Congratulations." Second, I wanted to talk about some targeted objectives and plans for the position. What seem like the bigger areas for advancement of the humanist movement?

Angelos Sofocleous: Thank you, Scott! Very glad to be working with you on a variety of causes in so many different projects. As the position I have been elected to is within a students' movement, I would like to focus on aspects relating to students. As Humanist Students, we want to ensure that religious students and religious institutions and union societies are not in a privileged position over non-religious students and societies. It's alarming and sad that this is the case in most universities around the UK. For the sake of having a belief, in this case a religious belief, religious societies, especially societies of the Christian religion, are treated differently from universities and students' unions. It's concerning that a student society is privileged simply because of their belief. Of course, this shows an absurdity. The absurdity is revealed once we think of a world where societies of certain non-religious ideologies (e.g. political) are privileged over societies of other ideologies. Imagine if the Marxist, the neoliberal, or the conservative society at universities enjoyed privileges that other societies did not have. That would cause a lot of uproar. But this is not the case with religious societies; they can be in an advantageous position without the student population reacting. This is our job as Humanist Students: React against this unfair privilege that religious student societies enjoy and ensure that non-religious students are treated as religious students are.

Despite the fact that, according to the latest British Social Attitudes Survey, 71% of young people are non-religious, this figure does not seem to reflect the work that is done by universities to cater for the needs of non-religious students. More specifically, the number of UK universities which offer non-religious pastoral care is limited, and this, again, makes some students privileged simply because they have a religious belief. No effort has taken place to cater for the needs of non-religious students. A number of universities have argued that their pastoral carers are trained to accommodate for the needs of students of all faiths, even non-religious ones. This is simply not true. The beliefs and ideologies of non-religious students are fundamentally different from the basic beliefs of religious students. Most of the world's religions have some common characteristics; that is, they believe to the existence of a supernatural world, hold a belief to a deity, give value to faith, and have a limited respect for science. Therefore, as the primary structure of the majority of religions is similar, one can't argue that help and advice to a non-religious student can be provided with reference to that structure. Help and advice to a non-religious student should be strictly administered on non-religious grounds.

Apart from countering privileges enjoyed by religious societies and providing non-religious pastoral support to students, we need to bring humanism into campuses to provide a platform and a community for non-religious students. As I will explain later, this is not to be done in a form of dogmatic introduction, or by presenting humanism as a new ideology (this will be harming to humanism itself), but by presenting an alternative to religious societies and to religious institutions which, in many universities, manage to dominate and, at times control, university policies and practices. As a matter of fact, it has been the case that members of religious societies, in this case mostly Islamic ones, at least in the UK, have attempted to de-platform and rally against certain speakers, accusing them of ‘islamophobia’ and ‘hate speech’. This is the mindset that needs to be overturned at our universities. We should be very cautious about what is ‘hate speech’ at our campuses. There are certainly practices that can be labelled of as ‘hate speech’; but criticizing any religion or any belief system is certainly not ‘hate speech’. Criticizing any ideology is vital for our development as a society and no ideology shall be immune from criticism. If one gets ‘offended’ because their religion, ideology, or belief system is criticized then that’s their problem. However, when speech calls for violent action against a particular group of people then, yes, that is ‘hate speech’. It is vital that we distinguish between the two, so that we are able to not mislabel certain events as promoting a ‘phobia’ against a particular religion or ideology. It is crucial that we keep our universities as places in which thoughts can be exchanged, challenged, and heavily criticized. There is no place for emotions here.

Wishing to give voice to the 73% of young people, many of whom are students, we are structuring Humanist Students in a way in which we’ll have stronger presence in university campuses, battling against religious privilege, and for freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, and promoting critical thinking.

Jacobsen: As a student at the University of Durham, you study philosophy and psychology. You have been the president of the Durham Humanist Students Society since May, 2016. You hold numerous board and executive positions in and for the non-religious community. With these backgrounds, how can we leverage these organizations and publications, and so on, to target those bigger areas with coverage, speaking engagements, political endorsements even, and making the humanist position an acceptable mainstream viewpoint?

Sofocleous: Firstly, I wish to point out that our aim, as I see it, is not to make the humanist position ‘an acceptable mainstream viewpoint’. Let me explain what I mean by that because such a statement can easily be misinterpreted. This is not to say that I don’t believe that the world would not be a better place if people embraced humanism or that we should not campaign for the wide variety of values that humanism endorses. The case, rather, is that there are dangers in viewing humanism as a concrete ideology itself, as an ideology which can turn into a dogma, if managed incorrectly.

Our aim is not to preach for humanism, it is not to try to ‘convince’ people that humanism holds the absolute truth. Doing this, we fall into the trap of the way of thinking that a number of religions, political ideologies, and other belief systems share. We should not view humanism as a set of ideas to which someone can ‘convert to’ or ‘deconvert from’.

We do not want humanism to be treated as ‘any other ideology’. This is simply because respect for other human beings, other animals, and nature is not an ideology. Valuing reason, critical

thinking, and logic, over faith, superstition, and belief is not an ideology. Battling religious indoctrination, religious privilege, and Church of England Bishops having a say in politics is not an ideology. Criticizing the atrocities that take place in theocratic nations and campaigning against blasphemy laws and for freedom of speech is not an ideology. We must not, foremost, treat humanism strictly as an ideology.

Someone who has respect for other human beings, values reason over faith, and is against laws which call for the killing of apostates does not just ‘hold an ideology’. Rather, they have just adopted the mindset through which societies can develop and prosper, always having respect for other human beings and human rights. It is the neutral position that every human being must follow, for the sake of being human.

I can make my case clearer by bringing in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), something that humanism fully supports and endorses. Do we want to hold that the UDHR is a ‘set of beliefs’ which is merely suggestive? Is there any sense in saying that a violent dictator ‘converts’ when they decide to adopt the UDHR? Is ‘preaching’ the right way to establish the UDHR as the ‘mainstream’, as you called it, position? I think that the answer is ‘no’, in all three questions.

We wish to make the humanist position ‘an acceptable mainstream viewpoint’ – but this is not to be done by any mechanism or method employed by religions or other belief systems which can be characterized as dogmatic. That is, we do not preach for humanism nor we do not ‘convert’ people. This is not even an option for humanism.

It is vitally important to understand the points I make above. This is directly related to your question as I see, unfortunately, that many humanist, atheist, secularist, and freethinking organizations become dogmatic and establish a concrete ideology to which all of their members must conform to or they become ostracized. If we, as the non-religious community, want to work together to have an impact in the world and fight for the causes that concern us, we should work according to our values and not fall into the trap of exercising the same practices which we criticize. Those are preaching, hate speech, ostracization.

We must work together, but we must also avoid treating humanism as a system whose values do not change and also avoid treating it as ‘any other ideology’. It is not ‘any other ideology’ for the same reason the UDHR is not ‘any other set of beliefs’. It is the position that we ought to take as human beings.

Jacobsen: In the UK, there are various privileges for the religious. How can the young student population work to overcome these biases, e.g. Bishops in the House of Lords?

Sofocleous: Indeed, there are a lot of privileges that religious institutions enjoy in the UK. In fact, as a non-British, I find it puzzling, and almost paradoxical, that in a country where the population is increasingly non-religious, the Church of England is recognized as the state church in England, operates its own schools, and can affect or decide on government policies, as it holds seats in the House of Lords. The paradox lies in the fact that, while in most countries the religiosity of people correlates with (or is caused by) the involvement of religion in public and state affairs, in the UK the Church of England seems to hold a position in society which does not reflect its actual effect in society.

The young student population can be active in battling religious privilege in many ways. On a personal level, they can be active in social media raising awareness for the existence of religious

privilege, or writing a letter to their local MP presenting their views and exercising criticism if the MP supports religious involvement in politics. What is more, they can write articles through which they support their position and explain why religious privileged needs to be challenged, potentially affecting other people.

On a wider level, they can join nation-wide campaigns organized by organizations such as Humanists UK and National Secular Society who very carefully plan and promote campaigns battling religious privilege. Such organizations are doing great and important work in securing freedom from religion and active participation immensely contributes to their causes.

Jacobsen: To found a humanist publication would be a step forward for Humanist Students in general, how do you envision this coming to fruition? How can people help out?

Sofocleous: A humanist publication will be a big step forward for Humanist Students. One of the main reasons as to why Atheist, Humanist, and Secularist Students (AHS) was rebranded and restructured as Humanist Students was to give a sense of cohesion and unity among AHS (and now Humanist Students) societies. As a cohesive movement, then, Humanist Students needs to give voice to its students and provide a platform for them. The work that each Humanist Students society is doing at a local level is exceptional. However, mostly, these societies support humanism, express their concerns and promote their causes through talks, small-scale campaigns, socials, and fundraising. A humanist publication will give a new dimension to the ways Humanist Students societies express themselves – it will allow them to be direct and clear about the issues that matter to them. Currently, local issues stay local. An issue which a Humanist Students society faces at its university or city does not receive considerable attention by other Humanist Students societies as it's the case that there is no medium through which the news will reach them. A humanist publication, then, will allow Humanist Students societies to communicate with each other about their successes and challenges they face on a local level.

Humanist Students societies members do have ideas and concerns, and do use writing to express themselves. In the absence of a Humanist Students newspaper, though, they look to find other platforms on which to publicize their material. A humanist publication, then, will not only encourage people who do not usually write to express themselves through writing, but will also utilize the vast number of people and societies who wish to present their ideas to the rest of the student population.

It is vitally important for the Humanist Students movement to have a voice; to have a platform on which it can express itself and through which it can criticize religious privilege and indoctrination. It will be a point of reference both for all Humanist Students societies, but also for any one who wants to learn more about humanism.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Angelos, I had a lengthy conversation with Hannah Timson. You are both highly competent. I look forward to your collaborative efforts to make these plans realities.

Sofocleous: Many thanks for this interview, Scott. I greatly value all the amazing work you are doing and the platform you give to so many people to speak out and express themselves. I am sure we will have the opportunity to join forces again during my term.

The State of the State and Mosque with Waleed Al-Husseini

December 23, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Waleed Al-Husseini founded the Council of Ex-Muslims of France. He escaped the Palestinian Authority after torture and imprisonment in Palestine to Jordan and then France. He is a friend. Here we talk about principles of free speech and secularism, values increasingly in the public sphere in Canada and so relevant to the Canadian general public as discussion pieces.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's talk about principles in opposition to one another, for example, freedom of speech and secularism versus restricted speech and theocracy (or its various tendencies). How are France's values and your own values more in line with freedom of speech and secularism? Why are these more important to be in place rather than restricted and theocratic values seen more in Islam?

Waleed Al-Husseini: For sure, my values are more in line with French values and secularism, and a perspective on humanity that sees everyone deserving of equal rights, and is firm on the need to get religion divorced from the state.

All of these things do not exist in Islam. These things only exist when all Muslims are seen as part of humanity as a whole. When Muslims are the majority in a country, it is different than when they are the minority.

Often, secularism and freedom of speech, and similar secular values, can only be computed only within the framework of Islam and Islamic values. That is why they are asking for the defense of the hijab in the name of liberty, but then they attack criticism of Islam in the name of racism.

Although, Islam is not a race, as I explained in one of our [interviews](#)!

Even the hijab is an example of slavery and second-class citizenship in society, in my opinion, it means that women are a sexual tool. It becomes one of the most important signs of Islam in politics.

The criticism of Islam is a human right, according to human rights declarations. I gave you this example to show that is how they use things, to spare Islamic values from criticism!

Jacobsen: Sharia Law can imply Sharia courts, separate and distinct from the universal laws in a secular culture for everyone. So, in effect, a dual-law system can be set in a secular society.

How do these Sharia courts arise in a secular context? What can dismantle them? Why do these separate courts violate the principles of, for instance, one law for all?

Al-Husseini: This is what happened in the UK. That's why I don't like "secularism" and prefer the term "laïcité"! With secularism, they make insular communities and everyone lets them do what they want.

I remember in 2010, maybe, one court released someone who was charged with beating his wife, because he said that it is okay to beat your wife within Islam and our religion!

That is why the religions should be out of the state and public arena. The religions should be in their places of worship! No more than this, not in courts, education, or the political and even economic spheres like the factories and goods.

Even the ones with the (halal) label. Yes, because this label is more proof of communitarianism, to create a mini-society inside the mother society.

Jacobsen: What will make for a more just and secular society aligned with secular morality and international ideals expressed in the UN Charter, especially for minorities within minority groups such as ex-Muslims?

Al-Husseini: The way for secularism is very long, especially in the Arabic world. It is the need built from childhood. That's why we need to stop teaching religion in schools – especially assumed as true rather than as a set of beliefs of one group or another like a world religions class – and we need to teach children secular values.

Also, we should stop telling kids about jihad and should not separate people into Muslims and non-Muslims! It provides a simplistic view of the world. Let them see all of us as humans of many stripes and shades, and types.

And the governments should have a secularism in law and work hard for it!

Because, you know, our problem is not only with the government, but even with people. For example, when the Saudi girl made a video while she was wearing a miniskirt, many people were asking to arrest her and the government did.

So, the problem is in the people! Sure, it's because this is coming from the brainwashing since they are kids. We have an example looking at what happened recently after Saudi Arabia allowed women to drive the car. People were attacking the cars of women.

Jacobsen: One more principle is the truth, or attempts at its attainment, and obscurantism, or attempts to lie or half-lie and cover the truth in some way. One obscurantist terms, one is the word, which is vague: Islamophobia.

How can truth overcome the obscurantism surrounding difficult topics in a discussion on Islam and the ex-Muslim community?

Al-Husseini: Islamophobia: this the Kalashnikov of what they call themselves 'moderate' (for me, moderate in Islam does not exist at all, we just have peaceful Muslims at the moment).

Because, for example, there are the jihadists or terrorists who physically attack you, but then there are these moderates who also attack you in courts! And try to kill you when they make Islamophobia and racism look like the same and mixing all the definitions up. It's kind of a war of terms; I talk about it in my last book I published in French!

About the truth, we ex-Muslims know more about Islam and the way of Islamism. Let us talk, and hear us out! Don't attack or fight us, and then allow for our Muslim brothers who destroy their own countries to speak.

So, what do you think they will do with other countries like Europe and USA? They can open more for us to be in the media to speak and not to attack us with Islamophobia and other epithets and invectives.

They can protect those in Arabic and Islamic countries from being arrested based on using their freedom of speech. This liberty to choose. Also, inside France or these other countries for that matter, they can stop the call to kill us because this is hate speech, at a minimum: calling to have someone killed.

I hope the media and people become more serious and more open-minded on this issue.

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

Faisal Saeed Al Mutar – Founder, Global Secular Humanist Movement and Ideas Beyond Borders

December 23, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Faisal Saeed Al Mutar founded the Global Secular Humanist Movement and Ideas Beyond Borders. He is an Iraqi refugee, satirist, and human rights activist. He is also a columnist for Free Inquiry. Here, we start a series together about Canadian culture.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, when you look at the landscape of Canadian culture, you can notice certain trends, especially if you're someone who travels in the speaking engagement circuit, as you do, as an Iraqi refugee, and as a non-religious person speaking on irreligious issues. What do you notice as some big takeaways from all of that speaking and traveling and seeing Canadian culture?

Faisal Saeed Al Mutar: My experience has been pretty great. At the same time, I don't see much difference between Canadian and American culture. I know Toronto and Vancouver. They are very close to the coastal United States in this regard.

From what I observed, there are some forms of frustrations in Toronto that I'm hearing from at least the ex-Muslim community who are seeing a rise of conservative Islam in Toronto. They are seeing more and more women wearing Niqab and covered from head to toe.

An Iranian friend of mine mentioned that she is getting a lot of catcalls from a lot of people that came to Toronto from the Middle East, recently. She feels that she has to censor herself in front of some of these folks.

I saw this mostly in Toronto. I didn't see it in Vancouver. I think Vancouver has a lot of immigration from Hong Kong or East Asia, and less from the Middle East, but in Toronto, you have Mississauga with a significant Pakistani and Indian population.

Then Toronto has Syrian refugees that came in, recently. Obviously, these are questions that are very complication. I am supportive as a refugee. What makes Canada and America and others great is that we stand for universal human rights by supporting some of these refugees, there is a paradox there.

Some refugees may stand against universal human values and freedom of thought. I am noticing some of that in Toronto more than in most American cities, except two. One is Dearborn, Michigan, which is East of Michigan. It is close to Detroit and Detroit is close to Canada.

The other one is in Minneapolis, Minnesota. You can see a significant Somali community. Some of them have joined Al Shabab. These are some of the negative things I have witnessed in Canada. As for the positive things, I think it is a great country and I am always happy to be back.

Jacobsen: What do you notice about the younger population, especially in religious affiliation?

Al Mutar: I think it is the same as many other Western countries. I think with the older generations in Canada. They tend to be less conversant than the United States. They are weaker

in Canada. The Christian Right in Canada is less active than the Christian Right in America. So, there is less of theocratic movement.

There is less of a theocratic movement. The Conservative Party and others tend to be different than the Republican Party in the United States to some extent. I think many of the younger people tend to be more secular and secular in the sense that they support separation of church and state and live for the most part a non-religious life.

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

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