

CANADIAN ATHEIST: VOLUME III

SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

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Contents

I	Acknowledgements	5
i	The Ex-Muslim Blasphemer in France: Waleed Al-Husseini	6
ii	Interview with Anouar Majid – Founding Director, Center for Global Humanities	8
iii	Houzan Mahmoud on Canada and the Kurds	10
iv	Dr. Paul Munyenembe on Irreligion in Malawi	11
v	In Conversation with Atheist Minister Gretta Vosper – Current Context	13
vi	Alberta Pro-Choice Coalition Conversation with Kathy Dawson	16
vii	Short Chat with Lee Moore – Former Executive Director for The Atheist Conference	18
viii	Father Joseph Lagumbay of the Catholic Universalist Church of the Philippines	19
ix	I Do Not Want You to Die: Or, Try Not to Die	25
x	In Conversation with Atheist Republic’s CEO – Allie Jackson	27
xi	Interview with Bad Science Watch’s Executive Director.....	29
xii	Academic Dean of Critical Loyalty on Progressive Islam.....	32
xiii	Mike Ivanov on Secular Campus History and Activities – President, U of T SA	36
xiv	John Brown from Another Godless Atheist.....	38
xv	Living After ‘Living After Faith’ with Rich Lyons.....	40
xvi	Interview with Dave McKee – Leader, Communist Party of Canada (Ontario)	42
xvii	Rick Heller of the Humanist Hub, In Conversation.....	46
xviii	Friendly Chat with a Filipino Raelian Life Guide	48
xix	Faisal Saeed Al Mutar on Concerns Over Backlash Movements	50
xx	In Conversation with Lita Bablitz on a Two-Tier Education System.....	52
xxi	Exclusive Interview with Writer and Producer Leslea Mair	54
xxii	In Conversation with Helen Austen – Executive Director, Kansas City Oasis	62
xxiii	In Conversation with Peter Gajdics – On The Inheritance of Shame	71
xxiv	Charlotte Frances Littlewood on Radicalization, Extremism, and Counter-Extremism	75
xxv	Dr. Leo Igwe Speaks on a Nigerian Awakening.....	77
xxvi	In Conversation with Angie Johnson – Executive Director, Salt Lake City Oasis.....	81
xxvii	“I didn’t even know we had an Intelligence Agency”	84
xxviii	In Conversation with Dr. Ellen Wiebe – Physicians Advisory Council, Dying With Dignity Canada	87

xxix	Interview with Devon P. Hargreaves – Chair, Lethbridge Pride Fest	93
xxx	“Like a lot of Unitarians, my path is a winding one.”	95
xxxi	“When I went to AA, there was too much religion in AA.”	98
II	License and Copyright	101

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Scott

The Ex-Muslim Blasphemer in France: Waleed Al-Husseini

December 25, 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 the Council of Ex-Muslims of France, developments, of the organization, death threats, torture, and secularism.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: As a friend and colleague, we published several interviews together on a variety of topics centered in religion and the ex-Muslim community, especially the ex-Muslim community in France and the organization founded by you: Council of Ex-Muslims of France.

Waleed Al-Husseini: Yes, and thank you for this and interviewing numerous ex-Muslims, because it's for many still very taboo. For others, it's fear in the name of not offending some Muslims.

Jacobsen: What new developments occurred for the Council of Ex-Muslims of France for 2017?

Al-Husseini: The most important thing is that we become more recognized in France and more in the media, especially talking about us, our activities. Many have joined our cause once they discover that they are not alone and have the same ideas as us. We support each other.

We improve the discussion in France about most of the Islamic issues including the hijab and what they like to call Islamophobia. So, more and more, we become a real part of this discussion about Islamic values and what Islamists are trying to pass into the secular and liberal parts of society.

I know the debates in France. It is increasing in Canada and the USA.

Jacobsen: For the Council of Ex-Muslims of France, how often do death threats come to the inboxes, or via other means, of members including yourself?

Al-Husseini: I received 5 death threats by internet today. This is a great day and nothing dangerous. It's been like that since the beginning. The easiest threats are by the internet. For me, it's not dangerous because the ones who really want to kill you will not tell you before.

The most serious things come from some Islamist organizations and sites, who post our photos to all their readers. This puts us in a very dangerous situation. For any random person, the organized Islamists ask and try to acquire our addresses.

This happened to me, personally, many times. That's why now my address is hidden and why I am taking greater care to take care of myself. For example, I simply do not travel to certain areas in Paris controlled by Muslims – Muslim areas.

This religion didn't accept someone to go out. It didn't accept the criticism. In 2017, only Islam and the mafia act this way.

Jacobsen: You were tortured, for several months, in a Palestinian prison by the Palestinian Authority for charges of blasphemy. I know the types and extent of the torture based on conversations with you. Do these memories resurface, at times, in personal life – of the torture?

Al-Husseini: I'm always trying to forget it. It was a hard time. Most of the time for me was hard. It's the time recollected when I wrote my book *Blasphemer: The Price I Paid for Rejecting Islam*. I had to remember all this time with the most difficult detailing.

Now, not that much compared to some others because the victims of Islamic fundamentalism are so many, many paid their lives all over the world and have had the same as what happened to me or worse.

Jacobsen: What threats to secularism exist in France? How does the Council of Ex-Muslims of France represent a bulwark against those who wish to silence the non-religious, ex-religious, and the general formal irreligious?

Al-Husseini: Secularism in France threatens Islamists and is threatened by Islamism. The main problem for some Muslims is that they want the Islamism in place of secularism rather than secular Islam.

So, they do all that they can. They want society to accept the hijab in the name of liberty. They want limited freedom of speech and limited criticism of Islam, which comes in the form of false charges of Islamophobia and racism.

That is why, always, the Islamophobia charges, for me, are a modern fatwa: nothing else. A lot of examples are like the halal food, etc. What we do to protect secularism is that we explain the ways of Islamism, show it clearly, and have a rich debate about it, we do our best to show their hypocrisy and their spokespeople for hypocrites.

We present the real hate of the Islamist imams and Islamism in general, and raising the standards of all these definitions in French society, keep the secular values out of the religious values and going forward with secularism, not back because only secularism will protect our society from civil war.

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

Interview with Anouar Majid – Founding Director, Center for Global Humanities

December 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Anouar Majid has authored several books on Islam and the West, and has been on Bill Moyers Journal and Al Jazeera television. He is the Founding Director of the Center for Global Humanities.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Your work focuses on Americans and Muslims, the West and Islam, Muslims in the modern world, and so on. Why is this dialogue important in the public sphere now?

Anouar Majid: Anyone who is alive today and pays attention to the news must be aware that the question of Islam is the topic *du jour*. Samuel Huntington was not joking, nor was he wrong, when he talked about a clash of civilizations.

Maybe not civilizations, but definitely worldviews. Of course, underlying such clashes are other elements, not necessarily of a religious nature, such as lack of education, resentment of Western progress, etc.

Jacobsen: In one book, you asserted that we're all Moors. Who were the Moors? Why claim this? What is the reasoning behind it?

Majid: The Moors are the Muslims who lived in Spain during the Middle Ages. (Spaniards today still use the term to describe Moroccans and Muslims.) They ruled most of Spain at one point, but the Catholics regrouped in northern Spain and started a process of reconquest that culminated in the surrender of the Kingdom of Granada in 1492.

One of the people who witnessed this event is Christopher Columbus. He was there to persuade the Spanish monarchs to sponsor his trip to India across the Atlantic. So, as you could see, defeating Islam in Spain and the discovery of America are two major events that are somewhat connected. Interesting, isn't it?

Jacobsen: With increasing secularism among the American population, especially the young, what place does religion have in the public sphere, civic life?

Majid: It is true that the "nones" (those without a religion) are one of the fastest growing demographics in America (if not the fastest), so traditional religion, embodied in church attendance and the like, seems to be on the wane. It's interesting to watch how this development could affect the political landscape in the long term.

Jacobsen: What do you see as the major contributor to a disinclination of the younger generation towards religion? How does this impact American life in general?

Majid: The United States is the last Western bastion for traditional religious commitments. For the longest time, religious practice was woven into the fabric of American republican life in a sort of unique combination that is hard to find elsewhere.

For example, the Constitution is resolutely secular, in that it doesn't privilege a religion over another, or even make religion necessary for holding office, including that of the presidency; but

a strong strain of Judeo-Christian morality courses right below the surface of political life, giving tacit support to those who adhere to such values and excluding those who don't.

In all the time I have spent in the United States (my adopted nation), only one politician—Jesse Ventura, a onetime governor of Minnesota— has declared publicly that he is an atheist. It would be interesting to see more people like him run for office.

Is America ready? I wouldn't bet on it. Protestant morality, without piety, is very much alive in American society today and manifests itself in all sorts of behaviors and cultural practices. But this is a discussion for another time!

Jacobsen: Of these trends, what ones can be extended into the culture of Canada as well, so extrapolation to North America in general?

Majid: I am not sure about Canada, but my suspicion is that the country has avoided the severe puritanical bonfires that cast a long shadow on American mores and outlook. Also, the Quebecois, with their French heritage, add a dimension to the country's multicultural traditions that has no exact parallel in the United States.

Canada may very well be the only European-style nation in the Americas, so it wouldn't surprise me if its attitudes toward religion in general hewed closer to those of Europe.

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

Houzan Mahmoud on Canada and the Kurds

January 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Houzan Mahmoud is the Co-Founder of Culture Project. She is a women's rights activist, campaigner, and defender, and a feminist.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Your work focuses on the Kurds and Kurdish culture. I want to focus on Canada in this conversation. We collaborated on the repository and incubator of Kurdish culture called Culture Project. Are many Canadians involved in this effort? Have any organizations helped with it?

Houzan Mahmoud: Apart from you, no one has yet supported us or our initiative as such from Canada. We are new, though we are just making ourselves known. I am hopeful that the more people learn about our work, the more they will get in touch and support us.

Thanks to wonderful friends like you who take time to both support us and make our voices heard, it means a great deal to our struggle.

Jacobsen: Canada was involved in the first Gulf War in 1991. So, Canadians, whether knowledgeable or not, have ties to the modern environment of Iraqi Kurdistan or Kurdistan. Did the Canadian government help or hinder the progress of the Kurdish people for independence?

Mahmoud: As far as I know, Canada had forces in Kurdistan in the past three years, at least since the fight against ISIS. They were there to provide support to Kurdish and Iraqi forces to fight against ISIS.

However, Canada did oppose the Kurdish referendum for independence, under the excuse that ISIS is still in the region and so on. So, their opposition, of course, was not good.

Jacobsen: How does Canada fare now, in terms of the assistance of the Kurds?

Mahmoud: I might sound sceptical to say no western intervention makes me happy. I am always sceptical and worried when Western countries intervene in our region. They usually don't help, and will always undermine any local effort that is fair and just.

Let's not forget when the US or UK is in the Middle East then every other Western government wants to be there both for economic achievement and for the political rivalry. Unfortunately, our region has been for a long time a centre for competing for international intervention and rivalry.

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

Mahmoud: You're most welcome dear Scott. Thanks for all your support.

Dr. Paul Munyenyembe on Irreligion in Malawi

January 6, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: George Thindwa recommended you. I interviewed him about the irreligious community in Malawi. You noted that no one has done more for the formal irreligious movement than George.

So, in light of the mutual respect and acknowledgment of contributions to Malawi's non-religious community, I want to start with the background to provide a framework for everyone.

Did family background influence religious or non-religious perspective? If so, how? Can you recall some pivotal moments?

Dr. Paul Munyenyembe: I grew up with my paternal grandparents who were very religious. But they were too old to enforce church attendance for me. So, I only attended church if and when I wanted. I cannot say that at that time I was irreligious. I started seriously questioning religion when I was in boarding secondary school.

I could not find answers to the many questions I had about religion. So, I completely lost my faith when I was still in secondary school. So, the short answer to your question is that my family background did not really influence my non-religious perspective.

Jacobsen: Since you have seen the developments in Malawi for some time, from youth to the present, what bigger developments took place in Malawi?

Munyenyembe: In my view, the bigger developments in Malawi are that we now have an organized irreligious movement. It's also important to note that Malawian society, in general, has accepted the existence of the non-religious in the country.

We often participate in discussions about paranormal issues. We have been able to educate society about the dangers of superstitious beliefs in violating human rights. We have a dedicated column in the Sunday Times newspaper titled "Science and critical thinking".

Many Malawians, especially the youth, are now not afraid to come out as non-religious.

Jacobsen: How have these aforementioned bigger developments influenced the religious landscape of the country, the demographics of the nation?

Munyenyembe: While the population as a whole is predominantly religious, our views and activities have led some religious people to start questioning their beliefs. The youth are becoming particularly sceptical of religious claims.

We are confident that the non-religious community will continue to grow in numbers. Of course, we are under no illusion that religion in Malawi will disappear anytime soon.

Jacobsen: Historically, what helps the formal irreligious movement in Malawi? What hinders attempts at it?

Munyenyembe: What has been very helpful to the formal irreligious movement in Malawi has been the advent of the internet and social media. Over the past few years, it has been easy for

members of our movement to instantly share views and news. Right now we have a very active Whatsapp group. We have also created a newsletter which can be read online.

In spite of these positives, our movement is facing many challenges. Malawi is one of the most religious countries in the world. It's also one of the poorest. And so religious organizations, especially Pentecostal churches, exploit people's poverty by promising wealth and a lot of other incredible benefits offered by them.

In this way, people flock to these churches for material gains. The more traditional churches offer heavenly rewards which are very attractive to the poor. The other problem is that the education system in Malawi does not promote critical thinking. As a result, students memorise facts and do not question ingrained religious beliefs.

Jacobsen: What authors and organizations from Malawi should the international community, such as countries like Canada, look to help out in the movement towards moderation of the bad parts of formal religion and the development of the community for those whom religion does not feel like the right life path?

Munyenyebe: The Association for Secular Humanism is the only atheist organization in the country at the moment. It needs help in different forms for the smooth running of its activities.

There are other organizations that champion secular views and human rights. Some of these are: Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation, Centre for Development of People, and Malawi Writers Union.

Jacobsen: What have been successes and honest failures in the non-religious movements in Malawi?

Munyenyebe: The successes of the non-religious movement in Malawi are numerous. They include the growth of the movement's membership from a handful to hundreds of members today; the eradication of witchcraft-based violence and human rights abuses; organization and participation in debates on superstitious beliefs and their dangers; participation in international fora, such as the World Humanist Congress; increased visibility of the movement in electronic and print media; and others.

One of the challenges we have been facing is that of fund-raising in an overwhelmingly religious environment. As a result, we have not been able to implement some activities. Due to this same constraint, it has been difficult to organize national conferences.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved other than simply reading and becoming more informed?

Munyenyebe: We have plans to establish humanist educational institutions and also to involve the youth in sexual and reproductive health. We are also promoting human rights activism, especially the rights of sexual minorities. We are also promoting activism in transformational leadership at the community level. In future, we have plans to introduce youth camps.

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

In Conversation with Atheist Minister Gretta Vosper – Current Context

January 12, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We have been in contact for over one year now, well over – while I get my act together and compile our larger project.

You have been a figurehead of controversy around Christian culture in the country, whether willingly or not – 'tis the case. For those that do not know, or at least who do not know your point of view – even who you are (Vosper, 2017), regarding the United Church of Canada and the context and narrative in the last few years, what happened and is ongoing?

Gretta Vosper: I am currently a minister in the United Church of Canada. This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of my ordination and I've been serving a congregation in West Hill – the very east end of Toronto – since 1997.

A few years into our work together, I realized that the church language I had grown up with and taught to use to describe concepts and ideas that could be described with plain English was problematic.

It both misled my congregants to think I believed in a supernatural, theistic being called God, which I did not, and prevented people without such beliefs from experiencing what I call the off-label benefits of the church community – belonging, recognition, affirmation, and an increased sense of well-being that comes with those things.

After engaging the church in a conversation about that dissonance, we began the work of creating a theologically barrier-free space and gathering. West Hill is now a haven for those who do not believe any religious concepts as well as continuing to serve those who do but for whom theological language is not necessary.

Unfortunately, rather than recognizing that it had, over the past many decades, trained leaders to serve this constituency, my denomination chose, instead, to retreat to a more conservative theology.

In doing so, the work we were doing at West Hill became controversial among those who did not know what we were doing or why. Their complaints led to a heresy trial which is currently being conducted under the guise of a “Disciplinary Review.” The end result may be that I am stripped of my credentials and no longer able to serve my community in leadership.

Jacobsen: With that background, what is new? You are involved in an organization called The Oasis Network. There is a brief statement of values on the website:

People are more important than beliefs.

Reality is known through reason.

Meaning comes from making a difference.

Human hands solve human problems.

Be accepting and be accepted. (The Oasis Network, 2017).

Other than these as an introduction to The Oasis Network as a statement of principles and values. What does the organization do in and for the community of the formally irreligious – the formerly religious?

Vosper: The Oasis Network has grown out of the desire of many individuals who have known church and experienced its “off-label benefits” but who do not hold religious beliefs to create meaningful community. Added to those many people are others who have no experience of church who are also looking for a place where meaningful dialogue happens and deep friendships can be nurtured.

Each Oasis community operates autonomously but collaborates with all the others. Research indicates that in order to provide the kind of experiences that allow people to flourish, communities need to meet weekly; so Oasis communities do that. They can pick whenever they want to meet but most of them have found that Sunday morning is the best time – it’s not a school or work night and most people have it free.

Oasis gathering replicate the gatherings of church without the doctrine and, for the most part, without the religious trappings you’d expect to find in church. For instance, there is a speaker each week but most Oasis communities don’t sing; they welcome different local musicians who are happy for a gig with a really attentive audience.

West Hill still sings, of course, because it grew out of the desires of a congregation that had a tradition and adapted it beyond doctrine. So it sings songs and hymns that have no mention of God or Jesus but reflect the humanitarian values we espouse. And they don’t, of course, pray to an interventionist God but some of them – not all – like West Hill, allow for a time for participants to share stuff happening in their lives – good or bad.

And there is a coffee time when some of the most important stuff happens: people get to know one another, become involved in one another’s lives. It’s magical, if I can use that word!

Jacobsen: What is the relevance of such as organization now? How did you become involved with it?

Vosper: I think Oasis communities are filling a very important need in a world that is emerging from social experiments for which we cannot predict the outcomes. As I’ve noted, there are serious off-label benefits to religion that go to personal well-being.

Which may sound self-centred. But personal well-being goes to our ability to engage in our communities and the world beyond our front doors. We have built our social democracies with the input of people who felt good enough about themselves and confident enough about what they had to offer that they engaged beyond their own “tribe” in the wider community.

Liberal Christianity (read any religion) transfers positive social values in a way that conservative iterations do not. And the great liberal Christian institutions of the twentieth century helped embed those social values we cherish in our communities as a result.

We are now watching the demise of those same institutions. And it is easy for those who do not believe in religious beliefs to dismiss the death of these institutions as a good thing. But it isn’t. Liberal Christians helped negotiate the social fabric of our nation, mitigating the effects of the fundamentalist versions of its own story and the individualistic relativism of an unchecked libertarianism.

What the loss of institutions like United and Anglican Churches of Canada might mean for the future of Canada's social democracy is unknown but I'd be willing to bet it will be a meaner, and less comfortable country than what I was privileged to grown up with.

And it will be subject to the influences of those two powers – religious fundamentalism and individualistic libertarianism. That isn't a pretty picture. So I think the loss of these institutions might be tragic.

Jacobsen: With a rapidly, very fast, growing formally irreligious population in the country, what can, even should, be done at present to accommodate that growing (and often young) population, e.g. development of secular or atheist churches, or Sunday Assemblies, foundation of organizations such as The Oasis Network, and so on?

Vosper: Building on my concerns for Canada's social democracy, I think it is very important that we find ways to engage individuals in communities that present humanitarian values as central to each person and every neighbourhood.

Liberal Christian institutions that are closing churches every week need to assess the cost of those closures which, as I've said, go far beyond their statistical and revenue losses. Perhaps their legacy could be the sale of those buildings and the use of that money as an investment in the future.

They could lay the foundations for secular communities like Oasis to take the ethos those institutions have nurtured and that define this nation, and craft it in ways that speak to and engage new generations and their emergent needs.

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

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Alberta Pro-Choice Coalition Conversation with Kathy Dawson

January 13, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is Calgary Pro-Choice Coalition, which was formed in 1994?

Kathy Dawson: Calgary Pro-Choice Coalition was formed to give voice to pro-choice people in the Calgary area, I approached them last year about expanding to Alberta and rebranding as the Alberta Pro-Choice Coalition because there was a need:

Access in Alberta has been limited to two clinics (Edmonton and Calgary) and one hospital (Calgary). Rural and northern people must travel, miss work, incur hotel and other expenses to access a basic health right, even in communities that are equipped to handle miscarriages (similar procedure as abortion).

Sexual health education has been compromised in some school districts that invite anti-choice groups to teach abstinence-based/sexual risk avoidance. Many US based programs, an example of the lessons and how they undermine sexual health and consent education can be found here:

<http://www.communityactionkit.org/index.cfm?pageid=923>

Waxman Study from the US: <http://spot.colorado.edu/~tooley/HenryWaxman.pdf>

I've been doing quite a bit advocacy in the Edmonton area and across Canada. We needed to go province-wide in Alberta. So, that's what we've done; I joined the Calgary Pro-Choice Coalition and we rebranded to represent all of Alberta, it is now called the Alberta Pro-Choice Coalition.

Jacobsen: For the Canadian population big minority that lacks a formal faith, are the people who tend to be anti-choice the people that one would usually expect from religious organizations and advocates?

Dawson: Most of the anti-choice come from religious perspectives and organizations (faith-based perspectives can vary – see the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada (ARCC) position paper). There is a minority that claims to be secular and not religious, but their definition of the beginning of life comes from a religious view, not a scientific view. Some anti-choice have attempted to rebrand themselves as pro-woman, feminist and secular, yet they work to restrict the rights that women and trans people have.

The Canadian Association of Pregnancy Support Services (CAPSS) is an affiliate organization of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and displays a logo from the Canadian Council of Christian Charities on their website. Many crisis pregnancy care centres in Canada are affiliated with CAPSS and agree with their Core Documents that make it clear they are Christian missions:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B3knVGoGcpZkdI9MMVVwVXFWUHc/view?usp=sharing>

Some resources that address the religious nature of their opposition:

Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada (ARCC): Position Paper #93 Religion and Abortion:

Not all religions are opposed.

<http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/postionpapers/93-Religion-and-Abortion.pdf>

The Observatory on the Universality of Rights (OURs) is a collaborative project to safeguard the universality of rights. They identify a coordinated effort on behalf of several religions to undermine feminist and sexual rights worldwide.

“This ‘unholy alliance’ of traditionalist actors from Catholic, Evangelical, Mormon, Russian Orthodox and Muslim faith backgrounds have found common cause in a number of shared talking points and advocacy efforts attempting to push back against feminist and sexual rights gains at the international level.”

<https://www.oursplatform.org/resource/rights-risk-key-opposition-actors/>

Jacobsen: What would be one of the arguments that they might propose, and what would be one of the responses?

Dawson: It should be noted: “The right to abortion is not debatable, because access to legal, safe abortion is a fundamental human right, one that is protected by law and supported by the majority of citizens. The provision of basic human rights is not open to debate.”

<http://www.prochoiceactionnetwork-canada.org/articles/debate.shtml>

“The real key question behind the legality of abortion is: How much do we value women and trans people’s rights and lives? Because focusing on the fetus always has dire legal and social consequences for them. It’s also insulting, because it usurps their moral decision-making, as well as their bodies and wombs.”

<http://www.prochoiceactionnetwork-canada.org/articles/fetus-focus-fallacy.shtml>

Anti-choice claim to want abortion stopped, yet they oppose comprehensive sexual health education and most contraception that would reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies.

The pro-choice perspective focuses on the right of women and trans men to make informed decisions for themselves. We also support and work towards preventing unwanted pregnancies through promoting contraception and education. We recognize the right of people to choose to be pregnant or not and be parents or not.

Jacobsen: Also, these come from an international context. The ones that have the evidence behind them and their rights behind them, where the United Nations, or organizations in alignment with it, would state that things such as abortion are a human right.

Human Rights Watch would state “equitable access to safe abortion services is first and foremost a human right.” So, in a way, the most religious organizations or secular organizations taking religious arguments are in short anti-human right rather than anti-choice in a way.

Dawson: Sexual and reproductive rights, including abortion, are human rights.

Many anti-choice organizations are also opposed to LGBTQ+ relationships and erase the existence of trans people. The CAPSS and their affiliated crisis pregnancy care centres believe in “celibate singleness; and in faithful heterosexual marriage as God’s design for the family” (Core Documents). These organizations, although focused on restricting rights for women also actively work to undermine other human rights, including LGBTQ+, minority rights, and the right to medically assisted death (death with dignity).

Short Chat with Lee Moore – Former Executive Director for The Atheist Conference

January 16, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did A-News come into existence?

Lee Moore: Almost ten years ago myself and a few good friends were annoyed that the vast majority of the talking heads of atheism were only reaching out to the wealthy and well to do... We wanted to put out an atheist voice that understood that many work horrible jobs for terrible pay... and in many cases have to rely on a church to stay afloat. We wanted to also appeal to the new generations by injecting bad humor and pop culture references.

Jacobsen: What are the more favored topics – as measured, say, by likes and shares on Facebook – of the A-News community and readership?

Moore: Our most popular show had to do with a girl who masturbated with a crucifix on camera at her Catholic school.

Jacobsen: What is the service to the atheist community from A-News – its niche provision for the community?

Moore: We provide free entertainment and information.

Jacobsen: What has been your own favorite post or few in a-News?

Moore: Can't say I have a favorite.

Jacobsen: Of the news posted by A-News, there will be news about trends in religion and non-religion. Based on the research already done, what seems like the longer term trends for religion and irreligion?

Moore: People will continue to lose interest in identifying as atheists, and the religious will continue to lose interests in their old beliefs.

Jacobsen: Other than the connection on Facebook. How can people help out? What are other news sources of potential interest to the atheist community?

Moore: News sources of interest to the atheist community... avoid the blogs... especially the popular ones.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Moore: You may not be aware of this, but I just presided over TAC, the now-canceled NYC-based Atheist Convention. The community is dying out; we have bigger fish to fry now.

Father Joseph Lagumbay of the Catholic Universalist Church of the Philippines

January 18, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: For the Canadian atheist community, what is your own background and upbringing in a faith? What was your training? How does this tie into Filipino culture at large?

Father Joseph Lagumbay: Hi Scott, thanks for having me here. I was born and raised as a Roman Catholic. As you all know, the Philippines is a very 'Catholic' Country, having 80%+ of the population claiming to be Catholics. Becoming a Catholic Universalist Priest didn't become much of a challenge for me aesthetically, since the rituals are almost similar to the RCC. Reaching to Filipinos are not that hard too, given the advantage of the familiarity of the rituals.

Jacobsen: In terms of position and personal philosophy, and way of life, what is the position? What is the personal philosophy? What is your way of life, i.e. the practice that follows from the personal philosophy?

Lagumbay: My personal Philosophy is very much in line with our Church's principle Theses.

We do not have doctrines or dogma, rather we believe that God can be experienced by everyone, Christian or not, Theist or Not. This experience of 'God' is when we give love, and feel loved in return. And the famous Christian verse that states, 'God is Love'. Master Jesus always tell us to 'Love one another' and 'Love others as we love ourselves'. Master Jesus even said, 'Love your enemies'. You cannot say, 'You love God but hate your neighbor. How can you love an unseen God when you can't even love a visible neighbor'? Also, we often see Master Jesus healing the sick, Jews, or non-Jews. Religion was not important to Jesus. He's not asking what we should believe, rather he was busy teaching us how to love. I guess this is what most Christians missed. Jesus did not ask us to believe in him that he was God, or if he was, it's not important. He wants us to care for one another, as we are created in the image and likeness of God. When we respect, care and love each other regardless of race, gender, religion, etc., we show our greatest love to God.

As a personal practice, I practice some Buddhist and Hindu meditations along with some Christian prayer and contemplation. I have lots of Atheist and Agnostic friends, too. Some of them even attend our Church services.

I walk in the path of Love. No Judgment. No prejudice.

Jacobsen: You are the project executive at ThinkLogic. What is it? What are some of its provisions?

Lagumbay: Well, Thinklogic Marketing is a startup, local BPO Company here in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines. As you can see, the Clergy of the Catholic Universalist Church are non-stipendiary. For us, we keep it this way: "Priesthood is a vocation, not a profession". We keep church funds and donations for the people, and by the people. So, any clergy from CUC needs to have a day job to sustain yourself, your family, and the ministry.

When I applied for the job, I started as a regular ‘Call Center Agent’. I didn’t get any special provisions even though my employers knew that I am a Priest. I got no special treatment. I got reprimanded too and received memos just like other employees.

Personally, I also do not want to be treated ‘special’ just because I am a Priest. I am a human being, just like you and everyone else.

It was after more than a year when I got promoted, and became a Client Services Executive. I earned my employers trust and confidence not because I am someone ‘holier-than-thou’, but because of my hard work and dedication towards work.

Today, I juggle my time between work (on weekdays), and being a husband, a father and a Church Minister on weekends.

For those who are interested in our services, please visit: www.thinklogicmarketing.com.

Jacobsen: You are a Catholic priest at the Catholic Universalist Church of the Philippines. In previous interactions, you had a different angle on the faith and religion as a practice too. Can you please go in depth into your own theology of the world and the practical spiritual life that you lead for us?

Lagumbay: The Catholic Universalist Church (CUC) is a self-governing jurisdiction of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church in the Liberal Catholic tradition.

Liturgy is offered using the Rites of the Liberal Catholic Church and the Young Rite, as well as other Universalist, mystical celebrations of the Eucharist. Although not affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, the CUC offers valid Catholic liturgy and sacraments to those who come to hear that the Gospel really is “Good News” in that all will ultimately be reconciled to the Divine.

All who come with an open, honest heart are welcome, and the CUC does not discriminate based on race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation or identification, ethnicity, or disability. Our sacraments, including the fullness of Holy Orders, are available to all.

For a better understanding, listed below are the Frequently Asked Questions:

Q: What is the Catholic Universalist Church?

A: The Catholic Universalist Church (CUC) is a self-governing jurisdiction of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church in the Liberal Catholic tradition.

Q: Are you affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church?

A: No. We are an independent and self-governing Church. Although not affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, the CUC offers valid Catholic liturgy and sacraments to those who come to hear that the Gospel really is “Good News” in that all will ultimately be reconciled to the Divine. We respect all people from diverse spiritual paths – the sacramental table is open for everyone!

Q: What do you mean by ‘Universalist’?

A: Universalism is the belief that, in the fullness of time and in the infinite love and mercy of God, all beings will ultimately find their rest in the Love of God and will be united with him in paradise. We believe that salvation is for everyone – no one gets left behind!

Q: Do you believe in God?

A: Yes. We do believe in God. God manifests himself in different cultures, in different forms to different people with different needs.

Q: Do you believe in hell then?

A: Well, that is up to the individual to decide. The Lord bestowed upon all of us the grace to see him in the different experiences that we face in day to day life. Theology is experiential. Some members of the Church believe that hell is a reality but only temporary. These people believe that hellfire is purifying and like purifying gold or various precious metals need to be stricken out of impurities before considered to be perfect. Some Early Church Fathers believed in this teaching such as Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Clement of Alexandria and many more. Some members of the Church believe that Earth is hell in itself and that we are purified as we live in it. Other subscribe to reincarnation and other forms of the teaching. However, though our views may be very varied and different, we are united in the belief that the mercy and love of God transcends evil and hell. That the same God who is omnipotent (all-powerful), omnipresent (all-seeing), and omniscient (all-knowing) chooses, in his divine love to draw all of us unto himself that he may be all in all.

Q: Does this Church have distinctive doctrines for one to follow?

A: The church subscribes to intellectual freedom; therefore, we do not require anyone to accept our beliefs. They are offered as a teaching framework only. It is up to the individual to experience Gnosis – the Knowledge of the Divine in their own ways and spiritual paths. Our teachings as a church are guided by these principles but each individual is free to reason and interpret as their own good conscience dictates.

Q: What do you generally believe?

A: These are the principle theses taught by the Catholic Universalist Church:

We teach that there is One Reality, an Infinite Divine Source, who is Love, Light, Truth, and Spirit, whom we are called to seek, know, and love; this One Reality has acted to initiate the universe, and whose nature was revealed to the world in the person and teachings of Master Jesus of Galilee, known as the Christ.

We teach that the universal commandment is to love and serve one another, as we love and serve ourselves.

We teach that there is a law of justice by which actions generate consequences, whether to be manifested in this life or the life to come; and that love, grace and forgiveness ultimately overcome the law of justice.

We teach that the grace of God provides a full and final triumph over separation and death: the mercy and forgiveness of God are always victorious; this victory of redemption is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; and that, therefore, no human being will be allowed to suffer pain and separation forever.

We teach that every person is the divine offspring of One Reality, created in the image of the Heavenly Parent of all; the destiny of every person is to be raised up from imperfection to maturity according to the pattern of the archetypal Christ, the Child of the Divine Source, and the Perfect Human in whose image all humanity shall be transformed.

We teach that mysterious spiritual phenomena, such as the resurrection of Jesus, which transcend materialistic views of reality, exist though they defy human explanation.

We teach that the One Reality, functioning as the Holy Spirit has inspired numerous prophets, saints, philosophers, and mystics throughout history, in a variety of cultures and traditions; by reading the Bible and other great texts of spiritual and moral wisdom with a discerning mind, and meditating to connect to the Spirit within, there is a greater understanding of truth to be gained. This understanding should be applied for the betterment of our world and ourselves.

We teach that Christ instituted various sacraments in which an inward and spiritual grace is given to us through an outward and visible sign. There are seven rites, which may be ranked as sacraments, or mysteries, namely: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Absolution, and Anointing of the Distressed, Holy Matrimony, and Holy Orders. The Christ is the true minister of all sacraments.

We teach and uphold the primacy of the human intellect and will in discerning all matters relevant to one's body, soul and spirit.

Q: Are the sacraments open for everyone?

A: The purpose for the establishment of this church is to bring the love of God, as we hear in the Good News of Universalism, to all peoples of all places in the world. All who come with an open, honest heart are welcome, and the CUC does not discriminate based on race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation or identification, ethnicity, or disability. Our sacraments, including the fullness of Holy Orders, are available to all regardless of one's religious affiliation or gender orientation.

Q: So women and people who are openly part of the LGBT community can be ordained?

A: Yes. It's open for everyone.

Q: Do you marry people in the LGBT community?

A: We do and openly embrace it! However, it must be remembered that as citizens of a given state we must abide by the laws set therein.

Q: What is your view of the occult?

A: The Occult refers to the mystical and 'hidden' spiritual knowledge passed on by spiritual adepts to their initiated students. The CUC is not affiliated with any esoteric or occult organizations. However, individuals are encouraged to spiritually grow. The CUC has no hidden teachings or secret initiatory rites that one has to pass through in order to gain access to certain mystical insights. Since our Church is a part of the Liberal Catholic Movement, we adopted some beliefs uniquely found in Theosophy and other Eastern Philosophies. But one does not have to be part of any organization in order to be part of the CUC. One may be a freemason, a theosophist, an occultist, a ceremonial magician, a yogi or whatever one wants to be as long as it is for their benefit and spiritual growth.

To simply put:

We are a very progressive and an ultra-Liberal branch of the Catholic Church.

Jacobsen: Now, you are married. How does this change the dynamics for your spiritual or edificative life compared to priests who are not married?

Lagumbay: In my case, instead of being a burden, being married is an advantage. My wife has been very supportive to my path. When I am not around, she takes care of our small community. When I am around, she takes care of me. She understood that when she married me, she is also sharing my vocation.

When I was married, I became more focused on my goals, both spiritual and material. I have learned to manage my time properly. Being married also gave me credibility when giving advice about failing marriages, romantic relationships, family, and parenthood, as I am experiencing the first hand.

I think priests should have a wife (or a husband/Spouse) for them to have someone to share their vocation with. It makes their task easier. Also, it will make them understand 'Humanity' more and more. It is by living like any other human being that one becomes an effective leader in the society. On the process, the love of two individual grows as they surpass their ministry's struggles. Their love will resonate to the entire community, as if God, the unfathomable cosmic consciousness, is here and now.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Lagumbay: I would like to thank you, and the Canadian Atheist Community for this chance to share our Spiritual Views on your website. This might sound unusual, but we are all One. We do not wish to convert anyone to our beliefs. We also never asked Atheists to believe in a 'God'. However, we just engage in philosophical and scientific talks, with sincere love and compassion. We are here for those who need us. Personally, the God that I worship is not some 'Old Man in The Sky' who loves to be kissed in the ass all the time for Him not to punish me. The God I believe in is the Universal Consciousness. We all are One and the same. We came from the same 'star dust'. All religions are just mere human institutions to try to 'Explain' this universal consciousness. We are all part of this 'God' we call. We are created from the 'Spark' of God. Master Jesus always tell us to Love others because that's the true meaning of 'Worship'. To Worship is to serve God. You only do that best when we serve our fellow man.

Let me share with you my article in: <https://hapihumanist.org/opinion/humanism-re-defined-transcending-beyond-atheism-theism/>.

As Humanists, we transcend beyond Atheism, Theism or the likes in between. The issue here is not proving about the existence of God. The real issue here is, "can we be good without God?" If there is God, then we ask ourselves "can we be as good as God?" If we also view God as an egoistic creator, then let's ask, "How can I be good unlike God?"

We as human beings are entitled for our beliefs. Spiritual maturity is a process. Sometimes we are just too egoistically driven that we do not admit unto ourselves that no matter what we do, there are things that the logic we use in our 3-dimentional minds could not comprehend. Some people stop to ask questions and accept things as it is, while others continue to seek.

No matter what we believe in, let us remember that it's our actions that make us a better person, and not our 'version' of God. In continuing these meaningless fights between religious groups and non-believers, we are not addressing the real issue.

The world needs to be healed using genuine love and compassion and not words of hate, mockery and insult.

To Atheists:

Isn't it clear that it is us who create our reality? Why not start doing something to make this world a better place to live in?

To Theists:

Isn't it clear to us that we are created in the image and likeness of God? If we have God's DNA, why not create a better world to live in?

Whatever might be our stand, let us remember that what divides us is just a wall of illusion. We are NOT our beliefs.

Beyond our ideals lies the truth of our humanity.

We are here to experience life that is meant to be shared with others and cherished!

We are here to love and be loved.

We are made up of the same substance that is present in all stars and planets in the Universe.

Isn't it amazing how can we move and think knowing that we are just made up of non-living molecular substances?

Maybe the Universe is alive and all stars, planets and everything we thought that are non-living materials are its gigantic molecular components?

Or could it be that we are the Universe within the Universe itself?

Maybe within us are other Universes as well?

We really don't know.

But here's what I've got to say.

Let us be more tolerant my fellow humanists.

We are just One, being expressed differently in a short period of time.

When I look into your eyes, I know that the 'Spirit (Energy)' I see in you, is also the 'Spirit (Energy)' in me. To hurt you, is to hurt myself.

..and to love you, is to love myself more.

We are One.

Namaste.

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

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I Do Not Want You to Die: Or, Try Not to Die

January 18, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I do not want fellow Canadian citizens to die. Yes, you: neighbours, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, please, please do drink filtered water rather than unfiltered groundwater and food instead of laundry detergent pods, even on a dare (CBC: Health, 2018).

It is a problem across North America as this happens in the United States as well (South China Morning Post, 2018). That extends to my almost fellow Americans, too.

Canadians, in their bid to win the prize for greatest reduction in the global health and wellness rankings by more than any other country, decided to mark the news cycle with two Darwin Awards or, maybe, a series of championship trophies given the scale (Azpiri & McArthur, 2018; Government of Canada, 2018).

People in Canada have been eating detergent pods. This has led to up to 40 hospitalizations in North America (The Canadian Press, 2018). The government health authorities of Canada have warned teens and others from biting the pods. Prince Edward Island police have tried to make a similar point with humor.

So, there are efforts to tackle this from a serious as well as a humorous angle, but the consequences are not as humorous because people can be harmed. People bite into the colourful pods and feel ill (Bissett, 2018).

There is also a move for raw water. Some sell jugs worth upwards of \$60 USD. Health experts have warned that this water coming unfiltered out of the ground can contain a host of deadly illnesses (Stechyson, 2018). These can include Giardia, Hepatitis A, and Cholera. It is gross water. It is dangerous.

An Edmonton professor of health law and science policy, Timothy Caulfield, has noted that “this is deeply ridiculous.” He calls this a “great example of our embrace of the naturalistic fallacy and inability to understand risk” (Ibid.). This unfiltered water could contain animal poop: feces.

Caulfield notes that they are paying lots of money for, essentially, gross, contaminated, and dirty water (Muzyka, 2018).

In other words, the 91 contaminants that community tap water removes potentially could not be removed from the unfiltered groundwater and could also contain the diseases that kill great-grandparents of ours (Stechyson, 2018). What can you do?

Keep away yourself, and warn and protect others. Be informed.

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In Conversation with Atheist Republic's CEO – Allie Jackson

January 19, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We have talked before. I wanted to reach out because the Atheist Republic remains the largest atheist Facebook page in the world. As its CEO, you hold power and influence in the international atheist community.

Internationally, the population of the formal irreligious stands at about 16% or more than 1 billion people. How can communities and organizations, such as the Atheist Republic, give voice to the formal irreligious?

Allie Jackson: Hi Scott! It's wonderful to speak with you again. What every organization can do to help the irreligious around the world, is to give them a platform to express themselves.

Often I focus my attention on Ex-Muslims in Islamic countries. Their voices are muffled and there are often serious consequences to speaking out against Islam.

Be loud about the injustices they face. Be their voice when they can't use their own. Share their stories on your platforms. That's the best advice I can give.

Jacobsen: What does the Atheist Republic provide for its members?

Jackson: That's quite a question, actually. We provide a lot to the atheist community, much more than social media. We publish atheist related books, news, and blogs. Our bloggers range from new atheists to old, American to Bangladeshi, and everything in between.

We have a one on one support group system that provides resources and advice for asylum and emotional support. We give atheists a platform to use their own voice in our podcast, Atheist Republic Voicemails.

We have consulates around the globe, encouraging atheists to get out from behind their computers and meet together for drinks or community service. There's so much more, and we have many plans in the works! We'll never stop trying to bring the community together, and give everyone a place to belong.

Jacobsen: How can satire and comedy soften the transition for those who do not see the utility in religion for themselves?

Jackson: Satire is such a powerful tool of expression. It can make a person laugh, feel offended, confused, or angry.

Often when we are faced with an emotion regarding satire or comedy, we are forced ask ourselves why. In searching for that answer, we either double down on the beliefs we already hold or are challenged to explore a different idea.

It can be uncomfortable, but that's why I like satire. Does it soften the transition? Perhaps, perhaps not. Changing one's mind on a topic is rarely soft or easy, but when people are honest with themselves, there is much joy in it. Every belief should be challenged.

Jacobsen: What has been one of the most dramatic reactions to the work of Atheist Republic?

Jackson: Oh my, where to begin. [Laughing] I'd say the most dramatic reaction towards us was when the Malaysian government started a witch hunt on our Atheist Republic Kuala Lumpur members, simply because they met for dinner...and took a picture.

For anyone reading who is unfamiliar with this story, our consulate in Malaysia decided to get together for dinner, and just meet other atheists around them. Someone took a lovely group photo, they blurred out faces of those not wanting to be public and gave it to the Atheist Republic to share.

This led to news coverage of the gathering, death threats towards the consulate members, and the government saying they would "hunt" these members down like animals, because atheism was that terrible to them.

Jacobsen: How can we help with the situation in Malaysia and elsewhere, where state and religion conspire to silence the formal irreligious?

Jackson: This ties back to what I was saying earlier, the best thing we can do, is the voice of the silenced. We can write the United Nations, and scold them for having Pakistan and Saudi Arabia hold seats on their committees, when they are responsible for so many human rights violations against atheists in their countries. Just never stop, keep trying new ways to fight for them.

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

Interview with Bad Science Watch's Executive Director

January 19, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Michael Kruse is an advanced-care paramedic in York Region, just north of Toronto, Ontario. A theatrical lighting designer as well, he re-trained in 2005 as an EMT-Paramedic Specialist at the University of Iowa and as an advanced care paramedic at Durham College. Michael is currently enrolled at the University of Toronto working towards an undergraduate degree in physiology and the history and philosophy of science.

Michael has been active in the science advocacy community for 7 years and is committed to a compassionate defense of science for the betterment of all Canadians.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, how did you get involved in the skeptic movement in science in general?

Michael Kruse: So, myself, I discovered the skeptic movement so many years ago. Now, 20 years ago, I was working as a senior technician. While I was running the show, relaxing, I never heard about this in high school.

So, I have never had exposure to it and the skeptical movement. It wasn't until 10 years later that I am participating in the social group of skepticism, the social movement. When I went to camp in Las Vegas, it was amazing.

I started to become more involved in skepticism and the skeptical movement. They spoke to me from the social point of view. I was interested in how we can make society better by using the precepts of science and venturing the world.

I have been involved after that, after Center for Inquiry Canada as a coach fair of the community skepticism. So, I was there through Center for Inquiry Canada's reorganization in late 2000. I saw myself wanting more professional science advocacy, as a role.

So, along with a former CSI member, Jamie Williams who was the secretary director, we made up a recommendation, which we mention as a departure from us beyond the Skeptical Movement. In a way, it is to try to redefine what the values we held as skeptical in a large community.

There were a couple things that came up again. That was when we were talking to people who are not familiar with the movement, which was difficult to have that discussion about what is a sceptic. There are a lot of different definitions that people have now. There are different cultural norms around that, so it was problematic.

Advocacy people knew there was a larger community. I'll have to find kids in the world and the skeptical community, but that were often a part of it. We were interested to start becoming a part of that community.

So, that's how we started. I have five more lessons left in the social movement towards skepticism. It sticks to my values around internal issues, especially in social justice. That I didn't really value. Now, it's for me to call on myself and what we do at times with science advocacy.

That seems to be useful and more successful for me, certainly.

Jacobsen: What are some of larger targeted objectives of Bad Science Watch in terms of constructive education for the public?

Kruse: So, we had couple of things that we want to do. One was make real change in society. We had tried multiple times through skeptical blogging. We created a new blog for that back in 2000. Education was a long game.

It's very difficult to measure. In which case, these structures or community programs tend to be people involved who are already interested and support the subject. When it comes to making social change education, it is difficult to measure the outcome.

As such, you will find it difficult to measure, so we decided that if we want to make real change to society that we should have a more government-based organization. One that would be educating the public.

There are a lot of people doing that work already. There are many up and coming scientists who are trying to let the public understand science and communicate with the public that way. That was a movement that we wanted to part of because it has its own mandate.

We were more concerned about making change right now. The problems society is dealing with at the political level, so that is why it became a government facing organization. That it is essential that there is communication as an organization with the government.

Where our values that we hold in come to the government of Canada, this can be done through a petition of the government. We decide to focus our effort on the government. We can talk to the public and the media, obviously.

That is a way of finding common ground or finding support. You need that to start to make change in the government, but we were talking directly to the government. That's why early on we got projects focused around the problems.

If the government, the Public Health Association of Canada, and other various organizations are informing the public, we consider involvement with the government is good. We want scientifically backed products on the shelves and others off.

So, that involvement with the government may be talking to a Member of Parliament, talking to our supporters to encourage them to talk to the government, and have an organization that is made for them, e.g. bad Science Watch.

Because the federal government needs organizations devoted to having a structure for evaluating evidence for products given to the public.

Jacobsen: How can people – if they want to get involved – get involved, whether through donations or volunteering, expertise or writing? Wat are some of the benefits of helping?

Kruse: So, there are several different ways. We have a core membership, which is made up of volunteers with who have spent a significant amount of time as board members or as long-term volunteers.

There were members chosen by the board to identify whether people want to have a more in-depth knowledge of how the organization moves forward. But in the organization, everyone is a volunteer.

Nobody gets paid, which is helpful because that allows us to run a budget. However, if you want to get involved, there are several ways. First, obviously, we work on a budget: donations to make commission can help us.

So, we can go forward to pay for the posting of our communication projects and ensuring all those concepts that make the non-profit go forward. Ultimately, the organization, we will continue to grow the organization having a part-time executive director.

That's something that we have because of the advocacy role the organization. It has been a bit difficult for us. We have been opening our budget. We are looking to adopt some principles that are more responsive to our members.

This is so that the donors can rest assured the donations are going towards the company.

If you want to volunteer, you can contact the volunteer coordinator. The email address and website are good starts. We accept text messages. We have a couple projects on the way right now. The one that is across the country is the marketing of national health products.

That is underway. Right now, we are investigating the webpage marketing in Canada. It will help answer some of the questions, whether the sellers are acquiring and showing the Health Canada license on these products.

So that one is on its way. We can always use more evaluators in the next month. We are probably going to be coming up with running a file report, but this is a pile of studies. So, the next step is expansion into a more comprehensive look at a lot of the products in Canada.

So, if you want to get involved, we are always looking for people to do some simple stuff around the organization such as communication and newsletters and web things. Even if they can email our volunteer coordinator, or if they help with connecting other people or organizations that can help Bad Science Watch.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for your time, Michael.

Kruse: Okay, you are welcome, thank you very much.

Academic Dean of Critical Loyalty on Progressive Islam

January 19, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Shaykh Uthman Khan completed his ‘Ālimiyyah degree from Madrasah Taleemul Islam from the United Kingdom. He received a traditional Master’s Degree in Arabic and Islamic Sciences and Specialized in traditionalism and the traditional sciences. He also received an Academic Master’s Degree from the Hartford Seminary in Muslim and Christian Relations and specialized in Theology, Philosophy, Religious Scripture, Historiography, and Textual Criticism and Analysis.

His other academic achievements include certificates in Adult Psychology, Accounting, Phonetics, Phonics, and Phonology.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, to begin: what was family background – culture, language, geography, and religion, or irreligion?

Shaykh Uthman Khan: I was born in Canada and grew up in Canada. My father’s from Pakistan. My mom is from India. I was born Muslim and was raised as a traditional Muslims

Jacobsen: You completed a degree at Madrasa Taleem al-Islam in the UK for a master’s degree in Arabic and Islamic Sciences.

Khan: Yes.

Jacobsen: Also, a master’s at the Hartford Seminary in Muslim and Christian Relations. How have those professional qualifications helped you in personal and professional life? What was the main motivation for pursuing them?

Khan: As far as motivation, my motivation for pursuing Islamic studies was that right from a young age my parents wanted me to focus on religious education. So, even when I was about 10 years old or maybe about 12, I memorized the entire Quran in Arabic.

Right from a young age, my parents were building this interest in me to pursue religious training and education. Thus I completed my traditional degree and started working in the same traditional realm.

The traditional realm meaning in mosques, Islamic schools etc. Then I decided that I needed to increase knowledge because of the challenges that I was facing academically. I was trying to bridge the gap between traditional and academic perspectives in Islamic Studies. So, I needed to pursue Islamic studies from an academic lenses.

There’s difference in traditional and academic education. So, I went to study academic Islamic studies at The Hartford Seminary studying with well known Islamic Academics which helped me gain academic perspective.

Jacobsen: Now, you’re the academic dean of Critical Loyalty. What is it? What tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Khan: Yes, I am the Academic Dean of Critical Loyalty. “Critical Loyalty” portrays the history of my education. So, Loyalty, being in reference to being a loyal Muslim, but Critical, is basically not blind following but being a critical thinker.

The main point I notice within the traditional style education or even within conservative Muslims is that there’s not much effort made to ask questions or to understand the reasons behind why we’re doing, everything and anything, which is the case in every religion, I believe.

Many of my traditional Christian friends also say, “We can’t ask questions and have to listen to what they tell us. We have to listen to what the scholars or the priests or the pastors tell us.” I personally didn’t like that approach as it was subjective and monopolized.

So, Critical Loyalty, after studying Academic Islam, was to bridge the gap between traditional and academic Islamic studies. At Critical Loyalty, for example, I will teach traditional sciences the way it’s taught in regular traditional institutes but I will then infuse all of the courses with critical thinking.

This is the academic approach, I’m trying to bridge the traditional and academic gap. Many Muslims will look at the Quran or the prophet’s sayings and blindly apply them without contextualizing it or viewing it from the perspectives of their cultures or preconceived ideas, I tend to look at the context: What is the back story? Why was it revealed or said? When did it happen?”

It gives the whole new perspective and this is very rare to find.

Jacobsen: If you take the historical contextualization through an academic setting and education for students, what bigger messages tend to come out in a positive light from pupils?

Khan: I’m trying to implement this perspective through this thought process because I find that religion is becoming an old concept for the older generation. Concerning young adults in the 21st century, I find that people are only following a religion because they’re a part of it or they were born in it, but many don’t know the reason why.

Islam is stigmatized because people don’t understand it. And if we’re going to constantly keep on pushing for a blind following approach, it won’t help the situation

A lot of people are questioning or leaving religion because of that. I’ve seen many people coming to Islam but also have seen many people leave Islam simply based on this.

I was an example of this, where I started to question religion because I couldn’t justify doing things when someone told me to do it. For this reason, the message I try to get my students to understand is, “Don’t believe everything and anything people tell you.”

As I historically look at it, religion, or traditional rigidity, is something which is very common probably in the last 100 to 200 years. Perhaps to monopolize and to promote a message, one for religion itself is the structure of religion that is codified.

The scholars of scripture or the medieval ages were very great academics; they rejected thousands of narrations that people claimed Prophet Muhammad said compared to the ones they brought into their books.

But I find now people will accept anything and everything, whatever someone tells them. It's a very distorted ideology. and it is being promoted now in the name of religion. People will then end up assuming, "Oh, that IS the religion."

But this is not anywhere religion. People use the same verses of the Quran to kill while others use the same for peace.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Khan: That's why I'm trying to instill critical thinking in the students. Think about why you're doing and why you don't do things.

A person should know why they are doing it anything and be able to justify it critically, which technically singles me out of every traditionalist. I'm the black sheep in the middle of the entire traditionalist segment. But I'm ok with that because I feel I understand religion.

Jacobsen: Within a traditionalist framework, what is the importance of a progressive voice, a progressive tendency of voice?

Khan: The reason it's important is because of the direction society is moving in, because of the amount of academic learning and philosophy that's been taught in schools. A lot of people are questioning everything.

So, in my own experience, if I bring 100 people in front of me who claim to be Muslims, one hundred people are going to have one hundred questions that are not answered.

That's a huge motivation for me to understand those questions, not judge the questioner, and to look at the situation that's in front of me, and to talk about it, especially when people are doing unethical things in the name of religion.

Most people resort to unethical acts because either they don't have any answers or they are following the wrong people/monopoly.

Jacobsen: Within a Canadian context, as you noted living in Ontario, what do you see as some of the more positive directions? What do you see as some of the more negative directions that things seem to be moving in that could use some help?

Khan: Positive... man! That's a hard question. Are there any positives in a distorted religion? Every religion has a few good aspects. You have to believe in one God, in the angels, in the books, the rituals, praying five times a day, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and so on.

Every religion has some rituals. Then you have the ethics of it. When it comes to the beliefs and the rituals it doesn't impact anyone because anyone can believe in anything or do any rituals.

But when it comes to the ethics of it – if we're not taking an academic approach in religion, and if we're going to be strictly following on age-old tradition at this point – then what we've done is we haven't progressed.

We're bringing to the table an ethic, 1300- to 1400-years-old ethic. That was perhaps applicable at that time, but we are living in another era. We've moved forward in time and space, and scenarios and situations have changed and everyone understands that.

Even UP 100 years ago the concept of modesty or how people dressed was different from 15-20 years ago. So, the time has changed, and if we're going to stick within the mentality or an

ideology that's 1400-years-old it won't make any sense in regards to our ethics, and this is a prime example of failing to see the bigger picture.

That's the biggest problem in sticking with a traditional approach and not being willing to be open to question why you're doing what you're doing.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] What's your favourite course to teach?

Khan: It's called The Evolution of Islamic Thought and Theology. The name of the course was switched from "The Introduction to Islamic Theology" because I realized that theology is very large.

Then based on a recommendation, one of my students said, "You should change the name to The Evolution of Islamic Thought and Theology," because there is an evolution.

In that particular course, I teach how a person is a Muslim living in 2017. Why do you think or believe what you're believing in right now? I basically take you through a history of theology from the time of Prophet Muhammad all the way until now.

So, what's the belief in God? What's the belief in the concept of sin, predestination, or predeterminism vs free will? How an individual's mindset has changed in a span of 1,400. So, this is an evolution of a thought process. That's my favourite course.

Mike Ivanov on Secular Campus History and Activities – President, U of T SA

January 20, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Mike Ivanov is the President of the University of Toronto Secular Alliance founded by Justin Trottier several years ago. Here we talk about the history of the U of T SA, or UTSA, activities of the organization, and the upcoming “Is there a meaning to life” event at Convocation Hall on January 26th.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did the University of Toronto Secular Student Alliance come to life? Who started the organization, and why?

Mike Ivanov: The University of Toronto Secular alliance came to life due to the efforts of Justin Trottier around 10 years ago. He wanted to create a community for secular students where they wouldn't feel ostracized for their beliefs or lack thereof.

Jacobsen: For those that do not know about secular student alliance but with an interest in founding one on their own campus, how can they do so? Who should they contact? If one already exists on their campus, how can they bring themselves and others into that fold, that community of the formal non-religious of all denominations?

Ivanov: If students want to open their own secular alliance, they can contact their student union about getting their club recognized, and then they're set! Usually, the multi-faith centre on campus will be aware of any secular association and help you get involved. That's definitely the case with our multi-faith centre which offered to host our club.

Jacobsen: What is your own personal history with the secular community? How did you find it and become involved with it?

Ivanov: I came to the club 3 years ago and enjoyed going to the meetings. The following year I was voted in as president which I've been for the last 2 years. I got involved because of their great advertisement during clubs day which I highly recommend all freshmen and even other students to attend.

Jacobsen: Any exciting and interesting activities that are ongoing for the membership? How do you keep a membership enthused? I know this can become a difficulty for organizations.

Ivanov: Every week, we pick a new and usually controversial topic to analyze and discuss, letting our membership have a say in what that topic will be. We do movie nights, debates and discussion panels with guests of all religions to keep our members interested.

Jacobsen: What are your new and upcoming events that you will either host or will be involved in that people should keep an eye out for online, on campus, or off-campus but hosted by the UTSA?

Ivanov: We will have our movie night sometime in February and will be involved with the “Is there a meaning to Life” event in Convocation Hall on the 26th which should be exciting.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Ivanov: What we really try to do at the secular alliance is to promote discussion that you wouldn't usually have at University lectures which are listening-based or tutorials which nowadays try to avoid controversial content. This is a safe space to discuss any opinion, however politically incorrect.

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

Ivanov: Thanks for your time Scott.

John Brown from Another Godless Atheist

January 21, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

John Brown is an atheist and the administrator for Another Godless Atheist. Here we look a little closer at his story.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family life like for you? Was religion a big part of it?

John Brown: Family life was pretty good for the most part. I went to a Catholic school where I attended church regularly. However, as a family, we only ever attended church on Christmas Eve and Easter.

Jacobsen: Were there pivotal moments in becoming an open, or explicit, atheist?

Brown: This was a long process. It wasn't from Christian to Atheist. I had a lot of agnostic time in-between. I left the Catholic Church for good when I was 18 (1988), but became part of the Pentecostal Church in Oshawa, Ontario.

There I was born again, I went to church 3 times a week, and married at age 24 with three children. My wife and I did a Bible study with our pastor and by 1998 I had a lot of questions (enter the internet), questioning the faith and the Bible whilst not really getting straight answers.

My faith swayed and I left the church. This was my agnostic phase. Months later, this had taken a toll on my marriage and we separated in February 1999. I was in New Jersey on a working holiday and wanted to go to Manhattan the morning of September 11, 2001. Up early, I made my way to the ferry terminal.

It was just after 8 am, the first plane hit. I think this was my tipping point into atheism. But I was more Humanist by 2006. I don't think I ever used Atheist to describe myself until about 2012.

Jacobsen: How did you come to create and administrate Another Godless Atheist?

Brown: In the early days (2012), I called the page 'Godless Heathen' and my goal was to upset as many theists as I possibly could. However, I later changed in 2015-16 and decided to take a different route.

I decided to put all the daily news stories that involved religion issues around the world, making it a one-stop shop that also is shared on my Twitter page.

I still take the odd jab here and there at religion and will randomly post memes or sometimes pick a weekly theme from the Bible to quote on Mondays or coffee with Jesus, but mostly it's about bringing the attention of what religion is doing to our world in all its negativity.

Jacobsen: It is a moderately sized group with a few thousand members on Facebook. How does this provide for its followers or members? What were some important moments in its developmental history or trajectory?

Brown: I really am not sure, the number rose quite fast when I was constantly taking cheap shots at religion, but leveled out around 6,000 for the past two years that I changed the format.

I have other admins, but they are rarely present as they all have their own lives and are in debate groups, and that's fine. I have my Twitter account linked, so all posts go directly there. I started a

YouTube channel, but it never went anywhere as I'm not that great at it despite my video editing skills being better than average.

Followers of my page seem more likely to share and react to a post rather than comment, but I did have a few dozen regulars that throw out comments to most posts. I also randomly get hate mail or post to the page with both love and hate.

Jacobsen: What other groups give you some inspiration for the non-religious community? How can the non-religious community become active and involved, even if through a Facebook community such as Another Godless Atheist?

Brown: Groups, pages, personalities that inspire me are the Atheist Experience, the Thinking Atheist, the Friendly Atheist, Dr. Lawrence Krauss and the Atheist Foundation of Australia, of which I am a member and volunteer for live events.

Part of the problem with the Atheist community is that we're really not organized and organizing us at times is like herding cats. The one thing we have in common is we don't believe in God.

Everything else is so random and there are so many atheist/humanist activist groups with so many different goals, it's hard to get everyone on the same page. I think we need better organization and pick the more important goals and work together.

Group leaders should reach out to each other and try to merge in common interest. That's what makes theism so successful. We need to take a page from their playbook (not the holy book).

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Brown: I think as a species we can only move forward and advance as a species as fast as our slowest members. Religion brings fear, mistrust, hate, bigotry, violence, discrimination, etc., to everyone who doesn't subscribe to the same dogmatic ideology as they do.

Even amongst themselves, there is fighting and heavy disagreement, but they all get together for the common goal, despite how illogical and irrational it is. We need to all get-together and pushback as one, but we're simply not there yet. As a species, we can all do better.

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

Brown: Thank you for taking an interest and asking my opinions. It was a pleasure.

Living After 'Living After Faith' with Rich Lyons

January 22, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You used to run the podcast Living After Faith. How did it start, develop, and dissolve?

Rich Lyons: Living After Faith was the brainchild of my wife Deanna Joy and myself. When I was first coming out of religion, there was no organization and very little resources to be found for people making that journey.

We decided to start one. We figured we would have a few dozen people in the world who would relate to it, but now with over 300,000 downloads, I guess we were wrong. A podcast seemed natural since we were both radio professionals, and already had that skill set.

We started by me telling my story, but I kept getting too triggered by PTSD to finish an episode, so we started bringing in guests to share their experiences. All we asked was for them to tell their story as accurately and openly as they could. What transpired were dozens of stories that people could see themselves in.

They could feel that pain because they knew that pain. We never planned on ending LAF, but knew it would happen one day. We reached the place where we felt we were just telling the same few stories over and over. And while that was popular, we wanted to do more.

We wanted to bring in experts to comment on things that were discussed and make it a better resource. At the same time, we were realizing I was not mentally or emotionally healthy enough to keep up with my current load, much less add more to LAF. So we took a pause until I was ready.

As of this date, we are still paused, with some distant illusion of starting back, but no set plans, and honestly, no distant plans, either. But never say never.

Jacobsen: What is your own background in faith and irreligion? How did you come to this point in your personal narrative in other words?

Lyons: I was raised by extremely verbally abusive parents who were also moderately physically abusive (I say moderately, but for much of my young life I was beaten daily, and still remember my parents checking for marks.

I thought they were checking to see how well they did, not realizing the goal was NOT to leave marks. They didn't leave marks, so I say moderately.) and according to one shrink, that left me always looking for the comfort of being in an abusive relationship. I joined a Pentecostal church as a young adult, and found it perfectly abusive for my needs.

I lived under a pastor I have later called the single most abusive human I've ever known. He was arrested for beating his own children, but got off of the charges.

Anyway, that fundamentalist, abusive church was where my damage was done. It damaged me, and I damaged others when I became a pastor then Senior Pastor. My ministry lasted nearly 20 years by the time I realized it was just an abusive cult.

I tried to fix things before I left, but realized not even the leader can change an entrenched cult. I left as a total failure. I left the cult in 2004, and have been in recovery since.

I've survived a suicide attempt and many years of living with suicidal thoughts. I'm not sure what "recovery" actually looks like, but for the past year I've been more stable and had more energy than I have in my life. So that's at least moving in the right direction.

Jacobsen: What were the things that you used to more prominently and popularly do on Living After Faith?

Lyons: I think what made LAF work was that it was professionally produced when most podcasts were anything but, and we focused on the very emotional stories of people who were hurting.

Our listeners could relate to that. They were themselves experiencing many of the same things, and hearing it in other words from another person gave a connection point.

Jacobsen: Now, with the podcast over, what are the next steps for you?

Lyons: Over? That sounds pretty final. I think we may have some ideas about what LAF in a new generation should sound like, and may work toward that. Or I may continue just helping a few other podcasters put out a professional product.

I tried the atheist speakers tour, but that is a business that isn't ready for professionals to enter, with speaking engagements rarely paying more than room and board. I don't foresee any public outreach to the atheist community outside of helping podcasters and maybe issuing an occasional episode.

Jacobsen: How do you hope to give back to the irreligious community in the future? How do you hope the non-religious community develops over 2018?

Lyons: In a way, I feel like LAF was my contribution. We only produced 70-something episodes, but those have been listened to hundreds of thousands of times. Some of the techniques we introduced for sound quality are in use by many of the podcasts that followed, and have even been adopted by others that were out there first.

I do help with some podcasts, and would be interested in teaching or mentoring those starting podcasts. But I don't feel a great debt to the atheist community outside of that.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Lyons: I'm glad to see others responding to the needs of people who have just left the life of faith. It is the most difficult journey most people will ever take, and knowing there is a vibrant and growing post-faith community to help them is comforting.

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

Lyons: Thank you for this interview.

Interview with Dave McKee – Leader, Communist Party of Canada (Ontario)

January 22, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Back in 2007, you were interviewed by the *Toronto Star*. In the interview, you were asked (bold) and stated (non-bold) said:

EDUCATION: What would you do to ensure our publicly funded schools can offer quality education to all children in Ontario? Do you favour extending public funding to all faith-based schools?

Universal, quality public education is a right, though it has been under attack for almost 20 years. Massive public investment of \$20 billion over 5 years, in a single, secular system open to all irrespective of religion, race, national origin, sexual orientation, etc. is urgent. This means separation of church and school, and in the case of the Separate School system a gradual reduction of funding, and a transition of students, staff, and facilities into the public system. (Toronto Star, 2007)

Some questions come to mind for the secular audience here, possibly, especially with the ongoing religious privileges afforded to the Roman Catholics in this country through the separate, publicly-funded, Roman Catholic School system. How has the universal, quality public education been under attack for almost 30 years now?

Dave McKee: Per capita cuts to public education funding in Ontario date back to the 1970s. But the focused and comprehensive attacks on public education, which I mentioned in the 2007 interview, appeared with the Conservative government of Mike Harris, elected in 1995. These attacks affected the financing, politics and curriculum of public education, but I will only reference the first two here. Notably, the Harris attacks were preceded by a public comment from the Minister of Education (John Snobelen) that the government needed to “bankrupt” and create a “useful crisis” in public education, in order to generate support for its right-wing restructuring.

On the financial side, Harris reduced education funding by \$2.3 billion during his first 5 years in office. During this same period, enrollment (full-time equivalent) in Ontario’s public schools grew by about 20,000 students. All of the enrollment growth was in elementary schools, meaning that secondary schools would eventually see an increase as well. The funding cuts, combined with increased enrollment, quickly diminished the classroom environment. Prompted by this decline in the public system, enrollment in private schools jumped by nearly 30,000 during those same 5 years – an increase of more than 35%. The number of private schools increased by a similar figure.

This loss of funding was administered both through actual cuts to provincial grants and, more far-reaching, through changes that the Harris government introduced to the formula for public education funding. Previously, public school boards were largely funded through a levy on municipal property taxes, with additional grants from the provincial government, and so had control over a mechanism to fund local needs. In 1997, Harris moved all education funding to the provincial level. Although much of the money would still be raised through property taxes, the local boards lost all control and became wholly reliant upon provincial grants. These grant

formula was based on enrollment, meaning that school boards had no way to budget over the medium-term, let alone for long-term considerations. Large urban boards typically have a more diverse student body than smaller boards, and their budgets include costs relating to issues of settlement, accessibility, equity, languages, etc. As a result, per capita costs for larger urban boards are disproportionately higher than those of smaller boards. The enrollment based funding formula had an immediate and particularly harsh effect on funding of large urban boards.

In terms of the interplay between the public board and the separate (Roman Catholic) board, these two entities, within the same geographic area, essentially had to compete with each other for students, so that they would secure and maintain funding. Successive provincial governments have used this competition to play the separate and public boards against one another, most recently in the area of negotiations with teachers' unions. The flawed funding formula, which has been maintained ever since by successive Liberal governments in Ontario, has produced a sad cycle for public education – one of underfunding, leading to lower enrollment, leading to further underfunding.

On the political side, the Harris government also introduced sweeping changes to school board governance. In 1997, the number of local boards was reduced from 124 to 722, through forced amalgamation. This led to a sharp decrease in the number of elected school trustees, dropping from 1,900 to 700, and a much larger area for each trustee to represent. Additionally, remuneration for trustees was drastically reduced, from around \$40,000 in large urban areas to a mere \$5,000 per year.

These changes, which have also been maintained by successive provincial governments, greatly diminished the democratic aspects of public school boards. Fewer working people could run as candidates, since a \$5000 stipend meant that they would have to maintain employment elsewhere. The costs of running an election campaign over dramatically enlarged wards (typically involving 100,000 residents, in large urban areas) has noticeably reduced its accessibility to working class candidates. The overall combination of underpaid part-time trustees and huge geographic wards immediately reduced trustees' to properly serve and engage their constituents.

Over a short period of time, these changes have meant that the profile of school boards, the local democratic forum for public education, has declined very sharply. Boards have become staff-driven entities with less public engagement and input on a wide range of matters relating to the school system.

Also in 1997, the government introduced legislation stipulating that school boards had to provide balanced budgets. Since the provincial government controlled funding, this rule was a way to force local boards to carry out program cuts, sell-off school lands, and increase student fees for basic educational needs. Through this political reform, the provincial government uses school boards to maintain and exacerbate the problems of underfunding.

In the now 33 years since these attacks began, none of the parties represented in the Ontario legislature have consistently or forcefully fought to reverse course. In the face of this inexcusable silence, there is now an acute crisis in public education: 2000 schools have been closed since 1990 and hundreds are currently threatened with closure and sale, there is a \$16 billion backlog in school repairs across the province, school shortages and overcrowding mean that children have to be bussed out of their neighbourhoods to find a school that can accommodate them, and reduced staff has meant that violence in schools is increasing.

All of this is avoidable – what is lacking is the political will, at Queen’s Park, to make the necessary changes. Fortunately, there are ongoing grassroots efforts by parents, community organizations, unions, and others including the Communist Party, which are committed to building the required pressure.

Jacobsen: How would a single secular school system be fairer and more democratic?

McKee: In terms of fairness, a single secular system is the basis for ensuring universality and equality of access for all communities within Ontario. The current arrangement provides public funding to one religious community, among many. This only ensures that there will be ongoing and growing inequity – the United Nations Human Rights Committee realized as much in 1999, when it stated that the Ontario government’s practice of funding one religious community was a discriminatory practice.

In terms of democracy, a single secular system would help ensure that decisions regarding publicly funded education are wholly made in the public realm. A current example of this principle being denied within the Catholic system is the area of sexual education.

In 2016, shortly after the Ontario government introduced a long-overdue update of the sex-ed curriculum for public schools, Catholic bishops issued a 34-page letter reminding educators to “present the Catholic Christian version of...sexuality, chastity and marriage.” The letter explicitly stated the Church’s opposition to same-sex relationships and against the recognition of transgendered people. So, we have a situation in which the government and public institutions are taking more concrete action to affirm and respect LGBTQ people, but a huge publicly-funded institution refuses to accept this and actively educates the opposite.

None of this is to say that a single secular system would automatically be profoundly fair and democratic, but such a system certainly provides the most reliable structure to promote and implement such goals in a deliberate, transparent and accountable manner.

Jacobsen: Why is the separation of the place of worship and government important to you, for Canadians generally?

McKee: The Communist Party is of the opinion that religion and the churches of all kinds are fundamentally reactionary, and serve to defend the exploitation of the working class. We are unequivocally in favour of state secularism.

At the same time, however, the Communist Party supports the freedom of conscience and the democratic right of individuals to practice their religions or to have none. We oppose coercion and advocate an approach relying on persuasion and education. In this sense, the Communist party categorically opposes the prohibition on wearing religious symbols by public employees.

As Frederick Engels said, “persecution is the best way to strengthen adverse convictions,” to heighten interest in religion, and to make its actual decline more difficult.

Public institutions must display neutrality towards religions. To be universally accessible, they must be secular – their structure and delivery must not be contingent on a specific religion, or on religious belief and practice in general.

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

McKee: Thank you!

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Rick Heller of the Humanist Hub, In Conversation

January 23, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Humanist Hub was founded on January 1, 1974. What have been some of the main developments in its growth and outreach to, and activities for, the humanist community?

Rick Heller: The Humanist Hub was founded as the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard. The founding chaplain, Tom Ferrick focused on serving the needs on nonreligious Harvard students. Greg Epstein has been the Humanist Chaplain since 2005, and expanded the mission of the organization to serve the needs of the nonreligious in the Boston area regardless of academic affiliation. He also raised funds to add staff, which currently stands at four, both full and part-time. We have also leased a space in Harvard square where we hold community gatherings on Sunday afternoons, which we livestream on Facebook.

Jacobsen: As the current operations manager at Humanist Hub, 1) any previous positions within the humanist community? If so, what? Also, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position of operations manager at Humanist Hub?

Heller: This is my first position within the humanist community. My only programmatic role is that I lead weekly mindfulness meditations. Other than that, I handle bookkeeping, purchase supplies, and schedule meetings and events.

Jacobsen: When Humanist Hub talks about being a place to connect with others, make the world better, and for evolving as a human being, what do these mean to you, in an abstract description? Also, what are some on-the-ground examples of the Humanist Hub providing these services?

Heller: Our motto is “connect, act, and evolve.” The word “connect” refers to our aspiration to be a true community. Our main activity is our Sunday afternoon gatherings, which beside a talk includes time for people to gather into small groups to discuss the program. It is through discussion that people often get to know one another and “connect.” With regard to “act,” we have a “values in action” committee which aims to be of service to the larger Boston community, and has most recently collaborated with One Warm Coat to collect winter coats to be distributed to those in need. Evolve refers to programs that contribute to personal growth, including our mindfulness program and those of our Sunday programs that touch on topics of mental health.

Jacobsen: You wrote the book entitled *Secular Meditation: 32 Practices for Cultivating Inner Peace, Compassion, and Joy*. Why write it? What was the inspiration for the content – and its title?

Heller: We have been holding secular meditations since 2009. Most of the meditations are drawn from Buddhist practice, but in some cases we have modified the instructions to use language that is clearly secular. Many humanists are put off by any language that smacks of the metaphysical. I’ve found meditation and mindfulness to be personally valuable to me, and I’m happy to share it in our group and through a book to a larger audience.

Jacobsen: What are the upcoming events for the Humanist Hub? What are your hopes for the next few years of the humanist community? How can people donate and become involved in the Humanist Hub?

Heller: We have some exciting speakers lined up for the spring season, but we are not yet ready to make a public announcement. Last semester, we had exciting talks by speakers such as E.O. Wilson, Dan Dennett and Ann Druyan.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Heller: One of our goals at the Humanist Hub is to be a model for nonreligious communities that we'd like to see spring up in other metropolitan areas. We don't believe that atheists have a "god-shaped hole" that needs to be filled, but everyone has a need for human connection, and in-person communities for the nonreligious can go some way toward meeting that need.

Friendly Chat with a Filipino Raelian Life Guide

January 23, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Jacobsen: To begin, what was life like growing up, developing into adulthood?

Kuya Manzano: I was 10 years imprisoned in a Catholic boarding school. So I had ample time to learn how the Bible works and how priests operate. Church in the morning and night, every day.

Jacobsen: How did you find the Raelian movement?

Kuya Manzano: I love controversial people who are brave enough to go against the grain and fight the conservative madness that the Catholic church has dominated the world with. So, I found these crazy Raelians and I started learning more online. Because I am an Activist Atheist and they are too and they are taking real actions around the world.

Jacobsen: What eventually convinced you on the logical coherence and empirical veracity of the faith?

Kuya Manzano: If you read the books by Rael it makes way more sense than any other religion out there. No miracles, no magic, just science, technology.

Empiric is kind of confusing. 'Cause even the things we think are true, proven through science nowadays, might change. Science is always correcting its mistakes, therefore, science is always wrong. Though it is nicer to stick to science than to magic. Bravo for correcting the scientific theories whenever there is a new truth discovered.

I wasn't there when the world was created. I wasn't there when the UFOs abducted Rael. It just makes sense, pretty possible. And fits my logic more than other explanations out there.

Jacobsen: As a way of life, what are its theories about the nature of the world and our origin, and recommended ethic for how we should behave towards one another in the world?

Kuya Manzano: This is the best part and why I embrace the Raelian philosophy, because of the values it brings. Just love one another, give freedom to your partner, be free with sex. We are pro-peace, female rights, gender equality, meditation, health, cloning, automation, happiness.

Everything has a creator, things that happen by accident can't be so complex as a chair, a computer, a human, a fish.

We believe everything is eternal and infinite and that matter is recycled. And the Elohim, the extraterrestrial race that created us also modified the planet a little and created different kinds of life forms in a laboratory. Same as others did with them before. The process is infinite, cyclical. No beginning and no end.

Jacobsen: Now, your position is "Raelian Life Guide." What do you do in that capacity? What are some of the downsides of the work that you do, e.g. violent or verbally abusive interactions with people who do not believe and may even be anti-Raelian to an aggressive degree? What are some of the upsides, e.g. personal fulfillment in helping others in some way within the constraints of the Raelian ethic?

Kuya Manzano: As the national guide for the Raelian movement in the Philippines, I can introduce new members, take decisions on actions to be taken by the group, communicate with the international structure.

I find more aggression from the Atheist community than from the Religious one actually. We are an Atheist religion and hope to get respect from both sides though. Some atheists think we replaced gods by aliens but here there is no praying, no worshipping, no commandments (just loving yourself!).

Upsides, I find hundreds. It totally changed my life for the better. We focus on building happiness. A vital need, I see a certain lack within humanity around the world, whatever belief or lack thereof.

We teach how to be happy, healthy, how to meditate, and philosophy – and personally, I even teach people how to be wealthy by applying the Raelian principle of Paradism (paradise on Earth where all work is done by automation and we can just enjoy life).

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Kuya Manzano: I love the Atheist community. I thank you for your activism. I am an activist Atheist since years ago and I personally host many events of different Atheist organizations here in the Philippines.

Before becoming a Raelian, who is an Atheist, I was a regular Atheist for 20 years. Now, I am still an Atheist. I have a life guide that makes me and others happier.

I invite the Atheist community to read the messages from Rael at <http://rael.org> free books download.

And to follow the social media of the Philippine Raelian movement

<https://www.facebook.com/raelianphilippines/>

<https://twitter.com/raelianpinoy>

<https://www.instagram.com/raelianpinoy/>

Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Love and Infinity!

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

Faisal Saeed Al Mutar on Concerns Over Backlash Movements

January 23, 2018

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 continue a series together.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to a recent speaking tour, you traveled to Canada. You had concerns about the rise of some backlash movements. Where does this concern come from? What is the nature and character of this backlash movement?

Faisal Saeed Al Mutar: So, there is a talk that I did at CFI-Toronto with Al Rizvi. It was a result of research in an article by Thomas Friedman called “America is Being Europeanized.

In this era of polarization, especially around immigration and extremism, in this rise of anti-globalism, pro-protectionist policies, these polar opposites are feeding into each other.

Both, to some extent, need each other to survive. They need each other to continue rising. Many people dismiss my concern as Canada being more educated and less crazy than the United States. We are seeing even places like Germany, where the AfD have won some seats in the parliament.

In France, you have Marie Le Pen. So, there are many European countries and the United States – where Trump won the presidency and also the Republicans won the Congress. This is a concern that many people have.

Many people make a comparison between Obama and Trudeau, as you noted before the interview. Nobody thought that someone like Trump could rise after Obama. But I think this is a result of many people living in a bubble.

I live in New York. Many people are Democrats. Many of my friends too. They do not have even really strong negative views of Obama. But if you go to other parts of the country, Obama is the equivalent of Satan.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Mutar: It didn’t take much for these people to get mobilized, especially in the States because there is the electoral college – so it is not just popular vote. Places like Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, some of these people are completely pissed off at Obama, the Democrats, and the DNC in general.

It didn’t take much for them to become happen. So, that can happen in Canada as well. I do not think Canada is some special place away from partisan politics.

Jacobsen: So with an educational bulwark that could prevent some of the nastier aspects, what would be an analogy to bridge that conceptual gap through an example?

Something that happens in American from former president Obama to current president Trump as from the transition from prime minister Trudeau to whoever becomes prime minister next if indeed this becomes someone who appeals to people of a Far-Right bent.

What would be some signifiers or indicators of this reaction?

Mutar: There is a movement of anti-globalism rising up, constantly. In America, we have Alex Jones. In Canada, you have Lauren Southern and *Rebel Media*. They are gaining momentum in one way or another, but not mainstream momentum.

Those are indicators that some of these voices are being listened to. Some of these people like Trump. It is possible. I think Trump is an exceptional case. He is unique in a way in his craziness. I think that a possibility is similar in a sense of protectionist anti-globalist, probably anti-immigration and pro-travel bans, 'pro-Canadian culture' or 'Canadian values.'

Like what happened in Montreal, where people have to say *bonjour* while entering a restaurant, I don't know if you have heard of that.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] I haven't.

Mutar: If there is that transition, I assume many people who are the Trudeau supporters will be in complete shock when that happened. You will probably be shocked that there are many people who do think that.

We have many protests such as the women's march in America. There are probably protests every week across the Trump towers in the country. We have one group who is disappointed and another group that is happy that the other group is disappointed. With Trump, this is a revenge. To me, that is quite obvious.

Jacobsen: Does this come from making the other side 'the Other' – so you can go along with your party line?

Mutar: I have witnessed, over the past year or so now, how many – as you know, I work in the international affairs world and have an organization focused on that – relationships I have seen torn because of how different people see these candidates from the different political points of view.

There is a lack of empathy for the other side, "You are voting for a rapist, a criminal." Same for Hillary, they said, "How could you vote for a criminal?"

That has probably been happening on pro-choice or pro-life, where one side sees the other as pro-killing babies and the other sees the other side as anti-women. It mostly devolves into personal attacks and *ad hominem*.

Nothing generally good comes out of it, seeing the other side as the Devil. That is why it is hard when I do public speaking engagements and speak to different crowds, Liberal and Conservative.

As you know, I have views from both sides. So, it doesn't take much for me to piss off people if they see me as from the other side. If the conservatives see me as liberal, or if the liberals see me as conservative, they shut down all of their listening.

In Conversation with Lita Bablitz on a Two-Tier Education System

January 24, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have been in some of the Canadian news cycle over blogging what you term a two-tier system with some educational provisions inaccessible to families with tight budgets.

The province made an announcement about cuts to school fees, especially with two sons riding on the Edmonton Transit Service or the ETS. However, only some students qualified for free or reduced-cost ETS access.

What happened? What was the rest of the context for you?

Lita Bablitz: No actual changes came of my blog/concerns. I hope I was heard. The Education Minister has advised that I “stayed tuned” for further initiatives.

I realize the Province isn’t made of money I just felt that ignoring the incredibly wasteful 2 public board system and all of it’s cost redundancies while simultaneously creating financial barriers to any kind of choice was a huge step in the wrong direction.

It effectively created a 2 tier public system; the very thing most Pro-Public Education advocates fear most.

The issue of choice is complicated, but there must be some common sense number somewhere between offering no choices and offering a vast array of (often pedagogically and developmentally inappropriate) programs because public boards are competing with publicly funded faith-based boards for students.

Furthermore, programming choices should be accessible to all. They missed an opportunity I think.

Jacobsen: What was the target of the blogging – awareness, frustration, change in funding dynamics, and so on?

Bablitz: I blog to work through issues for myself. I have written blogs on many things from Colonoscopies to parenthood to politics. Some get read by 10, some by 2000. If I say anything that resonates with anyone or helps them make sense of something they are worrying or wondering about then I am happy.

But I write for myself. My blog is not monetized is that the word? I simply find I stew and agonize over things less if I can sort out a way to express my thoughts.

Jacobsen: As you dished out \$940, how did this affect personal budgeting if I may ask? How does this impact families with even less money for transport?

Bablitz: We live pretty close to the bone financially but we were able to pay the \$940 and keep our boys in French immersion. However, I was terribly worried that it would be deciding factor for many families leaving.

We feel very fortunate to live as we do so I don't wish to seem like I'm complaining about our life. We are so very lucky. It just seems we never get ahead and there is always 'just one more cost'.

We have only one car, and neither my husband nor I drive to work often, we walk or use transit. We rely on transit for our kids to get to school. I am certain the added cost would be too much for many families to juggle.

It sent a clear message that choice was only for families who could afford the additional cost or afford to have a parent drive them.

Jacobsen: Now, with respect to two-tier systems, and as you well know, there exists debate around the Catholic and non-Catholic school systems in Alberta – and in other places throughout the country.

What is your own angle on this? How do you feel or think the situation is progressing, especially with organizations such as IDEA emerging with prominent educational names, including David King, Patricia Grell, Marilyn Bergstra, and others, coming to the fore?

Bablitz: I think it is time to end publicly funded Faith-based education. Churches have protections and guarantees under the law. Individuals have personal religious freedoms within the law.

But there is no rational reason to continue funding a Faith-based school system. And unfair to only offer it consistently to one Faith. It is an institutionalized privilege and we need strong leadership to end it. It's time.

However, I think people can be very resistant to change and it must be done respectfully and with a focus on equality, fairness, science, and public good. But continuing to do something just because we always have is no reason to continue.

Sigh, it's going to be a tough battle but well worth it I believe. A strong, inclusive, secular school system with help build "we" where there has been "us" and "them".

Jacobsen: As this seems like an inflection point in the history of education within the province of Alberta, where can people across the country look to become involved, whether to donate finances, expertise, time, or contacts?

Bablitz: I honestly wish I knew.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Bablitz: We have to do a better job promoting secularism. I think people of Faith often believe secularism is somehow nihilist and lacking in all values. I get very frustrated by that. Studies are certainly showing that isn't the case.

A secular society can create a rich set of values and ethics, still respect and protect religious freedoms within the law, and function from a confident position on scientific and social matters.

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

Exclusive Interview with Writer and Producer Leslea Mair

January 26, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Leslea Mair is an interesting person doing incisive work on losing one's religion, e.g. producing and writing for Losing Our Religion (2017). Here we talk about her, her ideas, and views on things. Enjoy.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So to begin, I want to lay a framework of where you came from so people know where you're coming from when we have the full discussion. So in terms of personal family background, what was it?

Leslea Mair: I grew up in Regina, Saskatchewan, out on the prairies. My family belonged to the United Church of Canada. My grandfather was involved with the church. That's interesting because it's a progressive church and we were in a progressive congregation.

Nobody believed much of anything. You stand up and say the nice creeds, but you don't put much into it. It's all about how you interact with the world. The way you treat people. It's basically the progressive Christians who say try to be nice and try not to hurt anybody.

That's what I grew up with. I did have a relationship with a fundamentalist family in my early adult life, which was interesting. It was certainly informative; people think differently.

It was the first time I got up close to the more extreme religious end of the scale. So, I've always been interested by religious people because they believe in things in a way I don't seem wired for.

Jacobsen: Can you expand on that in terms of not being wired for it? Is that something that you simply do not have an inclination towards or simply don't experience it?

Mair: I think some people are more wired to belief and other people aren't. If it doesn't make logical sense to me, it's not something I can put a lot of store by. As a young child, I thought ghost stories were pretty thrilling. It would be nice to believe in, but ultimately when I look at it, I have to look at it and say the evidence doesn't stack up for that.

Some people, maybe, whether it's nature or nurture, are more inclined to be more evidentiary in their beliefs and some people are more inclined to magical thinking. We all do a certain amount of magical thinking though, it's something we all do. Some of us are more prone to it than others.

Jacobsen: Can you recall any individuals or pivotal moments that were of influence in terms of non-belief, away from the United Church of Canada?

Mair: I don't think so. We never believed any of the supernatural stuff you deal with in church. So, I grew up not believing in the supernatural aspects of religion. So, there wasn't any really. I guess you could say I'm a lifelong, deeply agnostic person, which is functionally atheist and have been my entire life.

So for me, there's no personal shift to or from religion at all. But I find religious people interesting.

Jacobsen: I think that's a good segue into *Losing our Religion*, which is a new documentary film about people who have lost their faith. So, I have three questions there. What was the inspiration for it? What is the content? And what was the purpose?

Mair: Well, the film is essentially about preachers who are not believers and what atheists do when they miss having a church community. So, the inspiration for it was general curiosity, which is a handy trait for a documentary filmmaker.

I read Dennett and Linda LaScola's initial research paper, when it came out, and read about it. I thought, "Well, that's interesting." We've read lots of deconversion stories if you follow the atheist blogs, but hadn't ever read a deconversion story of a preacher, someone who was actually in ministry.

So, I found it interesting. A couple of years later they came out with a follow-up study and people started talking about The Clergy Project. Realizing, it's not a handful of people.

There are a lot of people out there who are active in ministry, basically, professional Christians and The Clergy Project covers more than Christianity: it's Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists. and everybody.

They have all the major religions, Judaism as well. So, it was a big group of people. I thought there is something interesting about it. I wonder what that's like. I contacted The Clergy Project and said I'm a documentary filmmaker interested in pursuing something about this.

They agreed to it. So, that's where the idea came from. I read about it. I was curious. I wanted to find out more.

Jacobsen: If you look at the individuals who have made probably the most difficult decision in their lives to leave something where they thought they were there for life and, for instance, in a Christian context guided by God to do, become ministers, pastors, or preachers in the local Church, and then leave it.

What have been some of the more difficult recollections of the transition out of pastoral life that you can recall?

Mair: The hard thing transitioning out of being a pastor is because you've got the panic of having to find a job and redefine yourself. Because it's not a job, it becomes an identity. Even when you are still in the job, you're hiding what you actually believe.

It has a tremendous amount of stress to it. But when you have to leave, when you are redefining yourself, those are big questions. And they're hard questions, and when it's tied to your economic well being as well, and your family and social well being, it becomes overwhelming.

We followed a couple, Brandon and Jen Murphy through their being in the ministry, but not believing all the way through to getting their lives back on track after leaving. It was a tough time for them to go through. It was incredibly generous of them to let us in on a difficult part of their lives.

Jacobsen: Off-tape, we were talking about some of the ways in which that transition can be even more difficult because the individuals not only leave their community, but when leaving are still within the context of the theology – even within the language.

So, for instance, in the case of people who have left Islam, they become ex-Muslim. For those who leave Hassidic Judaism, they become OTD, or off the derech. In a way, it's playing by the rules of the theology to the benefit of those that are still within the religion?

Mair: Yes, well, it's interesting. Because when you stop believing, you're still the same person you were when you were a believer. It's one of the details about you have changed.

But people see when you do stop believing, especially if you're a minister, they see that as a tremendous betrayal. They react badly a lot of the time. There's a special cruelty saved for de-converts.

You can add up by ten times when it's a minister. But what is interesting, they may have stopped believing in the supernatural, but the way they speak, especially with Evangelical people, has certain phrases and things.

Jen in our documentary describes it as Christianese. It's funny because when you're having a conversation with them. There are turns of phrase, Certain words have their own special meaning within particular religious contexts.

They don't think about them. They're part of the vocabulary. It's interesting to think about how being part of a religious community does seep into us at almost a cellular level. We don't even realize how invested we are with it or how it shapes us.

That's part of the journey they're going on even after they come out of believing in the supernatural.

Jacobsen: We both know of some public figures who have made the difficult transition in real time, in national news. People like Gretta Vosper, for instance.

Mair: Yes. Gretta is in our film. I was happy to have her there. She is a member of The Clergy Project and has been on their board of directors. Gretta is interesting because she is still in the pulpit.

She is not willing to walk away from it. Her congregation is fine with it. That's the interesting thing. Who is not fine with it is the larger church organization in the United Church of Canada, which surprised me, having grown up within the institution. It never seemed to me like we were heavily invested in belief anyway.

So, Gretta's struggles with the United Church of Canada are something interesting. But a lot of progressive churches stand to gain if they can find a way to start accepting some secular people into their congregation in a community sense.

Building the kinds of communities where secular people can feel comfortable because, quite honestly, churches are dying out. The numbers don't lie. And the progressive churches are dying out faster than any other church.

So, they need to start embracing people who are embracing science. They say they do and to a large degree they do a good job of it, but they're still hanging on to those threads of the supernatural that don't make sense to people anymore.

It's taking the leap into the next thing, which Gretta is pushing them to do. They're fearful. We had a review in the *United Church Observer*. I found it funny because they didn't say we were wrong or anything.

It was that I lacked nuance in my view of religion. I found that incredibly funny because it's like "I'm not going to attack you on the substance of what you said. I'm going to say you don't get it."

I get it as much as the next person does and probably as much as many of your parishioners do. So, it's interesting how they approach it. It's not different from how a lot of church organizations reacted to Dan Dennett and Linda LaScola's study on preachers who weren't believers.

They said, "We knew that. It's not a big surprise to us." But they don't want to talk about it.

Jacobsen: In a way, I feel that could be taken by analogy to a legal context, where someone knows an individual that they don't like hasn't broken the law, but they can say, "Well, they went against the spirit of the law."

Mair: Yes, something like that. It's a bit of a vague thing, "I don't like where you've gone with this."

Jacobsen: Because the documentary film only came out recently, what has been some of the early reactions to the film outside of the *United Church Observer* – so to speak?

Mair: That's the only bit of negative review we've gotten. We've had actually quite positive reviews from lots of people. I haven't heard much. Surprisingly, I haven't heard much from people who are religious, or churches or people who are believers.

I haven't had any of that feedback. What I get from people who are in the atheist community is they quite like the film, it's positive; we've had lots of positive feedback. I've had a few people who are pastors or former pastors send me a message – either on Facebook or via email.

They say or write, "Thank you for making this film, this is great. It was so nice to see a story that is partly like my story out there." So, there is a desire for people to have the conversation, to talk about what are other ways we can organize ourselves into communities.

What happens when you do stop believing? Where do you go from there? We tried to do that. We didn't want to go into this thing saying all religion is bad, and religious people are stupid. I didn't want to do that.

It's been done to death quite frankly. It's not a positive message. It's not something I was interested in exploring. But the idea of "What now?" or "Where do we go from here?" appealed to me.

The more I talked to ministers who didn't believe anymore, the more I realized they're still ministers. Some of those ministers like Mike Aus, who started Houston Oasis, that are continuing to be ministers in a secular way.

I found utterly that fascinating. Bart Campolo is a humanist chaplain now or has been until recently. There are people doing things outside of the belief, who are still doing the positive things people get from religion. It was so cool.

Jacobsen: When you reflect on the set of reasons for individuals leaving the faith, whether as members in the pews or as leaders in the church in some capacity, what tend to be the main reasons for them leaving?

Mair: There's never one reason. That's the thing. People expect there to be some cataclysmic happening that drove them to make this change or this decision and it's never one thing.

It's the slow drip of this or that didn't make sense, so they set things aside and then don't think about it. They prayed for someone and they didn't get better. For one of the people in our film, it was the day to day ministry stuff.

"Can you pray for me for something that's fairly trivial?" And then seeing on the news terrible things happening in the world eventually making the cognitive dissonance unbearable.

Most ministers have a level of cognitive dissonance in their training. For a lot of people, the movement towards atheism or agnosticism starts in seminary.

Because you're confronted with the historicity of the Bible. You're confronted with things. You have to study the scriptures. You have to address some of those contradictions in the book.

So, a lot of people find seminary fairly traumatic. Then you carry that into day to day ministry, it's a hard job. You're dealing with people in stressful times a lot of the time. When a loved one is ill, when a loved one passes away, you have to be there for the family to get them through that tough time.

You're also there for the happy times, marriages, the baptisms, and christening of children. All of the good stuff. But there's times where if your marriage is in trouble, you're going to go to your pastor.

Dealing with stress day to day grinds on a person to begin with, so there's a high level of burnout, but you add to some of the cognitive dissonance. Often, you find people go, "I can't buy it anymore."

Or some of them will go from being more fundamentalist and move towards a more progressive Christianity, over a period of decades, they will find themselves at a point where they think, "That's not a real thing. The God thing doesn't make sense ultimately."

But at that point, you've spent your whole life in it.

Jacobsen: What about for young people who themselves are on the fence? What kind of communities exist for them if they are reading this to reach out and potentially make that transition out of the faith if that's what they desire?

Mair: That's where the secular communities are starting up. The Sunday assemblies and the Oasis communities. Things like that. The humanist organizations are starting to put together regular meet ups.

They're starting to incorporate elements of what we get out of Church. Gretta put it best when she said atheists don't need church, what they do need is community. It's true. We all need to feel like we're part of a group. We're social animals.

Talking to Bart Campolo, talking to a lot of people about how to build secular communities, what they talk about now, "I want to know there if is going to be someone to visit me if I go into the hospital."

"I want to know someone will help me out if I'm going through a rough time." So, the secular communities are trying to find ways to step into the role for people who are either agnostic or nominal believers who want to be more private about their belief or whatever.

These communities are open to everyone. Everyone is welcome. The West Hill United Church is a secular community more or less attached to a church organization, but everyone is welcome.

They base their community on loving your fellow man (or woman). That's a tremendously positive thing to be putting out in the world. So, we're going to see a rise of those communities.

We are seeing a rise from those communities right now. It's actually exciting to see. Sunday Assemblies by the way, the way Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans are going, are an absolute riot to attend.

They are so much fun. It's a Sunday morning rave basically. Everybody is dancing and singing. It's great, great fun. And why not?

Jacobsen: If you look at the landscape of Canada in terms of a lack of formal religious faith, as you noted, the writing is on the wall in terms of the decline of not only Church attendance but religious attendance generally.

Who are some individuals, outside of Gretta for instance, that stand out to you in terms of, not necessarily being direct leaders but more, thought leaders in the country, in Canada?

Mair: In Canada, that is hard to say. Because we are a little bit more buttoned down about this thing than the Americans, so we Canadians tend to keep it a little closer to our vest.

I'm not sure. I was excited to read in the news this morning our governor general got up and said let's set aside belief in things aren't real. She's getting some blowback for it, but I was cheering.

It was great. As we see more and more of those kinds of people, the Chris Hadfields, the Governor General Julie Payette, we see more people standing up and saying, "You know what? We have to get down to brass tacks and start dealing with reality and start setting aside some of the magical thinking we do."

Because it's not all based around religion itself. There's a lot of magical thinking. The shift away from religion is coming not towards atheism; there's people who have replaced the idea of the traditional God and Jesus stuff with the universe or the energy fields.

There's still mind-body split and all of that stuff. As we become more and more scientifically literate, that shift is going to continue people down the road to atheism or even deep agnosticism, which is more or less the same thing.

Is anybody particularly leading the charge? I don't know. We should have more people leading charge. That's an interesting question. I haven't thought about that one very hard.

Jacobsen: For myself, when I reflect on it, I think of analogies to individuals such as Margaret Atwood. She was at a different time in the history of the country when she was growing up as well as becoming a professional writer.

However, a lot of her work focuses tacitly on women's rights and the violation or oppression of women in various ways throughout history. She, as a methodology, takes individual points of fact in history and then reincorporates them like little puzzle pieces to make a bigger puzzle for her books such as *The Handmaid's Tale*.

These, in a way, speak to women's rights through example, through writing. In a way, that's a much subtler way to do things. That's not getting up on a pulpit and speaking out. It's getting into the veins of the society.

Mair: She is getting right into the nitty gritty of it. She's finding a way of expressing it, expressing opposition to the religious oppression of women through her art. You do find that.

It's a different way to approach it, standing up and going on tour like Richard Dawkins does – and more power to him. He's one of the reasons that we've started having these conversations.

Now, we're carrying them on to different levels and in different ways. We're at an interesting point in history, where we can directly confront some things when she wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Atwood was not in a particular point in time where this was an easy thing to directly address. Right now with what's happening in Hollywood and with the Weinstein scandal, where we're at with climate change and things like that, we have to start talking about things that are real because it's our preservation.

The culture is going to be going through abrupt and rapid change and quite frankly, as a feminist of more decades than I would care to admit to, I'm happy to see this happening.

Jacobsen: I want to talk a little bit in conclusion about some of the social and legal privileges of religion in Canada. So, things like the religious exemption to anti-hate speech legislation, blasphemy law, and so on?

Statements about “sincere beliefs” or “reasonable accommodations.” Catholic school privileges, the anti-GSA in some Catholic education institutions in the country.

Even to symbolic ones like in the Preamble to the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, of the statement of the “supremacy of God,” and so on, do you think that as these discussions move forward, the ones you've noted, that individuals who are concerned about equality for those who lack a formal faith, that there could be targeted activism on some of these points?

Mair: A lot of things need to change. The fact we reference God in our *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* to me is absolutely ridiculous. When you get into that it's a strongly held belief, so they can say that. Where is the acid test for that?

I can say I believe your skin is green. Your skin isn't green. Sorry, that's silly. Why should you accommodate me in that belief? That doesn't make sense. You can believe what you want to believe, but you can't expect to be unchallenged.

When it comes to something like hate speech, I'm sorry. There are things that are not socially acceptable to say; if you're going to say stuff like that, there needs to be a consequence, especially if it's the speech that genuinely hurts people.

That's a deeply held belief of mine. I'm sure there are people who are going to disagree with my stance on that. It's not in relation to my film, which was more about community and things like that.

We need to start having those conversations. How do we take stuff out of our legal documents? We still have a blasphemy law on the books. Why do we still have that? I know it's mostly a historical artifact, but it can still be used against people.

We need to make some big changes. The atheist community and the secular community, because not all secular people are completely atheist, are starting to organize. It's up to us to start pushing for those changes and start pushing for a world where people can be kind to each other and safe.

That's what a lot of this has been about for me was, "Wow, let's talk about communities of kindness. Let's talk about places where you can come together and be safe. Let's look at all of those because they're so important." It's so important.

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

In Conversation with Helen Austen – Executive Director, Kansas City Oasis

January 26, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I had the opportunity to talk at length with the wonderful Helen Austen, Executive Director of Kansas City Oasis, which is part of the Oasis Network.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was your family background – geography, culture, language and religious faith if any?

Helen Austen: I grew up in the Midwest in a generally small town. I had what you would probably consider to be an average, liberal, American upbringing in a small town. I come from a highly educated family.

I grew up in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, which is about 40 minutes outside Kansas City, Missouri. I was there from 1st to 12th grade. My mom was a teacher and my dad was a city manager in the same town for 12 years.

I had a typical, average upbringing. My parents both being public servants were always compassionate and kind and thoughtful. Church-wise, we went, but I never recall it being a big deal. I have no recollection of learning anything.

Ironically enough, they never pushed it on us. We ate dinner together at the table at night and talked about our days, which usually revolved around what happened at their work or what was going on with us at school.

I have an older brother, 3 years older. It was incredibly average. Then when I met my now ex-husband, we went to high school together. I started dating him. That's when I got pulled into the Assemblies of God and started going to their groups.

Of course, at that age, you're highly susceptible to being pulled in and wanting to belong and they were incredibly warm and welcoming people too. So, when it came to looking at colleges, I auditioned; I was a classical singer.

I wanted to do opera, so I was auditioning all over the country, but got pulled into that. I did a music scholarship at a small university in Minneapolis. It focuses more on training in the industry and for the Assemblies of God.

I went there, graduated. I ended up changing majors so many times. I ended with a pastoral degree because that's what I felt, but the Christian speakers...that's where I was manipulated. Then when I left, it became a matter of wanting to know why.

I started getting into apologetics and reading Tony Campolo's books. It was probably one of the most significant shifts in my perception of life. I would say I was younger than 25, so my prefrontal cortex was not fully developed.

Because I was done by about age 25. I reasoned my way out. I started putting pieces together and one thing after another, then it did not line up. It came to a point where I don't believe in any of this. I went to grad school; I have a graduate degree too.

From there, I have this pointless degree. Also, I even tried to get some type of – I wouldn't say job – work for my career. I'm a highly driven person. There were roadblocks immediately after I finished school.

After I got my undergraduate degree, they say that want women in the ministry, but no they don't. They want women to be in children's ministry, which totally is not my thing. Or some other type of sub-ministry thing.

Anyways, so, it was not going to be a good fit for me. I decided to go into the counseling field, which is still I would say my niche to be true to myself. So, during my graduate degree, that's when I started to be done with stuff but still went to church.

It wasn't until I had kids when my ex-husband and I decided that we had concerns about raising them in the church. We didn't want them to be predisposed to hate, especially against LGBT. Of course, things are so different now, even more so with the conservative right.

But the church's beliefs on homosexuality were a major issue. So, we decided to completely unplug. At that point, I had young children. I had lost in some way my community with the people of faith friends.

We had a small group we were close friends with. You lose a lot when you leave that. I had always loved it; what I loved about being part of a religious community was the community, I knew the Bible. I didn't need to go to church to learn more about that to be frank.

In fact, that was boring if anything, because intellectually I was in a mega church. They aren't going for high intellectual stimulation. They're going at some surface, pat yourself on the back to feel good about life stuff.

So that's when I got the idea to consider why not start something that builds community but without all the things that no longer resonant for me. I figured I wasn't alone and that's when I googled Atheist Church.

I stumbled upon and I did reach out to Sunday Assembly; I didn't hear anything for 6 months and I reach out to Houston Oasis and started talking with Mike Aus. Everything that I was considering doing and wanted for this community to possibly be was what they started to do in Houston.

And from there, so the history of me going ahead, I had a group here in Kansas City that wanted to help start an Oasis, and so we did it.

Jacobsen: With regards to background, that's a thorough background. I appreciate that. That provides the foundation and a pivot into your perspective on how you view things.

You provided information on not only your background, but also this position that you have. With respect to the larger North American culture – and I'll include Canada and America together in this question, what do you make of the reasons – or what do you consider the reasons – for the rapid increase in what are called the Nones”?

Austen: Multiple factors. You've probably seen this already in your research, but *The Rise of the Nones*. That is a good book. I've experienced with my own people and from other atheist communities that the access to information, to the Internet, does play a big role in that.

The empowerment of women because the Church was built on the backs of women; women who, maybe, are more the stay at home mom type, so the culture has been changing with that. That's

also the big reason why we see a shift and then also the politicizing of religion has been distasteful.

Especially the younger generations, I'm a Millennial, technically, by birth date, but I'm on the edge. I can say that I have the perspective of either way. That's why I want to be part of a community that accepts all people.

Even more so now with Oasis, our first value is that people are more important than beliefs. That's key to who I am. That's important to me.

Jacobsen: And what have been some of the more touching stories that you heard of within your own network in Kansas City? Touching stories, emotionally touching stories to an Oasis community, for instance.

Austen: The fact of having relationships and friendships. The running joke is now that those of us who are connected and have been a part of Oasis for a while; everyone was like, "We don't know what our life was before Oasis because there are so many friendships, social things, volunteer things that you could be doing that you didn't have before."

Especially because if you were never religious, it's different. But we've had people tell us that they have more friendships than they've ever had before. They know they are friendships that they'll have for the rest of their life.

I can completely resonate with that. Even my own leadership in Kansas City, I love one of them. It's an absolute pleasure to work with them. It's a fascinating thing and something I don't think happens too much in life.

I have a large group of people helping make Kansas City Oasis run. We're the largest of all the Oasis communities. It takes a ton of volunteer hours to make it happen on an ongoing basis outside of myself.

But story-wise, things that you take for granted in a religious community would be death and being able to have that support network when life is brutal. So, we had a member lose a child tragically and suddenly when we had been on for 6 months and watching a young community that did not know each other.

That good rally around this family; it was unimaginable. It was a Thursday afternoon and we did a small graveside ceremony, not the right word, but what they had wanted and what they thought would be helpful.

And it was almost 2 hours outside of Kansas City, they were a military family, so it was upon a base and there were 30 people. And we were a small community. At that point, who took off from work and drove all the way up there and were present to be supportive of this family going through something that none of us ever want to know what would be like, we lost another member.

The same thing watching the community rally around losing one of our most favorite members to cancer. There are those instances. And then we have tons of young families.

So, there's been lots of babies. We get to celebrate new life. It's getting to experience life with a group of people who share some of your same values that is precious. And what's cool about it is, we do have some diversity of thought.

So unlike in a church or any other religious community, we have people who would identify with spiritualism. They may believe on some level of what some of us might call woo. And then I have hardcore atheists who are hardcore anti-theists.

We all live; we all get along well. We have great conversations where we disagree and still look after each other afterward. The thing where you would hope would be an ideal for the future.

Jacobsen: I have a question about demographics. Because I do know that in what I have researched in terms of the demographics of, for instance, mainline churches, the more prominent churches in North America, women tend to attend more than men – in greater numbers and in greater frequency.

What are the demographics in terms of the Oasis network whether in Kansas City alone or the network as a whole?

Austen: It's been shocking. We vary in age greatly, which is a barrier that most religious communities can't get past – the 40 and under. They can't reach the 40 and under group. We have college students to young families to 40s, 50s.

We have some people who are 70s, 80s, 90s, so it's a wide spread of ages. And that happened. We talked about how that would be the ideal and offering childcare and being family friendly is super important to bringing that to the table.

But we're also relevant when it comes to what we're offering, not Sundays, but socially. Giving back and volunteering to whatever city that the Oasis community is in, it appeals to most people, the wide age range.

Jacobsen: That's interesting because then it leaves not having to cater to a population. It attracts a broad base.

Because some of the mainline churches in America, some of the mega churches, you can find attempts to present in the past or recent past, a hyper-masculine leader and church life as you find or did find in Mark Driscoll or Matt Chandler, or to present oneself as a "everyman" – so to speak, such as Rick Warren.

And that's a barrier that you don't have to overcome given the broad base you're talking about. That's exciting.

Austen: Yes, it is. It is.

Jacobsen: With any community, there will be the problems of a community. What do you find to be problems of an Oasis community?

Austen: It wouldn't be anything unique to any other group of people. You organize a group of human beings and we're all evolved beings as well. So, there's the standard people dynamics, but we are board-governed.

So, we don't have the vicious yearly votes that a lot of church organizations have; we purposely designed ourselves to be that way. You can be on the board, volunteer, and help and show us that you're committed.

We can include lots of people on the governing board. That honestly has made a huge difference. In the church world, it's brutal and vicious. But also, we have some incredible culture where lots of ideas are welcomed.

There isn't a cult of personality; it doesn't revolve around me. That's been intentional. It doesn't revolve around who the primary organizer is. It is team-led. I am one of the main people making Kansas City Oasis happen in the network at this point.

But still, it's not the *Helen Show* by any means. We've been intentional about making sure that I'm not up front every Sunday. I speak maybe a couple times a year.

Jacobsen: So, I won't be looking forward to any *H Magazine* coming around the corner – akin to Oprah's magazine – that's *O Magazine*.

Austen: Oh [Laughing]! No. But I don't know; she does well with that. I would do my own personal venture if I did something that. That's not the goal. We didn't build the community with 1 person.

Jacobsen: Within Canada, we have a slightly larger non-religious population than America. I would assume or even assert that there are needs that are unmet for that community that an Oasis gathering, a Sunday Assembly, an Atheist Church, or a Secular Church might provide in that context.

Given the demographics, have you done any research into potential areas for expansion – if I can call it that – into areas of Canada that might desire it?

Austen: To explain the network side of this, the network was created simply out of necessity because we started getting so many people asking how they could do what Houston and Kansas City was doing after the *Time Magazine* article came out.

So, Mike Ellis and I sat down to discuss how we would empower the group: how do we do that? We still operate today in the sense that we are in for the long haul and slow organic growth. It's not we're purposely slow because we've grown fast, but we're not out there trying to open new Oasis communities.

We wait for people to come to us. It's set up to where people can say, "Hey, I'm interested." We can talk with them, understand what it looks like, and put together a team. That's hard to do. So, the burden then falls on more than one person.

If you can't put together a team and aren't self-motivated, it won't work out. We're all startups. We don't have some rich history with trust money behind it, like churches do; it's local led. We do give the infrastructure and do help coach, especially with the people challenges and understanding how nonprofits run – and boards.

There are a lot of details involved that we've figured out that are helpful in making this an easier thing to make happen. But we're not out there trying to open any Oasis community that has not been initiated by someone or not even someone but by a team of people in a location.

Jacobsen: Who is a personal hero for you?

Austen: I must think about that. It depends on what sector.

Jacobsen: Within the context discussed, someone with either a secular or a formal non-religious bend who knows how to reach people. Someone who can reach out to people in an effective way without offending them.

That can bring people into a secular community if that is what the person wants.

Austen: Someone that is already doing that?

Jacobsen: Yes.

Austen: I don't have anyone. I've met amazing people that I respect and that's why having Gretta Vosper as part of the Oasis network is great. She has unique insight and experience with building community, but I don't see it as necessarily any one person.

We're the pioneers of this at this point when it comes to what you described. So, people, John Dehlin is an interesting voice for the post-Mormon communities, bringing him into the fold. The way I've looked at a lot of this and one of my skills that I do see that I have is I'm resourceful.

Although, I may not have the outright experience in many things. I'm good at finding outside resources or getting to know a network with other people who may bring a lot of wisdom to the table as we figure out what this looks like.

It's never going to be a solid look because there always must be flexibility in our thinking and our approach. Because one, societies are always evolving and changing, but also the need to respond to what the community wants: what do the people want?

This is not "What does Helen want?", but "What do these communities want?" and "How should they look?" So, I don't know if I have anyone necessarily, but I have a ton of respect with the people that I get to work with, such as Gretta.

Jacobsen: I remember one person responded to a similar question in a recent interview that they don't believe in heroes anymore, but they have people that they admire and respect.

Austen: That's great; that's wonderful. I don't know if I've ever had a hero. Shockingly doing this after a couple years, it's almost been 4 years, who you get to work with and dream about the future with some amazing wonderful people.

These diverse backgrounds, and perspectives and experiences on life. It makes life incredibly rich. It's been wonderful.

Jacobsen: What are the values of Oasis? All communities have values, explicit or implicit.

Austen: People are more important than beliefs. Reality is the reason. Meaning comes from making a difference; be accepting and be accepted, and human hands solve human problems. These are our five values.

Having those, and having shared values is important to building community: if you don't have that, it doesn't give you something to stand on. But that is our goal; that is our filter. So, there's a lot to be said for setting those as goals that we are now as people and how we interact with the world and how we look at life. This is it.

Most of those think this is it, but, then again, I have a feeling that there are quite a few people amongst us that are on the spectrum not necessarily heavily dogmatic. But the values are important. I don't know if anyone else told you, but I can give you the logic behind what we do what we do.

Does that help at all? I don't know if that's the interesting article stuff, but this is the stuff when I talk to possible people who are starting communities, this is what we end up talking about.

Jacobsen: Please go ahead.

Austen: So, one of the things that makes us effective is frequent opportunity to get together. So, although yes, we do choose Sunday because at least in the American culture – I have a feeling it's similar in Canada – it's the time that's built into our society to get together a critical mass of people of varying ages, especially families.

Otherwise, it's a challenge. But creating that frequent opportunity to all have a shared experience, maybe to learn something, but then to have that launch out from there, you can check it out. It's much less intimidating than going to a bar; someone's house or a book club or a game night.

You must be one who is extroverted and okay jumping into the situation. By offering something on an ongoing basis, there is no question as to Sundays or whatever days. All of us are doing Sundays now.

It's there. We're offering it. Then we offer something people say is a cross between a Ted Talk and a house concert. So, we do 20- to 25-minute talks on all kinds of things because now we get to explore all of life and not one archaic book.

And that is appealing too. Then we get to learn things about local issues. We have a lot at Kansas City Oasis on racial justice issues, especially native to our city. So, we've had a speaker. He's written a book on the history of racism in Kansas City. So, if we know where we come from then we can better figure out how to help maybe create change in our own city.

So, having those learning opportunities are great, the talks' purpose is to create conversation. We're not telling people what to think or believe, but to have the shared experience and give something to talk about in a conversation over lunch.

Then we bring in different live music. Every genre in every city is different. I would say that Texas feels like Texas, but we have a ton of jazz in Kansas City. It is something we're well known for. We have a rapper. So, it varies drastically.

We had a band last week and then this Sunday is a rapper. And then the next week is the guy who sings while he plays the harp, it's the most magical, wonderful thing ever. So, you get to also experience art, which is another part of the human experience.

So, if we can offer something great and have a shared experience, then it's wonderful. Outside of Sunday, we are creating opportunities for people to connect socially, so different fun things. We've had museum meetups.

The standard things that a lot of secular groups have done, but not to the scale that we're doing it. We want to create the opportunity to build relationships and get to know each other. We also launched a small group system.

It's been a year and a half ago in the same way that a lot of megachurches do. My personal experience in church was that I made some of my closest friends being part of a small group. I was there thinking that there has to be some way we can use that.

All it is, you're getting to know a smaller group of people in a home on a regular basis. We do 8 or 10 weeks for small groups now using Alain de Botton's School of Life. The people don't have to read or do anything beforehand and they're all over the city.

So, this time we had 10 host homes all over the Kansas City Metro area and over the different days of the week and times. People can get to know each other even more and those have been an absolute hit.

Once we got to 150 every Sunday or so, I was worried people weren't going to start connecting. That's an issue that a lot of large churches have. Getting past that number can be a challenge because getting people to know each other in such a large group changes things, I was thinking, "Let's try the small group thing."

People have talked about that being one of the most wonderful things that have evolved out of being in Oasis. You get to know other people in your part of the city. Unlike a lot of churches who pull within a 10-mile radius, we are pulling within a 75-mile radius of our Kansas City Metro area.

We do a demographic survey every year to see who is coming and from where and all of that, so we have that data. It's interesting. The different dynamics that we have trying to connect people is to build community; that's why we exist. How do we build relationships?

And that's our filter for everything we decide to do. Then we want to give back to the community because that's part of our values. We do a blood drive every 3 months. The bus comes to our community center where we do our Sunday gatherings at.

People come in and out and donate blood. We're one of the biggest contributors to that blood bank in Kansas City due to how we have it set up. It makes it so easy. Then we work with a faith-based organization that feeds and clothes the working poor.

Every month, we work with them and have a great partnership. They're wonderful. They share our same values that all people matter and we want to help people regardless if you're Muslim, black, white, gay, straight, vegan: who cares?

We want to help people.

Jacobsen: I appreciate taking your time.

Austen: My pleasure. Cool, that's awesome. You're the first person to reach out to all of us. I did notice because I got a couple of communities reach out to me saying hey this guy is contacting us, "Can we talk?" It's fine.

I've had some strange requests lately that has made us now start to change my approach to responding to stuff. You followed one strange one that was, it was some weird Alt-Right thing that was unsettling. That they tried to manipulate us into talking with them.

It's interesting here in the states now. it's an alternative reality that we live in here. It's partially horrific. We envy you guys in Canada.

Jacobsen: We're the land of Margaret Atwood.

Austen: It's a strange world we live in now. After the election, our attendance skyrocketed also. Everyone was in shock. In a sad way a lot of us are not necessarily getting used to it, but you do in some weird way. For the US now, with Trump's America, we're not a political organization, but we stand for people to be treated well above and beyond whatever their belief system is.

The whole thing with Trump and getting rid of the ability for refugees to settle here and discriminating against Muslims; people are more realizing their need for community more than ever. It did change things.

Things have been different this year. And it's more of a way where we feel more than ever what we're providing is so much more necessary than ever because our political system in the US is something, that's for sure. I'm glad I have my community.

I can't imagine going through this living in this country with Trump as president without my community. It's been important in giving some element of hope because there's little for a lot of us in the US.

We're not giving up. Sometimes, it takes drastic and extreme things to wake up some people and to get involved. that's starting to happen, so we'll see.

In Conversation with Peter Gajdics – On The Inheritance of Shame

January 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Peter Gajdics is the author of The Inheritance of Shame: A Memoir. He can be found in Amazon, Twitter, Facebook, and Goodreads. Here we plumb the depths – as the cliché goes – about conversion therapy, his life and experience, and book.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You wrote a book called *The Inheritance of Shame: A Memoir*. I could give my own description, but I would like this in your own words. What is the content and purpose of the book?

Peter Gajdics: *The Inheritance of Shame: A Memoir* is about my six years in a form of “conversion therapy,” as well as my long road to recovery after suing my former psychiatrist for medical malpractice. Told over a period of decades, the book explores universal themes like childhood trauma, oppression, and intergenerational pain, and juxtaposes the story of my years in this “therapy” and its after effects with my parents’ own traumatic histories—my mother’s years in a communist concentration camp in post World War II Yugoslavia, and my father’s upbringing as an orphan in war-torn Hungary.

I started to write this book at the close of my lawsuit, in 2003. It is no exaggeration to say that I wrote to stay alive—to resist the silencing effects of shame brought on not only from childhood sexual abuse, and the lie that the abuse had “made me gay,” but especially as a direct result of this “therapy.” Eventually, I wrote to mine my own history and understand, to the best of my ability, what had brought me to that doctor’s doorstep, why I’d stayed for six long years, and what, if anything, I had learned. By about 2012, as conversion therapy began appearing in the media after California became the first world-wide jurisdiction to ban the discredited practice, I wrote as a political act—to try and prevent the recurrence of similar forms of torture.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How does most of your written work deal with issues of homosexuality? How does your work expose the inner workings of conversion therapy?

Peter Gajdics: I grew up Roman Catholic, and so even as a child I recall hearing the priests deliver sermons denouncing the evils of homosexuality. When I was six years old I was also sexually abused by a stranger, and ended up “learning” from various sources, including the church, the media, even my own family, that sexual abuse “caused” a person to become homosexual. By the time I started to develop sexual feelings for other males, the fear that this abuse had created my desires was unrelenting. My father had Anglicized the pronunciation of his surname, *Gajdics*, after immigrating to Canada in the 1950’s, and so I also grew up pronouncing my surname “Gay-dicks” (instead of its proper Hungarian pronunciation, “Guy-ditch”), which of course resulted in all sorts of ridicule from my classmates. I could not escape my name, of course, which seemed to suggest that I really was “gay,” and yet being gay, as I had learned, meant that the abuse had caused these feelings of same-sex desire. All of this amounted to one incredible nightmare as a child. And all of these factors—the fear around my name and the belief that abuse had “caused” me to become who I was—contributed to the reasons for ending up in this “therapy,” though I could never have clearly articulated any of this at the time. On some level I wanted to not be myself, to undo the effects of abuse, to escape the torment of what I

thought it meant to be gay, to not be my own name. Overall, I think that one's identity as part of any minority, especially a sexual minority, is always going to take centre stage in a person's life if only because they are constantly fighting against the currents of shame and invisibility. Our fight really is to stay alive, to retain our humanity, to resist the dehumanizing effects of oppression in its myriad incarnations.

With respect to the "inner workings of conversion therapy"—I think that all of these treatments begin with some version of the same lie, which says that being gay or homosexual is a disease or immoral, a deviation, and must be "cured" in some way. Because of my own history, early on my psychiatrist affirmed that the abuse had, indeed, "caused" my false belief that I was homosexual, and that this "error" in my thinking and the consequent "acting out" by sexualizing relationships with men could therefore be "corrected" through the use of his therapy. Every person who ends up on one of these therapies will have their own story, and lie, but I think the premise is always the same—lies are what snare gay people into believing they need to try to become heterosexual, or that causes a parent to send their kids to one of these therapies. A person can build an entire life around a lie—until, of course, the lies come crashing down. Truth is always forcing its way back into our lives—we just have to remain open to it.

Several years after my own therapy, it was important for me to try to understand how someone could end up believing they had "changed" themselves, because I really do believe that some people who are in these treatments actually believe their own lies, that they have "changed." Obviously, even to this day some politicians and right-wing zealots still believe that "change" is possible. The best way that I've been able to explain it all to myself is with metaphor of the map / territory confusion—"A map is not the territory it represents," which was first stated by philosopher Alfred Korzybski, even popularized by Deepak Chopra. Practitioners of "conversion therapy," and many people in these treatments, have confused the map of sexual identity with the territory of desire in that they think that a change to a person's outer behaviour, their *map*, will result in a change to their inner self, their *territory*—but of course, that's the lie. If I stand in Paris and call it Rome, really believe that it's Rome, the place beneath my feet is still the place beneath my feet no matter what I think or call it. I am still standing where I was when it was called Paris. Changing a map will never change a territory, but we can invest years of effort and our firm belief into trying to do just that.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: As a gay man, how does shame form a core of self-identity to potentially many gay men in their young lives. What are the majority outcomes? What are the positive outcomes? What are the more tragic outcomes from this disorientation of shame, guilt, and self-misunderstanding.

Peter Gajdics: It's true that shame formed a core belief or structure in my life right from an early age, but the shame wasn't solely about my homosexuality. Shame, within my own family history, stretches back generationally to my father's upbringing as an orphan, and even before him to his parents and their parents, and also with my mother's experiences in the concentration camp. Generally, I think that any oppressed minority faces at least some degree of shame, if only because they are marginalized, often teased and bullied as children and ridiculed as adults, and end up becoming "the other" within a society. There's always going to be some degree of shame when you feel you don't belong, when you face institutionalized hatred and bigotry, when you're ostracized or segregated. Sexuality overall is still very shame-based within our culture; even under the best of circumstances people's sexuality is often compartmentalized. While the world is obviously more accepting of gays today, I think there is a danger in thinking that various laws

or even increased visibility in the media means that on an individual level all is completely well. I don't think it is. "Gay identity," as a collective force, is not overly subjective; the political does not necessarily translate into the personal; and so on a very personal level, people still struggle with issues of shame and, as you say, guilt. I'm also not convinced that the portrayal of gay men and women in the media is always honest and healthy, and so there continues to be some risk of internalizing a new version of what "the world" says it means to be "out and proud." Pride has little to do with marching in a parade once a year, or even in having a lot of sex. Quantity is not quality. The locus of attention in a healthy sense of self must start from within, not outside, not in magazines or on television, or else we're always going to feel disoriented, caught in the eye of a social media storm. We will never "understand" ourselves if we always look to others for the answers about our own identity. "Being gay," just like "being straight," is largely illusory, and has little to do with being one's self.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Does the shame come from the self, the family, community, the society or some interplay amongst and between those domains? What are some symptoms of this sense of shame? What thoughts are used to rationalize the shame if there is no support network or insight into the source of it?

Peter Gajdics: Shame is definitely sourced in various places, including the family and its history, society, various religions, and each is always fighting for attention within one person's life. It can take an enormous act of will to resist these invaders and to exert one's own sense of self, free from shame and self-harm. For me in my own youth, shame manifested in the form of eating disorders, unsafe and sometimes compulsive sexual behaviour, and also of course depression and despair, thoughts of suicide. A sense of hopelessness, an absence of any real purpose or agency, is, I think, the most terrible state, but I do not believe this is ever innate or static. We find ourselves in these liminal states of being not because we are meant to stay there, but because of a number of other contributing factors in our life. Shame has its own logic, but it is never honesty. On some level, I think we always know when we are living the lie of shame, when we're self-destructing. The danger is that some behaviour, which is founded in shame, can end up feeling seductive and pleasurable. Pain can often feel like pleasure. I would like to say that reaching out for help or finding community is the easy answer, but I know this is not always possible, or easy, and sometimes we don't always know that we even need help. I look at my own life and there were years where I felt righteous in my own self-destructiveness. I needed to learn certain life lessons for myself. I suppose expressing myself through the written word has helped save me. I've worked my way through many difficult passages in my life simply by writing them down and seeing them outside of me, rather than continuing to internalize it all. Writing reflected back to me a source of power and identity—who I was and what I wasn't—that I could not find in another person.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: If you could take a bigger view of the nature of homosexuality or the popular conceptions of it, what seems like the benevolent prejudices and malevolent biases portrayed in the media and culture around homosexual or gay men?

Peter Gajdics: When we talk about "the nature of homosexuality," immediately I think of "the nature of heterosexuality," since one cannot exist without the other. In this sense, I think we are really therefore talking about "the nature of sexuality." Sexuality hasn't always been divided into this kind of binary, and while language and definitions can give voice to the marginalized, in this case I think they are often used as instruments of lies—beneath the lies of "conversion therapy," for example, homosexuality and heterosexuality are often used not descriptors of erotic desire,

but of mutable identities; “change” is not genetic but taxonomically societal. Also, the fact that it is still a headline in the media when a person is “discovered” to be gay, or comes out and is interviewed about “what it was like to discover” they were gay, says a lot about how our culture still perceives sexuality—there’s still a sense of scandal, or sleaze, compartmentalization, around all of it. Within a range of benevolent prejudices and malevolent biases, some stereotypes seem to me to be fairly benign, like gay men’s love of musicals, as one example—which of course is not necessarily true of all gay men, just as all straight men don’t necessarily love football. I look to the recent past, and I think the popular conception, believed and promulgated by many for a long time, of AIDS being such a thing as a “gay disease” has been about as malevolent as they come, because it was founded on the lie that said “we” are somehow separate and different from “you”—and we’re not. We are all one. Blood runs through us all. Lies like these result in millions of deaths.

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

Charlotte Frances Littlewood on Radicalization, Extremism, and Counter-Extremism

January 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Charlotte Littlewood is the Counter Extremism Coordinator for an area of East London that ranks as one of the highest at-risk areas in the country to radicalization and extremism. She spent two years delivering on the Prevent strategy, helping safeguard individuals from radicalization, which involved working on cases that prevented whole families from leaving to Syria to fight for the Islamic State. Now, as a part of her role as Counter Extremism Coordinator, she has developed and is leading on delivering a programme that looks to empower young people to speak out against extremism online: the Arts Against Extremism Programme.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is counterterrorism? What is counterextremism?

Charlotte Frances Littlewood: Counterterrorism is countering violent extremism; when acts of violence are committed on behalf of a political and/or religious ideology. The UK government tackles terrorism through its CONTEST strategy that can be broken down into four subsections, Protect, Pursue, Prevent and Prepare. Let's take Protect as an example: Protect aims to strengthen key infrastructures to better withstand an attack, for example, in the borough I work for, we have large concrete plant pots bordering the longest market street in London, these are there to protect from a potential vehicular attack. With regard to counter terrorism my expertise is in Prevent, which aims to prevent vulnerable individuals from being drawn into terrorism or becoming terrorists, it means working in local government in collaboration with the community safety team to safeguard these individuals from harming themselves and others.

Counter extremism is countering non-violent extremism. Extremism is that which opposes democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. For example, if one was to create a parallel legal system that enforced illegal cultural practices such as female genital mutilation both the rule of law and one's right to individual liberty would be opposed. Therefore, we are not just discussing Islamist and Far-Right extremism here, we're talking about honor killings, FGM, homophobia, Islamophobia; everything that falls under something that goes against our values of tolerance, respect, equality – essentially human rights.

The strategy, for which I now lead on for my Borough, can also be broken into four strands. Building the capacity of community groups that work to build cohesion and/or directly tackle hate and prejudice; increasing the reach of community groups that do the above; tackling the extremist narrative and opposing extremist groups. In my borough I have developed a programme using Arts Council and Heritage Lottery Fund money to do all the above. The Arts Against Extremism programme uses local community organisations to empower a group of young people to speak out on issues that affect them. These groups are paid for their contribution whilst also being able to share the platform with the participants to allow for their work to also gain greater reach. The messages that the participants disseminate are all ones of countering the manifestations of extremism they are learning about (homophobia, Islamophobia, FGM, sectarianism, Islamism and the far right) as well as putting out positive messages of shared

values. Essentially we are flooding the online space, which is sadly predominantly dominated by negative content, with positive messaging, whilst also empowering local organisations that counter extremism and building resilience in both that participants and the community to extremist messaging. The programme launches this week with Hibo Wardere, a victim of FGM, speaking on her life and work, so do follow the hashtag 'ArtsAgainstExtremism' and our facebook page.

Jacobsen: What is Quilliam?

Littlewood: Quilliam is a counterterrorism think tank. It researches the drivers of radicalisation and runs campaigns, programmes and outreach to tackle radicalisation at its root. Some of their work is used to inform how we understand radicalisation but otherwise it is completely separate. They are an independent think tank whereas I am a government employee.

Jacobsen: What has been a big success in the government work of identifying extremism and countering it?

Littlewood: So, I would suggest that the government's work in identifying extremist narratives is ongoing [Laughing]. Its biggest success has been in shifting perspectives on how we challenge extreme harmful cultural practices, tackling FGM being a prime example. It has been a slow progress of getting people to understand that there are actual ills and problems coming out of certain cultures because there is a real sense that when you push against a cultural practice then you're being culturally imperialistic. It has taken victims to these practices, born out of the cultures that propagate them, taking a stand against the practice.

Again I would point you towards Hibo Wardere, she really is a wonderful example of how perspectives can be shifted to understand something as harmful and therefore necessary to oppose. She is an anti-FGM activist who went through FGM in Somalia. Now, she goes all over the world talking about how FGM isn't a part of her religion and is a cultural practice, how harmful it is, how it is a human rights abuse and how we can work with the communities who continue to practice it to make a change. Initially her community hated her and countering FGM was considered to be interfering with religion. Now we see many of her community, especially locally, working with her and an increasing awakening to the harms of FGM. It is her passion, personal experience, knowledge and relationship with her community that has allowed her to make this kind of success in tackling extremism.

Now people are starting to get behind tackling some really intolerable and disgusting practices, even if they might be attached to a culture. So, positive voices from the culture are really important and having people like myself who understand that and have the ability to support and platform those voices are all part of ensuring we can be as effective as possible in tackling hate, prejudice and harm.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for your time, Charlotte.

Dr. Leo Igwe Speaks on a Nigerian Awakening

January 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Leo Igwe is the founder of the Nigerian Humanist Movement and former Western and Southern African representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. He holds a Ph.D. from the Bayreuth International School of African Studies at the University of Bayreuth in Germany, having earned a graduate degree in Philosophy from the University of Calabar in Nigeria. Here we talk about the awakening, ongoing, in Nigeria.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have written about an awakening in Nigeria. You are a main vocal and public intellectual for the non-religious community in the continent of Africa and in the nation of Nigeria.

You did something few have the willingness, courage, or ability to do, which is found an entire movement in a country: the Nigerian humanist movement. What are the major developments for the observation of an awakening in Nigeria at the moment?

Leo Igwe: The developments are not too different from what led me to found the Nigerian Humanist Movement in 1996. These are mainly the pervasiveness of harmful traditional beliefs and practices and the damaging effects of religious extremism.

Unfortunately, in Imo state just like in other states in Nigeria, traditional belief in witchcraft, Mami Wata, spirits and gods, charm, ritual sacrifice and ‘Ogwuego’, (blood money), traditional bullet proof remain very strong. Modern education has done very little to weaken the hold of these ancient superstitions on the minds of the people.

The notion that witchcraft is real is widespread and those who are accused, mainly women, children and elderly persons, are often attacked and killed by their accusers. The idea that people can make money using human body parts sometimes lead ritual murder and human sacrifice.

In fact, the Abrahamic religions, which missionaries, scholars, and jihadists introduced in the country have substituted these beliefs with their foreign versions or reinforced these traditional/magical conceptions of life and realities.

The two Abrahamic faiths have succeeded in inflicting so much damage because these foreign religions enjoy enormous privilege and too often their doctrines are shielded from critical examination.

Interestingly those who introduced Christianity and Islam criticized and ridiculed traditional beliefs and practices. Now, these Abrahamic religions prohibit and penalize, and sometimes criminalize the criticism of their own teachings and dogmas.

So foreign religions are holding Nigerians, nay Africans hostage, morally and intellectually. Their bogus faith healing claims, abuses and exploitation go largely unchallenged.

Miracle pastors extort money and dispossess their church members by compelling them to sow seeds. In fact, in a clear case of human debasement and an embarrassing show of shame, Nigeria’s foremost Christian faith healer, T.B Joshua recently claimed to have healed a person of “anus cancer.”

The local media published the picture of the man who had cancer along with anatomical details showing the location of the disease. Such dubious and irresponsible claims are rampant in present-day Nigeria.

The Nigerian society urgently needs a campaign of reason to awaken the local population to the dark and destructive effects of superstitions and religious fanaticism.

Jacobsen: You contacted me regarding the upcoming work in Owerri for the humanist and freethinker (etc...) population there – in Imo State, Southern Nigeria. What is happening there? Why is it exciting?

Igwe: A lot is taking place in Imo state that warrants a secular response. Centuries of Christian proselytization have turned the area into a stronghold of Christianity. Furthering the humanist alternative has become a necessity in order to challenge Christian religious privilege in the state.

The Christian establishment tyrannizes over the lives of the people. Christian churches control the schools and use these institutions to indoctrinate children and youths. They make it difficult for them to think outside the Christian/religious box.

Due to the Christian monopoly of the educational system, there is virtually no significant space for freethinking and critical inquiry. Imo state is witnessing a proliferation of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity.

The activities of these ministries damage the environment. Miracle priests and pastors have been ordering the felling of trees and the clearing of forests, which they claim to be the hideout of evil spirits.

Recently, one of the miracle pastors, Fr. Modestus Chilaka, claimed to have resurrected a man from the dead, after the corpse lay in a mortuary for three weeks. A culture of dogma and blind faith makes the people prone to believing this nonsense and other absurdities.

Also a few years ago, the Catholic church in the state witnessed an unprecedented crisis. Catholics in one of the local dioceses, Ahiara, rejected a bishop that the pope appointed to take charge of the area.

They claimed that the selection process did not follow the due process. Efforts by the Vatican to compel the priests and lay people in this diocese to accept the bishop have failed. The threats and intimidation from the pope and the Vatican have so far come to naught.

The people have stuck to their guns. Although the Christian church is dominant in Imo State, there is occasionally a defiance of its authority, a challenge of its teachings, a resistance of its oppressive structures, and an opposition to its monopoly of power and influence in the region.

That is a sign of hope. The humanist forum is an initiative to deepen and sustain this culture of defiance and resistance of religious dogma and authoritarianism.

Jacobsen: It is the Bible Belt, as you noted, of Nigeria. How does the fundamentalist, Bible Belt, form of Christianity mix with traditional beliefs and practices in Owerri?

Igwe: Christianity has annexed the traditional religious complex by divinizing and adopting what it considers good and moral while demonizing what it regards as evil and wrong using the Bible as a reference point.

Given that the Bible is not a coherent text, and there is no God or Christ to confirm what is true or false; what is or is not the word of God.

A mix of Christianity and traditional beliefs are consistent with the Christian fundamentalist paradigm because verses from the Old and New Testaments are used to justify what is often designated as traditional beliefs and practices such as the belief in witches, the use of charms and the practice of ritual sacrifice.

For instance, fundamentalists Christians use Ex. 22:18 to justify the accusation and persecution of witches. They continue to tighten the 'Bible Belt' around the minds of people in the region.

Jacobsen: What are the penalties for public non-religiosity in Owerri at the moment, and historically? What will the public, even the police, do to you?

Igwe: As in the north of Nigeria, there are risks that are associated with non-religiosity, but public non-religiosity in southern Nigeria is not as dangerous as it is in the Islamic Northern Nigeria.

Public non-religiosity attracts social sanctions, ostracization, threats of severance of ties and relationship, withdrawal of family and social support. Nonreligious persons can be attacked especially in situations where their non-religiosity is demonized and believed to be responsible for poverty, lack of progress, illness, death and other misfortunes in families and communities.

The police usually intervene on the side of the religious attackers. However nonreligious persons in strong sociocultural positions, that is, those who are gainfully employed or those who are financially independent are better placed to resist persecutions.

Jacobsen: How does religion change the political and cultural current of Nigeria? How can an awakening of freethinking change this disaster for the principles of secularism: of a place of worship and state/government separation?

Igwe: Religion is frustrating efforts to establish a secular state, and attempts to effectively tackle religious extremism. Religion has made it difficult to put in place institutions that guarantee the rights of all individuals whether they are religious or not.

Religion has hampered the evolution of a tolerant society that does not discriminate against anybody on religious grounds. Unfortunately, states in the Muslim dominated areas are implementing sharia and officially discriminate against non-Muslims.

While states in Christian dominated areas officially discriminate against non-Christians, in a religiously pluralistic Nigeria, it is imperative that the state is secular and religiously neutral and not biased for or against any religion. This is not yet the case.

In addition, religion has frustrated the realization of a culture of critical thinking and scientific inquiry, fostering a faith-based, not an evidence-based view of the world. Religious dogma has made it difficult for Nigerians to freely exercise their minds.

It has hampered the emergence of a scientific Nigeria and the unleashing of Nigerians' creative, inventive and innovative potentials. An awakening of freethinking will get Nigerians to realize their intellectual possibilities including the promises and benefits of separating religion and state.

It will provide a stimulus for positive and progressive change in the country. Simply put, fostering the principles of secularism will help deal a heavy blow to that last bastion of colonialism, religion.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Igwe: Religion is a global movement that uses transnational structures to promote its agenda, spread its dogmas and undermine the separation of church (mosque) and state.

Secularists should not be content with only complaining and criticizing the dark and destructive effects of religion around the globe. Mere criticism is not enough. Secularists should put in place structures and mechanisms to counter theocratic forces. A global synergy is needed to achieve a secular enlightenment worldwide.

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

In Conversation with Angie Johnson – Executive Director, Salt Lake City Oasis

January 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Angie Johnson took some time to discuss some of the Oasis Network activities. In particular, the work is seen in the Oasis Network branch in Salt Lake City. A previous interview was done with Helen Austen portrays the activities of the Kansas City Oasis. One of the main drivers of the Oasis Network initiative remains Minister Gretta Vosper from the West Hill United Church of the United Church of Canada. The first sect, or one of the first sects, in Canada to permit women as ministers – to allow ordination of women as ministers within the United Church of Canada. Here Angie and I talk about Salt Lake City Oasis.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, what was the original inspiration for Oasis in general?

Angie Johnson: I probably speak more to Salt Lake than to Oasis in general. But I will say I think the impetus was the idea that religion has the corner on the market for community, whereas a lot of things about community don't require religious belief or dogma.

So, Oasis was started with an eye towards humanism. The idea that the actual person is more important than whatever they may tend to believe. So, it is secular in the sense that there is no religion in it.

But it's also open to those who do have religious beliefs because we would put people above whatever their beliefs are.

Jacobsen: As the executive director for Salt Lake Oasis, what kinds of things does everyone do while there?

Johnson: Our weekly event is a gathering, which is like Ted Talks meets a house band. We have live music every time. The music part is important, but we have a lot of people who are big on singing as a group.

Maybe, because they are post religion, they love music. It's sort of an uplifting thing, so we have live music every week. We have a keynote presenter on a topic of interest to the community. So, we've had something new every Sunday for around a year now.

Last week, we had the Dark Sky initiative, but we've had talks on everything from stem cells to evolution to spirituality without religion to meditation to intimacy in relationships. We've had sex therapists.

We've had talks on grief and loss. We've had talks on philosophy. Anything that you can almost imagine. We've had speakers on those topics. So, they do a 20-minute presentation followed by a Q&A with the audience.

If people want to push back, ask questions, or if anyone is skeptical, then they can have their voice be heard. Then we also have a coffee and chat break in the middle of that.

Also, we have a community moment where somebody from our community takes 5 minutes to talk about themselves, or something that they enjoy, are interested in, or a topic on their mind.

That is the format for the weekly gathering. It's open to anybody that wants to come. We've started out with a few people, but we're up to where we regularly have 50 people there every time without any problems.

Then we focus on education and humanitarian works. So, we have a monthly project called the Burrito Project, where we roll burritos and deliver them to homeless people in Salt Lake City.

That's kind of our standing humanitarian effort. Every month, we try to have a speaker that pertains to humanitarian work. We've had room to read, to promote literacy for girls in third world countries.

Sometimes, we have our donations that week, half the donations go towards the cause. Then every once in awhile, we'll do a particular cause, as with Hurricane Harvey release fund for our friends that are in Houston Oasis.

We raised over a few thousand dollars to send to them for hurricane relief. I would say the main focus is community, education, and humanitarian work. We're trying to bring people together, so that they can form friendships and have the community that they often don't get because they don't go to church.

Jacobsen: When you do notice someone who is new to the community, how do you make them most feel welcome? How do you bring them into Oasis?

Johnson: I think coming to the Sunday gatherings. We have a board of directors. We have a person who is designated to greet people and look for anyone new and then to introduce them.

Sometimes, people come to Oasis thinking, "Oh, I'll try this once. I'll have instant friends," but they don't realize you have to put time and effort into making friends. You have to stick with it and show up for a little while.

We also recently instituted something called community groups. Because we are coming from all over the valley here, we have these community groups that meet on a weeknight. They run for 6 or 7 weeks.

They'll be at someone's home. We try to strategically place them further away. So, for example, in south Jordan, where I live, it's about 20 minutes to get to downtown Salt Lake, where we have our Sunday gathering.

So, I recently hosted a community group at my house in order for people who live down here at the south end of the valley can be able to come over watch a school of life video, discuss and eat snacks & drink wine and chat.

Those sorts of less formal events tend to cement friendships more than the Sunday gatherings. But Salt Lake Oasis has started sponsoring a navigators scout group this year for secular scouting, too.

We have some events, where kids start to know each other more through scouting. That's a new program. We started barely meeting last month. So, those are some ways that we try to provide that community experience for people.

Jacobsen: What are some ways people can become involved, e.g. volunteering time and skills, donations, and so on?

Johnson: We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit. All of our expenses are paid through people donating. So, we pass the basket at our gatherings and then we have sustaining contributors to go online and donate a monthly amount.

Basically, our goal is to get enough sustaining contributors to pay for our venue and business liability. Now, we have a part-time child care person for Sunday gatherings, so during the keynote we have childcare.

We have 1 paid person and 1 volunteer person from the community who, gets a background check and, helps each week. So one way to help is volunteering for the child care. We have jobs. We have committees.

We have the childcare committee. We have our snacks and coffee committee. We have a committee for helping find musicians. So, there are lots of volunteer things for people. We have a social committee that plans little events in the community.

We recently had a paint night. Sometimes, we have a classic skating party for the kids. We do a lot of hikes. This year for the first time we did a Salt Lake Oasis family campout, where we got a big group site up in the mountain.

We had an actual overnight campout for anyone who wanted to come. Actually, we had our Sunday gathering up there and had a professor come and talk to us about the positive effects of nature on the brain.

So, that was really fun. We try and incorporate some of the social events with the humanitarian work and the gatherings to have a complete package. Of course, not everyone goes to everything, but we try to find people where they're at and find what they're interested in doing.

Once a month, after our Sunday gathering, we have feast Sunday, where we go out to lunch together. So, that's more opportunities for talking and getting to know everybody.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for your time, Angie.

“I didn’t even know we had an Intelligence Agency”

January 30, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Yasmine Mohammed is an activist, author, and ex-Muslim living in British Columbia, Canada. Her story is an intriguing one, to say the least. She recounts the personal story in the book entitled From Al-Qaeda to Atheism. Here we talk about some of it.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You married an Al-Qaeda member and were contacted by the CSIS, Canadian secret service. When did you first find out about him? Was this an arranged or coerced marriage, or an egalitarian and consensual marriage?

Yasmine Mohammed: As is typical, this marriage was coerced/forced. ‘Love marriages’, as they’re termed, are looked down upon. It means the couple was debaucherous enough to know each other prior to marriage.

When my daughter was about a year old, my mother began to bleed profusely from her nose and mouth. I called 911 in hysterics. I thought she was going to die.

When the ambulance arrived to take her away, I grabbed my little girl and we rode in the ambulance with her. It was my very first time in our entire marriage that I left the house without him by my side.

When we arrived at the hospital, as I sat in the waiting room, I was approached by a man and a woman. They explained that they were from CSIS- essentially, the Canadian CIA.

I didn’t even know we had an Intelligence Agency. They told me that the man I married, Essam Hafez Marzouk, was an Al Qaeda operative who worked closely with Osama Bin Laden.

In a pre-9/11 world, those words didn’t mean much to me. I knew he had been in Afghanistan before he came to Canada, so I suspected he had some ties to jihadis. Why else would an Egyptian teenager go to Afghanistan? But I had no idea of the extent of his involvement.

Jacobsen: What makes an equal partnership in a coupledness to you? How does this differ from your experience in that marriage?

Mohammed: I’m lucky enough to be married to a wonderful man today. I’ve had previous relationships where I was told that I was pretty easy to please because I was over the moon if they didn’t abuse me! But I have come a long way. It was a slow process of rebuilding myself brick by brick.

The best part of that difficult process was that I could turn each brick over and over to make a conscious effort in deciding whether I wanted that brick included or not. The new me was formed with values that I wanted to define me. It was a lot of ‘fake it ’til you make it’ in the beginning.

One of the things I faked was that I deserved a decent, loving boyfriend, and I would not accept anything less. My husband, of ten years, is most definitely decent and loving. He is exceptionally kind and he is confident enough to allow me to define my needs in our relationship.

If ever I feel that the partnership is unequal, I react as if I had touched something scalding-swiftly and loudly. If I even sense a whiff of anything from my previous marriage, I'm very quick to respond. I will not ever be that woman again.

Jacobsen: You were in a traditionalist, fundamentalist framework developing into Islam and living in a similar marriage. What would characterize a more progressive or liberalized form of an Islamic upbringing?

Mohammed: That's difficult for me to respond to as I did not have that experience. However, essentially, a more progressive Muslim is one who does not follow their religion closely. A more conservative Muslim does. There is no such thing as progressive Islam, there are only progressive Muslims.

Jacobsen: When I talked to Haras Rafiq, the CEO of the Quilliam Foundation, I used the term "moderate" akin to "liberal" in the description of the general Muslim population who live regular lives, like most people. He corrected me.

He said to use the term, or suggested to use the word, "ordinary" in the place of "moderate." I learned from him. I am glad he corrected me. Ordinary makes more sense than moderate, to me, e.g. ordinary atheist, ordinary Roman Catholic, ordinary Sunni Muslim, and so on.

Do you think precision in the descriptors is important in such an area of heated discussion?

Mohammed: Yes. I think precision is important. 'Ordinary' denotes that the type of person you are describing is the norm or the majority. And that is simply not true. If you refer to PEW research, you'll find that so-called 'moderate' Muslims are very far from ordinary-in fact they are more of an anomaly.

The ordinary Muslim is incredibly conservative and would not even consider a 'moderate' Muslim to be a Muslim. Anyone who veers from conservative Islam is killed. Ahmadis, Sufis, any other moderate sects of Muslims are killed. Just recently in Egypt, close to 300 Sufis were killed as they prayed in their mosque.

Jacobsen: What are your projects ongoing or upcoming for 2018?

Mohammed: My main focus is publishing my book From Al Qaeda to Atheism. As well, I'm working on my Free Hearts, Free Minds campaign which collects donations to pay for a life coach that will support ExMuslims from Muslim majority countries.

In a lot of Muslim-majority countries, one could be killed for leaving Islam. As such, people who find themselves denouncing the faith must be very quiet about it. It is an incredibly difficult journey for anyone-but it is 100 times worse when you are in a society that could jail you and execute you for leaving the religion you were born into.

I've also started working on a website that will connect ExMuslims in the Muslim world. The objective would be to seek a partner for a marriage of convenience. If people are going to be coerced into marriages anyway, then at least I can help them to get into a marriage with someone they share values with.

There are similar websites for the LGBT community, so I'm hoping to mimic their platforms.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Mohammed: If you are facing honor violence, FGM, forced marriage or other forms of violence, please reach out to the [AHA Foundation](#).

If you are in a Muslim majority country, you can [contact me through my website](#) and I will get you involved in my Free Hearts, Free Minds program that will match you up with an ex-Muslim life coach who will help you find your inner strength and will arm you with the tools you need to fight back.

If you are an ex-Muslim in North America, you can contact [EXMNA](#). [Faith to Faithless](#) in the UK. If you are a questioning Muslim, you can contact the group [Muslimish](#) in the US. There are many organizations and individuals that will support you if you reach out.

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

Mohammed: My pleasure!

In Conversation with Dr. Ellen Wiebe – Physicians Advisory Council, Dying With Dignity Canada

January 31, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Ellen Wiebe is a Clinical Professor at the University of British Columbia in the Department of Family Practice with over 30 years of full-service family practice. She developed Hemlock Aid, is on the Physicians Advisory Council for Dying With Dignity Canada, and the Medical Director of the Willow Women's Clinic. Here we talk about medical assistance in dying and abortion.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, what is the relationship between abortion and MAiD's work?

Dr. Ellen Wiebe: I have been a family doctor. I have been doing family practice for over 30 years. For the first three decades, I had a full family practice, but I did a lot of women's health including delivering babies and doing abortions.

I was an activist in reproductive health rights and access to abortion and medical abortion as well we surgical abortion, etc. When our law changed, only then did I become active with medical assistance in dying.

I was not part of the activism prior to it or to getting the law changed. But what happened was that palliative care doctors, people who are dealing with end of life all of the time were not as a group not going to be doing any medical assistance in dying.

I immediately thought, "Oh my heavens, that means there will be a lack of providers. I can do this. I better get myself trained and up and ready to help." I recruited a friend and we went to the Netherlands to get trained before our law changed, so I could provide.

I connected with Dying With Dignity Canada and became active in the field as well. I was struck by how many parallels between the two kinds of work. First of all, in the deep connection we have with our patients, even though they are short relationships compared to regular practice where I see people for decades; in an abortion, I meet a woman, talk with her, discuss the options, and then we go into the problem. I fix it.

If she has other issues, I can refer her to somebody else, but we deal with it. But there are so many overlays with an abortion compared to other work. There are protestors that I have to deal with. There are things like her having to go through protestors to get to me.

There are all of these overlays and political issues. People don't keep it a secret when they want to have a baby and have one, but when they don't want to have a baby and don't have one they keep it secret.

But why do they keep it a secret, it is because of the shame and the stigma and so on. That is involved. There are the societal things. There is the political stuff of political groups being against it.

I got into this. I discovered again that I was providing medical care to people in very intense relationships, where they were dying and wanted to choose to have some control over their deaths.

I was able to help them provide for that. It was really good work. In both fields, I get intensely grateful patients. I get hugs from people I have only known a short while; I may get hugs from people in family practice, but these are after long relationships.

Whereas, these ones were short relationships. I feel privileged to be part of a family saying goodbye to a loved one. I used to be delivering babies and watching a family saying hello to a new loved one. There are so many parallels there.

Then the political stuff [Laughing] with all of the anti-MAiD people and the pro-MAiD people and the media and so on. The intense personal connection I have with patients as well as the political stuff as well as the sociological stuff, where some people who want to tell the world.

Some of my patients have gone public and made national news wanting to tell their story. Others wanted to keep it a secret. So, we have to work around that. I tell them that by law I have to report everything, but that we can try to keep it a secret from the other people around.

It can be a problem if you saw the news about the patient who was at the Louis Brier Care Home who wanted to have a private death and not have let anybody else around know; I, of course, got accused of being unprofessional by not talking to them, even though my patient told me not to.

The patient has a right to privacy. Those issues around they want things to be private, how and when they are dying. It is something they keep private. You have that kind of stigma associated for some people.

The political stuff is there too. We are lucky in Canada that abortion is not in the Criminal Code. Almost all of my colleagues all over the world who are abortion providers are providing abortion in a situation where abortion is in the Criminal Code with the exception that 'if you are a doctor and if the patient is under this and that, then you are allowed to provide.'

We are practically the only country that has decriminalized. For MAiD, we have it in the Criminal Code, which means I am guilty of murder if I don't follow the rules with 14 years in jail [Laughing], so I follow all of the rules and we have to interpret the rules.

It is hard because some are vague. One lawyer can interpret one way and another can interpret another way. I have got to deal with telling my patient that they are eligible or not and if I will provide or not.

There are some of those big differences. For me, if someone wants an abortion and I will provide it for you, I am not risking criminal prosecution if I am interpreting the law quite right. All of my colleagues all over the world do.

If their law says you can go to 12 weeks only, which is a lot of European countries and someone is 12.1 or 12.2, will you tell them, "Yes, I will do it," and then call it 12? Or do you say, "Sorry, you have to travel to the Netherlands"?

We may have to tell people, "Your disease may not be something where your death will be in the foreseeable future." The parallels are amazing.

Jacobsen: These are highly difficult circumstances that you have been dealing with, whether more than 30 years as a family doctor, especially with the potential for legal action to be taken by some, or a patient or someone holding picket signs outside.

Wiebe: You're right. Talk about legal and illegal actions, I have had my life threatened many times as an abortion provider by somebody who had a history of convictions for aggravated assault and a license to carry a gun.

My colleagues have been shot and stabbed around me.

Jacobsen: That is very pro-life, of course.

Wiebe: [Laughing] very pro-life [Laughing]. So, I have had my life at risk by illegal actions. Now, I have my freedom at risk by legal actions. Cool, eh [Laughing]?

Jacobsen: You have pressure from either side with regards to illegal action, such as death threats or threats of violent action against you as a person, as well as legal action against you as a professional person.

In a sense, you, to some people, cannot win because you're doing work that in any case, they will try to find a way to demonize, stigmatize, prosecute, or kill you!

Wiebe: Yes.

Jacobsen: So, that leads to questions about provisions for the doctors in terms of protection from the legal actions and the illegal actions. Are there any?

Wiebe: We have our organizations that are helpful. We have Dying With Dignity Canada that is an activist organization that is working hard to support us in some really important ways. We have our own professional organization called the Canadian Association of MAID Assessors and Providers.

They are working hard to help. I am a member of both organizations. That is important. As a professional, I have my own organization called Doctors of BC and Canadian Medical Protective Association.

I pay lots of money to our organizations and they protect me [Laughing]. I have all of those protections. I mean, I am obeying the law. I am following the rules. I am providing legal and medical care. I am in both of those situations.

I am helping Canadians exercise their rights. In one case, their right over their own body and their right to choose if and when to become a mother; also, the choice of how and when to die if it falls under our law.

It is really good work. I love my work. I love both sets of patients [Laughing].

Jacobsen: From my own observations, the individuals who tend to be against women's choice to have a child or not, in other words to be a mother not, as well as against an individual's choice to do their 'final act', when and how to end their life, are often the people arguing for a high form of individualism.

Wiebe: The right to bear arms, right?

Jacobsen: It is an illogical juxtaposition of them. You are for individual rights as one of the highest values if not the highest value, but you're against an individual woman's right to choose to be a mother or a person's with regards to death.

Wiebe: Those are such deep innate rights, over the integrity of your own body and your own death. They are such integral rights compared to some of the rights that they talk about: free speech and so on. Of course, we also agree on those.

It is fascinating to me, when you think of someone like Trump espousing individual rights, except for those people.

Jacobsen: What are some myths about abortion and physician-assisted death or suicide?

Wiebe: I haven't actually thought about this in this way. But you're *so* right. The argument is that if you make abortion legal then everyone will have one [Laughing]. The same with assisted dying. You make it legal and everybody is going to want it [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Society will implode.

Wiebe: Guess what? It doesn't happen. In mature societies such as the Netherlands, which have had assisted death for decades, we're talking about 4% of all deaths. 96% of all deaths are not assisted.

So, that is after decades. It doesn't take over. What happens with legal abortion if it comes along with access to contraception and sex education, the abortion rate drops. It tends to come together with those things. Legal abortion tends to happen in the same place as contraception and sex education.

Those are real myths. Another is vulnerable people being pushed into things. You've got abortion available and a boyfriend or a mother is going to persuade someone to have one when they shouldn't because they really want to have a baby.

That is *rare*. We have certainly seen it. We watch for it all the time in an abortion clinic. A young girl comes in with her mother and separate her to make sure she is not being coerced into this – likewise with non-English speaking wives who are in there with the translating husbands.

We want to make sure that they are, but it is a rare situation that someone is being pressured hard into it. Vulnerable people are not forced to have abortions in our society. In MAiD, there is this myth that vulnerable people will be pushed into it because we don't want any severely disabled people. We want to get our money faster.

There are evil people. There must be people like that. But it is *so rare*. It is our job to find them. It is our job to make sure that each person who comes in trusting an assisted death is not pressure in any way.

But what we find in abortion and MAiD, and I had not thought about this before, Scott, is that the vulnerable people and the most marginalized people have the least access to healthcare of all kinds including abortion.

The poorest people who have the least agency – the ability to speak for themselves and get what they want – are the ones who just don't get good healthcare in our societies. They have less MAiD and less abortion.

When people talk about the slippery slope, "When you start offering it, people will start pushing those marginalized people to have assisted deaths, so we don't have to pay for them anymore," but marginalized people don't get much good anything, much less MAiD.

You know who wants MAiD? It is me. It is white, educated, rich people. People used to being in charge of their lives. People who get cancer and say, "Huh! I am not going down that route" [Laughing].

Jacobsen: In some ways, in a larger context or in a larger societal institutional analysis, these two topics for whom the protestors see as the most important thing to do. It's important! They go out and picket on a cold day often. It's Canada.

These seem like red herrings to more important problems that resources could be devoted to, e.g. financial, emotional, intellectual, and human power resources.

Wiebe: Whose resources are you talking about? Could it be the Catholic Church?

Jacobsen: It could be the Catholic Church or it could be the individual citizens.

Wiebe: Yes, so, you have an agency or an individual who has resources and using them to fight abortion and MAiD, when they could be helping end of life care and helping disadvantaged youth who want to have children.

Jacobsen: It could be either of those cases. It could be even a larger context, where it is the preservation of the environment. The potential for environmental catastrophe.

Wiebe: Isn't it funny how the people who are against us on these issues aren't for the environment, even though it is their own environment too? [Laughing]

Jacobsen: Often, it tends to be obscurantists. People obscuring real issues, muddying the waters of real topics that deserve debate: what are we going to do about climate change? What are we going to do about energy policy to transition into a non-hydrocarbon producing economy?

These people are around. No need to name names. But people like this focus on these things as red herrings – smelly old fish that would throw off a dog, a philosophical term. It is a similar way you can apply to things *seen* as political issues, abortion or reproductive health rights, and physician-assisted death or end of life rights.

These become red herrings by being against them because the more important issues of the day are things such as climate catastrophe [Laughing] via global warming as well as pollution.

That could be of the oceans, of landfills that we're not really dealing with, and so on. In the long-term, there is obviously going to be an energy transition. Renewable energies every year get cheaper for the same unit of energy compared to oil, gas, or coal.

So, if that is the case, and it is, even on an economic argument, the transition should be done. But even on a moral argument, what world do you want to leave for your grandchildren? So, economically or morally, the arguments seem aligned in terms of the long-term view. That's why I see these as red herrings.

That's why I see these people as often obscurantists going against it. It is the similar relationship between many American televangelists and followers. The televangelists are the charlatans; the followers are decent people most of the time.

That may be hurt in some way and hoping for a magical solution. You've seen the videos. I'm sure. I've seen these YouTube clips of these old videos. Where there are individuals throwing their diabetes medication and glasses on the stage saying, "I prayed and had an ecstatic experience seeing pastor so-and-so, and my diabetes and glaucoma were cured."

These sorts of things. These people don't deserve ridicule. These are not people who are powerful. They are victims. I think in the same way with the people are who mobilized through red herrings, political red herrings.

Wiebe: That is an interesting issue. So, one of the uncomfortable discussions we can have is about what is acceptable to talk about and so on, as opposed to what people actually think, e.g. we're in every way a non-racist society, except we're all racists and behave as such.

It is good that we live in a non-racist society, but we have to recognize that we're racists and racism occurs everywhere. That is the same with some of these other basic human rights issues, where there is lots of intolerance of other people's viewpoints in general.

Those of us who say and it is acceptable to say now that everyone has their own right to their own ideas. We can accept these, but are intolerant of people saying out loud that they are intolerant of others.

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

Interview with Devon P. Hargreaves – Chair, Lethbridge Pride Fest

February 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Devon P. Hargreaves is the Chair of the Lethbridge Pride Fest. Here we talk about trans and LGBTQ or sexual minority issues and the Lethbridge Pride Fest.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family background regarding culture religion, and language?

Devon P. Hargreaves: Pretty status quo, white, English-speaking, and *very* Christian, more on the Evangelical side of things.

Jacobsen: When did you first find the sexual minority community? Was this the first time of feeling welcome?

Hargreaves: I think Fort McMurray is where I found the first LGBT community. I wasn't a part of it. But it made me aware that it was there.

Jacobsen: You are the chair of the Lethbridge Pride Fest. How did you earn the position? What tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Hargreaves: I did one year as a marketing director. Then I did two years as vice chair. Now, I did one year as chair. Now, I am onto my second term (2018). As far as tasks, I oversee the functions of the society as well as being very involved in terms of planning events.

Things like that.

Jacobsen: Can you relay some of the highlights of the event?

Hargreaves: We had a crosswalk vandalized with paint. One highlight was seeing how the community came together in the face of that. We had a university campout to protect it. The support from the community shows that one act doesn't define a community as a whole.

Jacobsen: What will be the highlights for this year outside of the warm feeling of everyone coming together? Why will those be the highlights? What is the story of their own organization? In other words, their own inclusion into things.

Those are the highlights I am looking forward to. It was our 9th anniversary in 2017, and preparation is well underway for our big 10. We have a great board. We couldn't do what we do without the people that here.

Jacobsen: Why is Pride important for places such as Lethbridge and Alberta?

Hargreaves: We are in the Bible Belt of Alberta. It is bringing awareness and visibility to LGBT needs. It allows people to see that it even exists and to raise awareness. Pride is very educational, even though it feels like a party.

We are letting people know we are here and getting them to join us.

Jacobsen: Is Canada by and large better for sexual minority communities?

Hargreaves: I would say we are not all the way there but getting there. Having friends who have immigrated and having the ability to be open with their sexuality and orientation, it definitely does help too.

In regards to Canada, I feel we're on the right track. There is still a-ways to-go regarding acceptance mainly with trans individuals in our community. We do have progress to make, even with the reaction we got nationally and internationally was both heartening and enlightening.

Jacobsen: Where is Canada doing good and bad for sexual minorities?

Hargreaves: We have protections in place. We have our justice system that discourages violence against some members in the community as well as an overall acceptance of the fact being attracted to someone of the opposite orientation is acceptable. For as where we are struggling, we have a-ways to-go in respecting trans rights.

I would like to see some recognition given to our two-spirit community. I feel in Canada that this is a bit lacking. We're actually going to be having that inclusion.

Jacobsen: Can you relay some of our experience? Some of your own hardships.

Hargreaves: Most of the hardships actually come from the work that Pride has done. I ended on meme pages on Australia. I had my name spread around by people who were not as accepting, but I do not take it personally.

It is not part of the fight. We will not continue to do that and opposition is not going to stop us.

Jacobsen: Who are common allies for the sexual minority community in Canada?

Hargreaves: In Lethbridge, we have some great partner organizations, including OUTreach, ARCHES, and Club Didi/Theatre Outre.

Jacobsen: How can we best move the conversation forward as well as make this a means from which to act in Canadian society to be able to get to that better point?

Hargreaves: Moving the conversation forward, it is about giving that discussion place to take form. I will reference back to our crosswalks. Most people don't even know what the trans flag was. By putting it on the asphalt and seeing it, people asked, "*What* is that?" It was allowing people to see that. Then it was a matter of "What are trans right and issues? Why are they getting singled out next to the rainbow flag? Aren't they part of that?"

They might have been lashed at by the Pride community in the past, as well as getting to educate our entire city council on what trans issues were and even to some of them what "trans" meant.

Jacobsen: What are the most effective means of activism?

Hargreaves: As far as my role goes, it is starting that discussion and being able to sit down and have that talk about what the needs and desires of our community are and bringing that to a wider audience more than one person can do on their own.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts?

Hargreaves: I feel like Canada is doing well with trans rights and issues. It is more of a recognition and appreciation is something that is lacking, but we are starting to educate and have that discussion and would encourage others to have that discussion.

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

“Like a lot of Unitarians, my path is a winding one.”

February 2, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Gil Leclair is the Treasurer of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Lethbridge Alberta. Here he gives a little insight into a small UU community.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was religious upbringing?

Gil Leclair: I was born in a French Canadian village in southern Manitoba where most people were Roman Catholic. I did the regular thing that Roman Catholic boys do. I became an altar boy and went to a Catholic church. The church was a very strong influence on my background.

Certainly, my parents were regular churchgoers, going to church was something you had to do. It was a cardinal sin to miss Sunday mass. As an altar boy, I served my time fairly regular: Sunday mass, weekday masses. Often going to church in the morning before school, and sometimes, there was a church service after school.

Being a small number of altar boys in the village, we took turns. I did my time. By the time I was 15, I started asking questions as many teenagers do. A lot of questions came from a program before your time, by a person named Garner Ted Armstrong.

He would espouse the religious beliefs on the television. He would offer booklets in the mail for free. I asked for one like ‘Does God Exist?’ I took that apart and dissected it. I realized there was no point in believing in God.

I basically became an atheist at 15. By the time I was in my early 20s, I was coming back around and regaining a faith. Jesus with a different narrative. Jesus as a non-divine human. I went with that for quite a few years and studying and learning as much as I could about Christ.

I came around yet again to come to understand that, “Yea, the guy didn’t live, let alone be a man.” Like a lot of Unitarians, my path is a winding one. Many Unitarians can tell that some people are Unitarians just by how they hold religion. Some will say, “Such and such is a Unitarian without knowing it.”

There are qualities of being Unitarian that deal with searching for truth in an open and honest way, exploring many different religions, testing religions under the microscope of science, and that sort of thing.

Jacobsen: What is your current position in the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Lethbridge, Alberta?

LeClair: I joined the Lethbridge Fellowship in 2002. I have always been an active member. I have held every position: secretary, president, vice president, treasurer. Everything except pastor [Laughing] in the congregation.

Now, I am treasurer. I have always been actively involved as well as I guess webmaster and chief of correspondents, Facebook poster.

Jacobsen: How big is the congregation? What activities do you do? How do you give charitably to the community that you’re involved in?

LeClair: We have never really gone over 20. We have always been a small congregation. I am not sure why that is. We tried to figure that out ourselves. We tried to grow beyond a certain number. Churches in Canada across the board are struggling with membership.

The Unitarians are no exception. I think we need to work at branding ourselves differently. A lot of people when they see the word “church” if they are Unitarians at heart will say, “I will avoid church altogether.” That can mean simply seeing the word.

If we include the term and call ourselves a church right away, people would not bother with us. But we cater to people who don’t go to regular church or who don’t want the dogma of the church. It is a kind of a contradiction in a sense.

Our congregation has always been older members. I think if you were to go to different Unitarian churches across the country that you would find the average age is up there. They don’t often attract younger people.

I am not certain as to why that is, especially with the people questioning religion on a steady basis. You think they would come more to Unitarians, but that is not the case. Contributing to society, that goes up and down over the years, and changes and varies.

But because we have an older and smaller membership, we find it hard to create events in which people would be drawn to them. I often think we need one big annual event, but there just isn’t enough people in our membership to make that happen.

Our members being over 60 can become an issue with physical health. The issue of having the energy and drive to do that. We want to have younger people in to do that. We insist on making childcare available to attendees and so on. Without that, we would almost certainly have the door closed to parents. We try to have that for parents, so they can have their kids taken care of during the service.

In order to answer your question, the answer is “not a lot” in terms of community participation.

But there are certain members who are certainly current with political events.

Jacobsen: What do you see as the near-term future – 5, 10 years – of the community, of the organization?

LeClair: There are certain fellowships that have a good membership and growing, bucking the trend sort of thing. If we were to attract 2 or 3 people with enough energy to move this ahead, that would be a game changer, whether we are able to do that...I don’t know.

My prediction or prognostication for the Unitarians in Lethbridge is pretty bleak. I don’t know whether we will survive another 5 or 6 years of low membership and not a lot of young people coming in.

A lot of young people, their religion is more of a New Age brand of religion, whether an interest in crystals or mediumship, or astrology, or whatnot. There is a lot of “New Age stuff,” where it doesn’t require any religious background – any religion *per se*, but it has all of the qualities of religion, in that, it has no science behind it. It is faith-based. There is a lot of hope in these being real and true. But my personal belief – and this isn’t the Unitarian position, and I don’t know if you could consider anything a formal Unitarian belief because we are quite diverse – is that a lot of the New Age stuff out there is crap.

This isn't the particular Unitarians in this fellowship, but there are those who believe in UFOs, life after death, and a lot of other New Age ideas that are not commonly expressed at any other church. That is just what I am seeing here with this congregation.

Oddly enough, maybe, if that was to be more expressed and nurtured, then maybe the Unitarians in Lethbridge would grow in numbers – if people wanted to hold those beliefs and dig into that whole part of the New Age movement.

That might be a way and means that this church would survive. My own participation would be called into question. I don't know if I would want to be a part of that. I guess I will cross that bridge when I get there.

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

“When I went to AA, there was too much religion in AA.”

February 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Roger C. is the Founder of AA Agnostica. I did not know about it, so I decided out to fill in my ignorance. Here we talk about his life, AA, the 12 steps, God, and the foundation of AA Agnostica.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your personal background?

Roger C.: I grew up as a Catholic. My parents were Catholic. I went to church regularly. At about the age of 19, I remember this well. I realized that people that I thought understood everything about the world, like the Catholic priest and my parents, didn't understand the world.

I even at the time wrote a little essay about spiritual pygmies. I set out to discover the meaning of life and the world on my own. I did various things to achieve that. I became a Transcendental Meditation teacher. I spent time with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in Europe.

I ended up going into the faculty of religious studies in McGill in an attempt to explore the nature of existence and the meaning of my life and the meaning of existence itself. That is what I did.

Jacobsen: How did you find the AA community as well as the AA Agnostica community?

Roger: Over time, the existential angst of my existence led to my drinking. It was to numb myself. It was a form of dulling things out. So, I drank, and drank, and drank. In fact, probably, times when I was the drunkest was most often when I was at the faculty of religious studies at McGill.

Eventually, after drinking for close to 40 years, I realized with the help of a few friends that I was going to die, so I stopped drinking. I was tossed into rehab. I quit drinking. The rehab facility that I went to had a lot of connection with AA, so I started going to AA meetings.

While I was at the McGill meetings, I was the resident atheist. I didn't believe in the Christian God: "Our Father who art in heaven." When I went to AA, there was too much religion in AA. The suggested program is the 12 steps. 6 of them refer to God or Him with a capital "H" or a higher power, capital "P."

Many of the meetings ended in the Lord's Prayer. I couldn't stand it. My exploration of the world as I understood it until then was that this was non-sense. After about 6 months, I thought, "I am going to start drinking again. I can't keep going to these meetings."

I almost accidentally went to a meeting for Agnostics and Atheists AA. I did that for about a year of sobriety. That's not true, about 6 months. I went to the meeting of about 20 or 30 people. They went around the table.

They shared and talked about different topics. There was no God. I went out and said, "I'm saved."

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Roger: It turned out to be what I needed. I needed to be in a group of people and share and be honest. So, that's what did it for me. I have been involved in the secular movement in AA for, well, quite some time. 6 years ago, I started a website called AA Agnostica, which was for non-believers: atheists, agnostics, freethinkers in AA.

Wow! It took off. People would come to it. There is a slogan in AA, "I am no longer alone." They would come to it and feel no longer alone. Things developed, I am not claiming to be the creator of this wave.

Not just in AA, but across the world, those who are considered Nones. The movements grew: when I first started, there were 70 meetings for atheists and agnostics (AA). Today, there is well over 400. There have been two international conferences.

In 2014, one was in Santa Monica, California; in 2016, there was an international conference in Austin, Texas. In 2018, the International Conferences for Atheists and Agnostics in AA will be in Toronto.

It is a growing movement. It is a popular movement. It is a huge relief that this movement exists for a huge number of people. So, there we have it.

Jacobsen: Does your experience reflect many, many others that you have met or read about with respect to AA and alternatives to it?

Roger: I have certainly met a number of people who have the same feelings as I have. In the Big Book, the book called *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the first 164 pages talk about God a lot and how God is going to be the source of our recovery.

In fact, in a chapter called "How It Works?", there's a section that ends, "Probably no other power could relieve our alcoholism, but God could and would if He were sought." There is an enormous number of people who buy that or should – at all – because it's not true.

We tap inner resources and other people. Most people in AA and in the secular areas say that the major factor in recovery is fellowship and support of other human beings and who understand the problem and how to help you deal with that problem.

We in secular AA celebrate the many, many paths to recovery because every human being will be unique in how he or she manages to put aside the alcoholism and put aside the addiction and to live a life without drugs or alcohol.

So, I think there is an enormous group of people and it is growing all of the time. There is a traditional AA that is highly religious. They don't call themselves religious, but I mean if you end the meeting with Lord's Prayer you're religious.

Bill Wilson, one of the co-founders of AA. He realized at some point that the religiosity in the 12 steps that have God or a Higher Power, or Him, in them 6 times (6 out of 12 steps). The religiosity in the 12 steps and the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, was a problem for people. 20 years after writing that book, which was written in 1939. Many people still treat it as a Bible in AA.

Bill Wilson ~20 years later in 1961 in a *Grapevine* article titled "The Dilemma of No Faith" wrote, "In AA's first years I all but ruined the whole undertaking with this sort of unconscious arrogance. God as I understood Him had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was

subtle and sometimes it was crude. But either way it was damaging – perhaps fatally so – to numbers of non-believers.”

I am now with roughly 7 years of sobriety and 6 years of operating a website of interest to people. Atheists and agnostics in AA around the world. They will certainly affirm the emphasis on God has been fatal for a number of people who will just go into the meeting and be confronted with the 12 steps and the idea that your *only* way of getting sober is God.

They will walk about the meeting and never come back. Some of them...some of them don't survive. I think, for me, [Laughing] and for where I am at and from the faculty of religious studies at McGill, one of the things I learned there and strongly believe is that don't care what you believe.

I really do not believe. What I really cannot tolerate is if you try to force those beliefs onto other people, the thing about AA is that you insist that you have to...find...God. I don't mind if someone believes in God and as a result stays sober.

I don't believe in God and I stay sober. I don't try to force my view on anyone else. I don't want them to force their view on me. That's an important part to me about dogmatism.

Jacobsen: Of the narratives in your time that you have come across in AA or AA Agnostica, what has been the most emotionally moving, whether positive or tragic?

Roger: For me, the most positive thing, and this has a little bit to do with going to the conferences in Santa Monica and Austin, the support you receive from other people. They are delighted to be with you and share their views and aspirations and hope. The things in their lives that keep them sober without having to be dishonest in any way. The whole element of honesty to me is a kind of grace in life. [Laughing] I like using words like that.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Roger: What I am getting at, after several years sober and realizing that I still hadn't figured out what my life is all about or what existence is all about, that I can still respect who I am, be who I am, and I can be and share and live and work in a constructive fashion with other human beings. To me, that is it. The honesty has been the most compelling, the most moving, the most dramatic, the most powerful part of being an atheist or an agnostic in AA and being with other people who aren't going to attack me as a consequence. That's it.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion based on the conversation today?

Roger: Actually, no, that's the summary of what went and is going on. What I want to do, AA Agnostica, the website I created has done, has created 8 books by 4 people in recovery. They are secular and are for atheists and agnostics. One is called *Do Tell*.

There are fifteen by women and fifteen by men. It describes their life in recovery without God. For me, as I go forward, I look for constructive and productive ways to help other people and in doing so to help myself. That would be my conclusion. It is very much an AA idea. It is the 12th step if it were. We share it with others in the hopes of helping them. That is what the website and books are all about, to reach out and to be of use to other human beings who have problems with drugs or alcohol.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Roger.

Roger: Alright! Thank you, Scott.

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