



CANADIAN ATHEIST

SET IV

SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN



IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

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

in-sightjournal.com

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

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

All rights reserved.

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

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

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

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

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

No official catalogue record for this book.

Jacobsen, Scott Douglas, Author

Canadian Atheist: Set IV/Scott Douglas Jacobsen

pages cm

Includes bibliographic references, footnotes, and reference style listing.

In-Sight Publishing, Langley, British Columbia, Canada

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

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Contents

I	Acknowledgements.....	5
i	In Conversation with Greg Oliver – President, Canadian Secular Alliance	6
ii	Bruce Gleason on LogiCal-LA	9
iii	In Conversation with Tammy Pham – Founder and Former Co-President, Dying With Dignity Canada (U of Ottawa)	12
iv	On Humanism with Moses Kamya – Headteacher, Mustard Seed Secular School	14
v	In Conversation with Arifur Rahman – Bangladeshi British Secular Humanist Blogger	16
vi	Americans becoming more secular	20
vii	Interview with Andrew Seidel – Constitutional Attorney & Director of Strategic Response Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.	22
viii	Diego Fontanive on Critical Thinking and Psychobabble	25
ix	2017 in Review with Professor David Orenstein	30
x	In Conversation with Joyce Arthur – Founder and Executive Director, Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada	33
xi	In Conversation with Dr. Steven Tomlins – Researcher, Canadian Atheism and Nonreligious Identities	36
xii	Bill Graham is Dead at Age 99	39
xiii	In Conversation with Dr. Gordon Henry Guyatt, MD, MSc, FRCP, OC – Distinguished University Professor, McMaster University	40
xiv	In Conversation with Professor Colleen MacQuarrie, Ph.D. on Abortion Rights Activism.....	50
xv	Interview with Catherine Dunphy – Author & Former Executive Director, The Clergy Project.....	57
xvi	The Eventual Questions for Faith with Pete	63
xvii	Shaykh Uthman Khan on Ayesha and Fatima	65
xviii	On the Evolution of Atheism with Dr. Stephen LeDrew	66
xix	Atheism, Humanism, and Islam with Ammar Anwer	68
xx	Interview with Dr. Teemu Taira – Senior Lecturer, Study of Religions, University of Helsinki & Docent, Comparative Religion, University of Turku	70
xxi	Interview with Dr. Christopher Haggarty-Weir – Scottish-Australian Vaccine Scientist and Venture Capital Analyst	73
xxii	Interview with Gauri Hopkins on Cult Upbringing and Contemporary Feminism.....	77
xxiii	Interview with Roger Dubar – Writer, Conatus News.....	80

xxiv	A Call from the World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO)	83
xxv	In Conversation with Lucas Lynch – Editor-in-Chief, Conatus News	85
xxvi	Interview with Frances Garner – Member, Central Ontario Humanists	89
xxvii	In Conversation with the President of the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, John Carpay, B.A., LL.B.	94
xxviii	Interview with EJ Hill – Former Reformed Evangelical Christian Minister	96
xxix	“Is Christianity or Secular Humanism a better foundation for human rights?”	98
xxx	Interview with Damon Conlan – Writer and Magician	99
xxxi	International Women’s Day in Canada	101
II	License and Copyright	103

Acknowledgements

I express gratitude to Mark Gibbs, Zachary R.W. Johnson, George Thindwa, Bwambale Robert Musubaho, Laurence A. Moran, Violine Namyalo, Kareem Muhssin, A.M., Takudzwa Mazwienduna, Sarah Mills, Terry Murray, Gary McLelland, Tina Block, Isaiah Akorita, Jen Takahashi, Caleb Lack, Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam), Angelos Sofocleous, Christine M. Shellska, Suzie Mason, Avery Sapoznikow, Cheri Frazer, Ian Bushfield, Angel Sumka, Mohammed Charlie Khadra, Chiedozi Uwakwe, Bayo Opadeyi, Moninuola Komolafe, Terry Sanderson, David Orenstein, Mother of Trans Child, Mark A. Gibbs, Imam Syed Soharwardy, Renton Patterson, Jon King, Rome Bethea, Sophie Shulman, Reva Landau, Janet French, Monica Miller, Bamidele Adeneye, George Ongere, Diego Fontanive, Waleed Al-Husseini, Jessica Schab, Angelos Sofocleous, Faisal Saeed Al Mutar, Waleed Al-Husseini, Anouar Majid, Houzan Mahmoud, Dr. Paul Munyenyebe, Minister Gretta Vosper, Kathy Dawson, Lee Moore, Joseph Lagumbay, Allie Jackson, Michael Kruse, Uthman Khan, Mike Ivanov, John Brown, Rich Lyons, Dave McKee, Rick Heller, Kuya Manzano, Yasmine Mohammed, Faisal Saeed Al Mutar, Lita Bablitz, Leslea Mair, Helen Austen, Peter Gajdics, Charlotte Frances Littlewood, Dr. Leo Igwe, Angie Johnson, Ellen Wiebe, Devon P. Hargreaves, Gil Leclair, Roger C., Greg Oliver, Bruce Gleason, Tammy Pham, Moses Kamya, Arifur Rahman, Andrew Seidel, Diego Fontanive, David Orenstein, Joyce Arthur, Steven Tomlins, Gordon Henry Guyatt, Colleen MacQuarrie, Catherine Dunphy, Pete, Stephen LeDrew, Ammar Anwer, Teemu Taira, Christopher Haggarty-Weir, Gauri Hopkins, Roger Dubar, Lucas Lynch, Frances Garner, John Carpay, EJ Hill, and Damon Conlan. I feel honored to contribute to *Canadian Atheist*.

Scott

In Conversation with Greg Oliver – President, Canadian Secular Alliance

February 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Greg Oliver is the President of the Canadian Secular Alliance. There is important work with a constitutional challenge with immediate relevance to the formal irreligious community at the moment. I reached out to talk about it. Here we talk about OPEN and the CSA, Section 93 of the BNA Act, and the morality or ethics behind the constitutional challenge.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's set some groundwork regarding OPEN, the CSA, and Section 93 of the BNA Act.

Greg Oliver: We are currently fundraising for a legal challenge that we intend to pursue. So far, we have fundraised over \$60,000, but these things can be quite pricey and take many years. So we have more to raise. We are now at the stage now where we are exploring our options for legal teams to at least to get the ball rolling.

Jacobsen: With regards to the morality or the ethics behind the constitutional challenge of Section 93 of the BNA Act, what is it? Or, what are they?

Oliver: First, you need to understand why there are fully funded schools for Catholics only in Ontario, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. Basically, it dates back to the 19th century sectarian dynamic that existed between Catholics and Protestants at the time of Confederation.

Between 1841 and 1867, Quebec and Ontario were a single province called the Province of Canada. They had denominational schools for the minority faiths in each respective region. The last relevant legislation for what is now Ontario that was passed before 1867 was the 1863 Scott Act.

At the time of Confederation, denominational schools were not popular in Ontario. The Scott Act was actually voted down in Ontario, but it was overwhelmingly voted in favor for in Quebec, which at the time was very theocratic. The primary reason denominational schools exist is because of the insistence of Quebec at the time of Confederation.

Section 93 of the British North America Act essentially stipulated that any province that entered Confederation could grandfather in whatever denominational schools that they had at the time that they entered. It was viewed as a grand bargain to protect English Protestants in Quebec and French Catholics in Ontario at the time of Confederation.

At the time of Confederation, only Ontario and Quebec had denominational schools. Later, when Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland entered Confederation, they all retained their denominational schools – but Manitoba and Newfoundland later got rid of theirs.

Then in 1997, Quebec got rid of theirs. So now we are at a stage where 3 provinces still have denominational schools, but Quebec is the primary reason that it existed in the first place and they no longer have them.

The reason this is important to us is that our mandate is to promote separation between religion and state. We believe strongly that in a society with a plurality of religious worldviews that the

only fair way to run society is to have no preference for one faith over another. Or for religion to be preferred over no religion – or vice versa.

We view denominational schools as one of the more flagrant violations of this principle left in Canadian society today. Not only does it privilege the religious over the non-religious by indoctrinating children into a specific religion with taxpayer dollars, but it also privileges Catholics over other faiths.

Jacobsen: Looking from the inside out, what have been some of the actions from the Roman Catholic sector in particular in reaction to the constitutional challenge, as this will be challenging the vested interest of the leadership?

Oliver: I can only guess that they will be ready to fight back, but, ultimately, it will be up to the courts. Section 93 as it is currently interpreted will be seen as constitutional or not. One piece of legislation relevant to this case is Bill 30.

In the late 1980s, Ontario extended full funding to Catholic high schools, even though it had only been taught up to grade 8 since Confederation. There was a case that went to the Supreme Court called *Reference re Bill 30*.

It judged that what existed at the time of Confederation for Ontario, which was only up until grade 8, was equivalent to high school in the contemporary age. They ruled that it was constitutional to have full funding for Catholic high schools in Ontario.

In that judgment they also stressed the importance of the grand bargain with Quebec in the formation of the country. They had publicly funded Protestant schools at the time. In 1997, they withdrew them. It was a unanimous vote in the National Assembly. This challenge is going to tackle those elements of the decision and ask the courts to re-examine what they decided on back then.

We also intend to raise some arguments to examine exactly what was grandfathered in at the time of confederation. The funding that existed back then was only about 60-66% of what was given to secular public schools. Section 93 was intended to protect what already existed, but over the decades denominational schools ballooned from 5% to 31% of the student population and they now receive over \$400 more per student in funding according to published government statistics – and other sources suggest it's much more. If Section 93 were interpreted as originally intended, funding for denominational schools would be severely affected and it would likely require abandonment of the entire system in Ontario – and perhaps elsewhere.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts?

Oliver: The status quo is also impractical. There are tremendous duplication costs. Right now Ontario runs two school systems for each official language. Irrespective of the inequality; four school systems cost a lot more to operate than two. Though the exact savings depend on what the replacement would look like, it is widely believed to be over \$1 billion per year.

There are over 600 schools in Ontario that are less than half full. This is much higher than it otherwise would be. Costs to bus kids to school are higher. There are more administration costs. You need twice as many trustees, superintendents and other administrative workers. The numbers are proportionately smaller, but this is the same in Saskatchewan and Alberta as well.

These savings could go to more beneficial causes for society such as healthcare, education, and so on. Duplication costs don't help society. And separating kids based on the religion of their parents isn't good for social cohesion either.

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

Bruce Gleason on LogiCal-LA

February 5, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Bruce Gleason is the Director of LogiCal-LA. Here we talk about the event, highlight presentations, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, the event LogiCal-LA is coming up. How long has the event been ongoing?

Bruce Gleason: Well, this is a very young conference. We had our first year back in January 2017 and we had a great line-up with Sean Carroll, he's a theoretical physicist headlining. And we have a very strong group of scientific skeptics including Joe Nickell who is the oldest one, but probably the most renowned skeptic because he is the only paid pseudo-science investigator in the world.

Among the other speakers that we had there were involved in a wide variety of science and public education, both in the two-day conference and the Friday night show. It was a full weekend.

Jacobsen: What would you consider one of the highlight presentations?

Gleason: Sean Carroll is probably one of the best speakers I've ever heard. He is kind of a half philosopher and a half physicist. In his latest book he expounds on how one must examine one's like in an ethically way as well as how does the universe end.

Jacobsen: As well, there were individuals such as Bob Novella present as well as Harriet Hall. They have done some work on basically medical and health pseudoscience. So, when they're coming up for February in 2018, are there others? Who are some of the newer speakers that people should probably keep an eye out for?

Gleason: Well, I'll give you a list of them. I just wanted to mention Sean's book, *The Big Picture: On the Origins of Life, Meaning, and the Universe Itself*; that kind of gives us a hint of the philosophical background that it has.

I'm going to start by looking at the LogiCal-LA's speaker's webpage because we have so many new speakers. Pascal, his last name is Gagneux, and he's a zoologist from San Diego that lived with the chimpanzees in Africa for several months. He is a zoologist who studies how evolution took place related to human beings and all other mammals. Lawrence Krauss, Professor, is our big speaker; he is our keynote speaker on Sunday.

And we have a lot of social oriented speakers, one of which is Diane Goldstein, she is from the Law Enforcement Action Partnership and what she does is promote prison reform and drug reform because there's many more African-Americans in prison than whites, even though the drug use is about 50/50 between them.

There's a reason for that, not because they commit more crimes it's because our laws are such that they are more unfairly treated, and her main idea is to modify the drug laws to where there's less prohibition and more education with drugs like other countries, like the Netherlands, and especially Portugal, who has legalized most drugs.

And of course, we have Harriet Hall, but she was in an accident the month before the conference in Australia and couldn't make it last year. So, we invited her this year. Also, we have a cognitive scientist, Julien Mussolini, and Bob Novella from the Skeptics Guide to the Universe is coming back, but he's just going to be on the panel. He's not speaking alone. He's going to be on the panel on Friday night.

And one new person we're excited to hear from is Alex J. O'Connor; have you ever heard of him? He's called the cosmic skeptic on YouTube.

Jacobsen: I have not heard of him.

Gleason: He is very popular in England, so he's flying across to speak with us. Have you ever heard of Jamy Ian Swiss? He is a magician skeptic.

Jacobsen: Yes, I have. I believe he's the one with the goatee, I believe, and I may have seen him in the documentary with James Randi.

Gleason: Yes, he was. He also was a consultant on magic shows for TV. He is a master magician. He will not only be speaking, but he will be performing on our Friday night magic show – which is probably going to be a world class magic show in a small venue that we are located near LAX.

I wanted to mention some of the other speakers that are speaking. We're having Cheryl Hollinger, a biology professor. We're having Brian Palermo who's an actor for Los Angeles that speaks to skeptical- oriented groups. The title of his speech is called "Why Science Needs Improv." I'm excited to hear what he's going to say.

John Watney is a computational biologist from San Diego will also be there. His talk is entitled The Illusion of God's Presence. As scientific skeptics, examining religion is not off the discussion table.

It's very interesting to see who's coming. We have about three more additions of speakers that we will be able to add during the next few weeks. So, all together we'll have 19 speakers over a three-day period. Friday evening will start the conference with a free panel discussion then later on our magic show.

Saturday, we'll have eight speakers and then we'll have a comedy show Saturday evening. Then we will have seven speakers on Sunday and then a special MusiCal musical show with George Hrab during the evening.

And then Monday, we are going to go to the La Brea Tar Pits and if anybody doesn't know much about La Brea Tar Pits, is one of the few places in the world where animals fell in a tar pond and then thousands of years later, we are able to extract their bones from the tar and clean them up and display it in a museum. We'll have a famous paleontologist, Donald Prothero to give a private tour of the museum, so that's going to be quite a special event.

Jacobsen: Did you have more speakers that you would like to talk about first though?

Gleason: Our website is a great source for more of the information: www.logicallla.com. These speakers are all very influential within the skeptic community. They travel to other skeptic, humanist and atheist conventions one of which is SciCon, which happened in October 2017 in Las Vegas.

Jacobsen: With respect to the content and purpose, so from the founding to the present of the conference, what are they?

Gleason: From our website, our mission is this: In support of the scientific skeptic movement, LogicalLA creates a place for critical thinkers to meet face-to-face and to experience presentations from nationally recognized speakers who will share their knowledge and insights with us.

So the conference is a skeptical conference, based on reason and science. It is similar to the idea that you can receive the equivalent of an entire semester of education in one weekend. So, it's an acknowledgment of what is the truth, how do we tell what is probably more true, how do we test the truth or test a claim; all these things are all behind the scientific movement that's happening around the country right now.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for your time.

In Conversation with Tammy Pham – Founder and Former Co-President, Dying With Dignity Canada (U of Ottawa)

February 6, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Tammy Pham is the Founder and Former Co-President of Dying With Dignity Canada club at the University of Ottawa. Here she provides some insight into medically assisted death or assisted death.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become involved with the physician-assisted suicide movement, the assisted suicide movement?

Tammy Pham: I was in the middle of my undergraduate studies at the University of Ottawa. In personal life, at the same time, my grandmothers from both sides had to go to a nursing home for different reasons.

So, all of a sudden my family had this transition of suddenly having to be caregivers. We felt the impact of caregiver burden. It made us think about what we would want if we were in that same or similar situations.

From there, I started researching online about assisted suicide. I stumbled upon the Dying With Dignity Canada website. I went to one of the first meetings in Ottawa when they started off as a chapter. I started attending more meetings.

The chapter head, Susan Desjardin, reached out to me. She told me that they wanted to reach out to more students, more people in my age group. The demographics of those DWDC meetings are older. I started a club at the University of Ottawa. I did that for 3 years. Then I moved to Winnipeg.

Jacobsen: With regards to Dying with Dignity Canada, what are some of the important initiatives ongoing?

Pham: What I am aware of right now is that they're doing a lot of work to expand the assisted dying law to allow for some minors, mental conditions, and also clarifying the "reasonably foreseeable" death clause of that, those are the main ones that I have been following.

Jacobsen: I have heard or read some discussion about the reasonably foreseeable portion. It raises questions in terms of the amorphous, vague definition of the phrase for some people, especially in terms of interpretation. Does that come up as an issue for some that you are more aware of than me?

Pham: Within the organization, in my discussions and with the Ottawa chapter, it seems like the phrase "reasonably foreseeable death" was put into the legal perspective rather than the medical perspective. But in the medical community, there is no such phrase as "reasonably foreseeable death." There is concern that the clause does not include conditions such as ALS, which were the cases that started this whole movement to decriminalize it.

Jacobsen: How can people become active participants in the movement?

Pham: My perspective is very much from a student perspective. For me, it is talking to your parents and grandparents about it. It may not be something that affects you directly. You perceive yourself as young and healthy. It is good to get that discussion going to know what your parents might want at that stage and also what you might want. The second thing would be what I did, start a club at your university. That's what I did at the University of Ottawa. Get together and discuss these difficult topics in a safe space. That got enough attention that when I left somebody was able to take over my role.

Jacobsen: Sometimes, there will be pushback. [By analogy, I think of reproductive health rights in North America. People will protest with signs, even obstructing women going to, for instance, abortion clinics. I draw that to the case of assisted suicide, assisted death. Who tends to be those that pushback in some way, whether on campus, as in your case, or in general public spaces?

Pham: What I have noticed is often the pushback comes from certain sects of the disability rights activists, which I definitely understand, to a certain extent. There is an argument that we live in an ableist society, so some of the concepts like assisted dying as a right for Canadians are ableist. I can see the perspective, but, at the same time, I don't think the right to assisted dying and ableism are so directly linked or quite black and white as that. I think it is more complex. We must still respect right to autonomy and choice.

I think the other pushback comes from certain religious groups. That was the case when I was in Ottawa. That was certainly the case when I was at the Elisabeth Bruyère Palliative Care Hospital. It was originally founded as a religiously affiliated hospital. When I moved to Winnipeg, there have been many stories about St. Boniface Hospital, where they had voted to allow assisted dying on hospital grounds. But then the parent organization added some new members to the council to stack the revote, that changed the votes in the end.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts?

Pham: I would like to add a little about my background. My dad is passionately Catholic and I come from a Vietnamese family. So growing up in this environment it was really taboo to talk about death. So I understand the difficulties in talking to your friends and family about this topic but it has helped me create stronger relationships within my family.

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

On Humanism with Moses Kamya – Headteacher, Mustard Seed Secular School

February 7, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Moses Kamya is the Headteacher of Mustard Seed Secular School in Busota, Uganda. Here we talk about religion and humanism in Uganda.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your own background in religion – and your own family's background in it too?

Moses Kamya: I was born to a Catholic dad living with a Protestant mum, both primary school teachers. None succeeded in converting the other. I was baptized in the Protestant faith. Dad tried to convert me to Catholicism while in upper primary but was unsuccessful due to long catechism lessons yet he was working in a distant place.

I grew up a Protestant, studied in Catholic schools, a ubiquity in my country up to senior four. It was at university while pursuing a bachelor degree in education that I got access to ideas of humanism.

Jacobsen: How the non-religious begin to gain some political leverage in Uganda, in a serious way?

Kamya: Uganda is a deeply religious country since colonial times. its of late that secular views are steadily taking root mainly beginning from higher institutions of learning. It's until after attending an international humanist conference in Kampala in 2000s that I was encouraged together with other colleagues to take humanism to another level.

We were encouraged by likeminded from all over the world that attended this conference to devise means of propagating humanist ideals in Uganda. I personally came up with the idea of a humanist school in 2005. This is how the mustard seed secondary school was born in Busota.

Jacobsen: What have been honest failures and real successes in the non-religious movement within Uganda? How can Ugandans learn from the failures and build upon the successes?

Kamya: The humanist movement is seriously challenged working in a deeply religious environment. Society's attitude is negative and not to forget that the existing laws are supportive of religion and against secularism.

Nonetheless, we now have 3 secondary schools to my knowledge a host of primary schools that operate as humanist schools on Uganda. We formulated an ethos funded by IHEU on how we teach and administer positive discipline in our daily duty and care for the learners.

Society, where we operate, has come to appreciate rationalism as a way of life. Humanist clubs in our schools encourage a scientific approach to solve problems as opposed to superstition and irrationalism, characteristic of all forms of organized religion.

The way forward is to strengthen our humanist schools to continue this initiative.

Jacobsen: How does religious gain privileges in legal, political, and social life within Uganda? How is this unjust if it occurs? What might be a remedy for it?

Kamya: Xtian missionaries introduced Christianity in Uganda in the 1970s. The major schools and hospitals were owned by churches and mosques. As a result, even the first political parties to be formed in Uganda during colonial rule and after were formed along religious lines, Catholics had their own, Protestants theirs, the same applies to Moslems.

Religion thus occupies a special place in our politics. Eg choice of cabinet ministers has to follow the principle among others of religious equity. The way forward is to empower youths with an indoctrination-free or for that matter secular education to be able to grow up independent thinkers that will compete for political office to change the laws.

Can you imagine that religious education is still compulsory in Ugandan schools? We need humanists to influence policy.

Jacobsen: If you point the direction to some admirable non-religious people who broke ground for the irreligious in Uganda, can you name names and also name books in order to guide the curious young person that may have interest in leaving their family religion and becoming a freethinker?

Kamya: There are a host of personalities in Uganda who have openly professed living secular life styles. Dr. Kikongo, Dr. Change Macho, Dr. Stella Nyanzi, all from Makerere University are a case in point.

There are other colleagues, Deo Ssekitoleko founder of Uganda Humanist Association (UHASSO), Peter Kisirinya of Isaac Newton High School (Masaka).

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Kamya: Kato Mukasa of IHEYO, and not forgetting myself. Luckily, enough we have abundance of humanist literature in the Ugandan humanist schools, thanks to kind donations from UHST UK. Humanism for schools is a darling title for the learners.

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

Kamya: I feel honored to be part of this interview. It has reinvigorated my resolve for the cause of humanity, i.e. leaving this world a better place than we found it. Thanks to all our supporters for enabling us to fulfill our humanist aspirations, without which we would probably remain wishful thinkers.

Long live the spirit of humanism!

In Conversation with Arifur Rahman – Bangladeshi British Secular Humanist Blogger

February 9, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Arifur Rahman is a Bangladeshi British Secular Humanist Blogger. Here we explore his own views on Bangladesh and humanistic values.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is the state of humanistic values in Bangladesh?

Arifur Rahman: I would say dying, because for humanistic values to flourish you would have to accept first that every person is a human being. Humanity isn't the top, unfortunately, in Bangladesh.

Islam is the dominant religion. Islam itself in its ideology talks about humans, but it doesn't accept anyone else other than Islamic belief to be somebody they would accept as human.

They do not absolutely understand or want to understand or want to accept the United Nations understanding of humanity or humanism. Nor would they want to accept any other religion, or absence of religion, as something that they would want to live with.

It an aggressive expanding philosophy, or should I say a system, that takes up violence to enforce its own beliefs on others.

So, I would say in Bangladesh – because Bangladesh is a very bad example of how a religion can destroy the social fabric and remodel it based on its own understanding, which is what we saw in Saudi Arabia – humanity-wise, humanism wise, is in the worst condition and Bangladesh is not fair.

Obviously, Bangladesh, we don't behead people on the public, but all other conditions and indicators are almost the same.

Jacobsen: Also, with respect to the way the dominant faith and its representative, I suspect a similar trend as in Canada. It's a sense of – metaphorically speaking – walking around as if you own the place. Is it similar in Bangladesh but to a greater degree given a greater number of religious people and level of religiosity?

Rahman: Yes, absolutely, I mean talking about owning the place; I was telling you earlier that the religiosity does not limit itself within only religious preachers and the followers.

It expands to the whole society and all the power players as in people with a placing in power, for example, the political leaders, the business owners who have money to spend on causes that are of a religious nature.

They usually call the shots. That means anybody or everybody who does not fall in line are subject to some correcting.

If you say that you want basic human rights of people who are nonreligious, you would then be targeted for multi-magnitudes of violence or even if it is not physical violence then some 'persuading' would take place.

We saw in 2015 in Bangladesh. Many colleagues of a secular nature, of an atheistic bent, where they were slaughtered in the broad daylight.

After every murder, without fail, Bangladeshi representatives would come in and say in public meetings and in press conferences that the blogger should not cross any lines, cross any limit.

The limits are set by the religious fundamentalists and the government is ensuring that bloggers are told not to cross that line and when that happens the rest of the blogging community, the rest of the people who may have some hope of keeping these secular, or keeping these humanistic. Values, they fall inside.

They get afraid and that's how the system wins, by implanting fears inside people's mind.

Jacobsen: Is this the main tool of religious fundamentalist in general?

Rahman: Fear.

Jacobsen: Yes.

Rahman: Well, fear is the first level. Fear means when you slit somebody's throat in public, broad daylight. That is the beginning. That's the shock and then you have a massive campaign or public relation and media that follow it.

It puppets things constantly. It repeats these same things that there must be a reason why they were murdered, and "look what they were saying about our Prophet" and they curse relentlessly against those people who are murdered.

Not because they were murdered, but because they say things that are unacceptable in their view.

It doesn't matter if that person was a human being and who is murdered that should have been taken seriously and should have all the protection of a civil state – at least that it can provide to a citizen, but everybody joins in the bandwagon by destroying that person's images and life.

What he used to stand for, he ends up solely being somebody who cursed against Allah and that should be brought to justify the murder and the victim blaming gets underway. So, it's a multi-tentacled thing.

I mean government passed a blasphemy law that says if you are seen or known to have said things that are of a blasphemous nature, then you will be arrested without the possibility of a bail. If you are prosecuted, you will go to jail for 14 years.

Can you imagine a 14-year period in jail for writing a few lines on the internet? That is one of the other tools, but the fear is the one that is dominating and dictates everything.

Jacobsen: If you had to point to the reason for the attempts of domination that people minds through religious indoctrination, what would it be?

Rahman: I have some theories about that. I mean, especially for Bangladesh, there are some theories that are global. We could talk in lengths about it. My theory of why religion is so prevalent is because the purpose of Bangladesh in a global community is to provide cheap labor.

That's the sole design of Bangladesh in the past 40 years or so. It is to supply cheap labor. The major consumer of that cheap labor was the Middle East mostly. All the big cities you see in the Middle East nowadays are built by blood and sweat of Bangladeshi unskilled laborers.

So, the cheap labor of unskilled labors. There are no statistics. But if Bangladesh did not supply the labor, the construction cost of those skyscrapers would go very high. The only reason you can bring in people from a different country is only when those people have no prospect in that country.

The only way it can happen is when they don't have enough education. They don't have enough jobs. Only then they would come to a different country and almost give their life when working at very high altitudes and in scorching heat; there are no human rights for those workers.

There are no labor rights for those who die there. So inside Bangladesh, that is one major reason for religious cities to produce in the millions. People who have very little understanding of their own human rights and of their own wish for a good life, and then when they are told that there is a slightly better life elsewhere then they follow.

They follow that voice and then they go and literally waste their life, give their life in building other countries' prospects. That is the male citizens, the females; however, there are two. The first one is the female who lives in Bangladesh and works in garments manufacturing.

I don't know if you are aware Bangladesh is one of the biggest suppliers of manufactured apparel, you know clothing to the rest of the world. The whole country is a big sewing factory.

The workers also have very little prospects, very little education, very little skill sets because you can become a sewing operator within days of training without any literature or any proper training.

You don't even have to know how to read or write. That's why Bangladesh has become this way. Then this dark alley of this whole story is that there is a section of female workers who go to the Middle East to work as a domestic worker, but they ended up being sex slaves.

We know about that. However, Bangladesh, it has got no other identity and no other interest to flourish and nurture its own people because it's primarily dominated by the mullahs.

Who don't give anybody any education, give some education, the point is to make people literate but not educated.

Even then, their mind and head are full of thoughts and hopes and dreams for the afterlife, talks about the afterlife, but nothing to do with this real beautiful world. So, it's a sad business. They got murder and fear and prosecution and more murders, more fear from everybody.

Jacobsen: What do you think is the most difficult truth for the nonreligious to come to grips with in their own lives?

Rahman: For me, I can talk about my personal life. It is that you will have no social life other than with you and your fellows.

The people, the society around you will abandon you if they know you are an atheist or if you voice too much, even the other day my father-in-law called my father who is also not an atheist.

He said that your son (me) says things that makes me ashamed. He said this in front of my father. This happens to every atheist, regardless. They can be so many things but if you are, the moment you fall out from the definition of a good Muslim, you become subject to that definition. The definition of degradation for you.

Jacobsen: Similar situation here, the history of Canada started pretty much with the colony of New France on the far East of the continent. It had slaves. 2/3rds were Indigenous.

It was to bring Christian European culture to them by force, psychologically or physically – and if not murder, if they didn't convert – and that's been with us since the beginning.

Similarly, not necessarily as violence, but a form of social violence – they could call it, that is that type of isolation that people would experience if they don't convert to the dominant faith in general.

I don't think it is as severe as what you are describing in Bangladesh or with the familial ties in Bangladesh. However, that is a definite trend, because so many things are taken for granted all the way.

But it's also legal with the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in Canada, which describes in the *Preamble* – arguably the most important part, that can set a tone across the country for the long haul – the belief in a “supremacy of a god.”

Rahman: Yeah, I mean even trying to get rid of them; unless, it already been done.

Jacobsen: It has not been done. There is work. There is work for a single education system.

Rahman: I would say those are cosmetic wins; not being cynical, I am not in any position to criticize anybody.

Americans becoming more secular

February 12, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to Salon, some of the reason for the animosity of the United States, internally, comes from the increasing secularization of the public. Many Trump voters do not like this. Others disagree. The secular movement in the US, probably, is not even a conscious phenomena.

Rather, it appears to be the natural development in advanced industrial democracies with pluralistic cultures. People prefer to have a separation of church and state, except, for instance, in some dominant, segmented sections of the population.

The author continues on the separation between the “real” America proclaimed by the conservatives in the country, where, by implication, the liberals do not represent the real America. Most Americans reject the “efforts by the religious right to use the power of the state to impose conservative Christian values on others.”

Every sector of American society wants a secular culture and society, except white evangelical Christians, which, by definition, makes many in the evangelical Christian religion within the US a politically oriented movement. It has consequences too.

Much of the US political polarization is in reaction to the efforts of the white evangelical Christian movement. These are not all Christians, or conservatives, or whites, or all white evangelical Christians, which is important to bear in mind to keep from stereotyping, I feel — in the opposite direction.

But this is a concern for the greatest soft power in the world. Stuff that happens there will influence elsewhere.

Part of the issue is the waning influence of this population on the general population. So this increased effort for more political influence could reflect a that decrease in influence because, even on purportedly controversial issues, most Americans find them agreeable topics.

The rights of sexual minorities such as gays and lesbians doesn’t bother Americans. Gay rights do bother some white evangelical Christians. Same with same-sex marriage. So the main disjunction between the general population and those against gay rights, and same-sex marriage, is evangelical status or not.

It’s a politicized religion situation.

As well, the desire and general need for secularization of culture and society comes with perceptual differences. It is well-known that anti-Muslim rhetoric and hate crimes have been on the increase. Less known, the general hate and disgust for the atheists within America.

And the perception of anti-Muslim rhetoric and acts is different depending on the group. So, for example, the religiously unaffiliated do see the increase, and somewhat similar, but lesser, findings for other groups. But not so for white evangelical protestants, they see more anti-Christian bigotry than anti-Muslim bigotry.

You see the disjunct.

The perception of most other sets of people is much different than white evangelical Christians or protestants. So this is an identifiable problem with obvious reactionary components based on the perceived, and actual, increase in secularization of the United States.

Interview with Andrew Seidel – Constitutional Attorney & Director of Strategic Response Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

February 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was religion or non-religion with regards to family as well as yourself growing up?

Andrew Seidel: There wasn't a whole lot of organized, coerced religion in my household. There was encouraged investigation: go out there and go to temple with your Jewish friends, go to church with your Christian friends, go to catholic Mass with your catholic friends and see if anything strikes your fancy.

It became pretty obvious early on that they couldn't all be right, so the most obvious explanation was that they were all wrong; it was a freethinking upbringing. We did the fun stuff at Christmas. We did go to church occasionally.

We did the fun parts of Easter. We did away with the churchy side of things. Our big family tradition was watching Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. It was not a reverent household [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing] You went to Tulane University to earn a degree in neuroscience and environmental science as well as law school there graduating in 2009. The focus was environmental law.

You also went to the University of Amsterdam for human rights and international law. Can you clarify for the audience and me what was the transition there from the work or the studies in neuroscience and environmental science into human rights and international law?

Seidel: I think they are all connected. I was positive when I was younger that I wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to do ER surgery, trauma surgery, maybe pediatric trauma. I was really interested in that.

I discovered that neuroscience was a major at school; it was so fascinating because it was cutting-edge. I remember this vividly. A professor came into class and said, "So, it turns out all of the stuff we did last two weeks is all wrong. We found this out in the last just recently."

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Seidel: It was so fascinating and was something you could sink your teeth into. I did all the pre-med requirements. I even took organic chemistry, which is the make or break class for pre-med for people here in the States. I also did a lot of work in the medical field. My summers I spent working in hospitals. I was the lowest on the totem pole. I was a nurse's aide, changing diapers and so on. I loved the work, but noticed the higher up on the ladder that you got then the less time you actually spent helping and interacting with people.

Of course, the doctors diagnose and so on, but they spend the least amount of time with the patients. The EMT stuff I did was really great, driving around in an ambulance. After a while, I became a bit disenchanted with the medical field, but I still wanted to help people.

I ended up picking up a double major. But in between undergraduate and Law school, I was doing Grand Canyon tour out in Arizona. I had a number of people in my tours who were environmental lawyers who wanted to help people and had a cause.

They encouraged me to do environmental law because it is so cool. I never thought about law school while in undergrad. The first time I ever thought about it was when I graduated in '04. I was selected for jury duty. I ended up being jury foreman on a murder trial. I was a 22-year-old and I remember this very vividly. It was in Houston, my permanent address during school.

The defendant or the accused was black. The judge said, "Go back in the room and select a foreman and then come back out." We went in and the guy stood up. He was a typical white male executive from downtown, maybe 60 or 62. He stood up and said, "I think we know what the outcome of this given what that guy looks like." It was something like that.

Jacobsen: Holy moly.

Seidel: It was basically "he's black therefore, he's guilty." What?! What? He made a speech about why we should elect him foreman, which was basically "you should elect me because I have done this before. We know he is guilty."

I forgot what I said, but I got up and gave a speech. I became the jury foreman. Everyone voted for me. We got the case three weeks later and everyone was in the jury room debating. By the end of the trial, my fellow jurors said, "You should go to law school." That was the first time I thought about it. It had been in the back of my mind since then.

When I started doing the Grand Canyon tours and getting more and more interested in environmental protection and helping causes that can't help themselves, such as protected lands [Laughing], they can't help themselves.

You need people out there willing to help protect those who can't protect themselves. Down the road, I came to an inflection point in my career. I was set up in Colorado to build an environmental law practice. It would have been a pretty big for the state and for the firm I was at. But I also had this opportunity to work at FFRF. I was talking with my little sister, "I am really passionate about First Amendment stuff. But I went to school for the environmental stuff. I know it far better."

She said, "Where will you make a bigger impact?" It was probably one of the most important questions I have ever been asked. There are thousands, *thousands*, of lawyers doing fantastic work on the environment.

You probably know better than most Americans how bad we are at combatting climate change. But it is hard to say with being another one of probably 10,000 lawyers out there that I would have had a big impact. But I know every attorney doing the work I do now. Most are in the office here. There are probably 15 of us. I am having a bigger impact here than I would get by working in the environmental field. If somebody asked me about my dream job, this is it. I am doing it.

It has always been about protecting those who can't protecting themselves and fighting for those who aren't able to fight for themselves. That is what I wanted to do with my career. I wanted to do something bigger than myself.

I went where I would be most effective and it turns out I enjoy it the most. If you asked me to create my dream job, it would be my job now. Though with a bigger paycheck.

Jacobsen: What do you see as some of the more pertinent issues ongoing with regards to freedom from religion in the United States?

Seidel: I think the biggest issue we're facing is a very clear attempt to redefine religious liberty. Historically, religious liberty in this country has meant you can believe whatever you want and you have the freedom to act on that belief to a certain extent, but you do not get to use that belief as an excuse to impose on others or violate the rights of others.

The idea of religious freedom has never been used as a license to violate the rights of others under our constitutional system. That is a shift that you're seeing happening pretty rapidly here. The first big warning signs for people was the *Hobby Lobby* decision in 2014 out of the Supreme Court.

The next big case that will or very well could redefine religious liberty is the *Masterpiece Cakeshop* case that the Supreme Court has right now. It is really shifting the way we think of and conceive religious liberty.

It is turning it from something considered a shield to a sword to impose on others. To me, that is the biggest issue we face right now. A lot of people don't realize what is happening; and they won't understand until it is too late. We have been sounding the alarm here at the FFRF for more than a decade. The very first warning was the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which was back in the 90s.

The one other thing you're seeing happen more lately is government funding of religion. Historically, in this country, that has been a bright line that does not get crossed. You are seeing it happen more and more with vouchers for private religious schools. FEMA or the Federal Emergency Management Agency here in the States just switched its policy to start funding the repair of houses of worship.

That is the first time in the US where the government will pay for that. In 1785, the Virginia Legislature passed the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom. Jefferson wrote that law and James Madison pushed that through the legislature.

In it, Thomas Jefferson said, "It is sinful and tyrannical," that is the quote, "sinful and tyrannical" to force somebody to support a house of worship that they don't agree with. You go from "sinful and tyrannical" to these places of worship saying they have a *right* to feed out of the public trough.

The Supreme Court did not even bother to analyze that bright line rule in the *Trinity Lutheran* case that came down last term. So that's the other big issue right now.

And I think you're seeing both of those issues because our nation has done such a good job of keeping State and Church separate that most people don't have a good understanding of how violative of their rights it is to have the government rebuild a church with their taxpayer funds.

They haven't experienced that religious coercion and that theocracy; so, they don't get it. There is a bit of complacency, but I think we are going to see that change if we see these changes go through.

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

Diego Fontanive on Critical Thinking and Psychobabble

February 15, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Diego Fontanive founded EOF. His background is in sociology, psychology, and critical thinking.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Most people would not disagree with the idea that they have the right way to look at the world. How does EOF as a project and as a set of tools convince people that they may have some misconceptions about the world?

Diego Fontanive: This is a very delicate point. We want to be right, especially when a viewpoint is being stuck in our head for a very long time – especially years. What I am saying is a delicate approach, mostly, you cannot approach people directly.

Also, I think this is why showing people facts and evidence, especially when the belief is very much ingrained, doesn't really work because they will eventually apply a confirmation bias and a modality of thinking to justify their belief in another way, in another modality [Laughing].

I have a name for this approach. I call it "Circumnavigation," which is trying to place doubts. Fundamentally, we don't want people to think the way we think. We want people to think in a way capable to think for themselves and to be as objective as possible.

We plant seeds. I think a good and simple approach is to ask, "What do you mean by that?" When people talk about their beliefs, they tend to be very fast: lexically, verbally, and cognitively.

I think it is wise to stop them when it is possible, of course, and to ask, "What do you mean by that? What do you actually mean by that?" For example, let's say something like this, a typical situation when someone faces the loss of a loved one.

Usually, somebody says, "This person is in a better world and enjoying a better life." I will ask, "What do you mean by that? You just don't know that." Another example, when some people say (which has happened to me), "Buddha achieved enlightenment."

My approach would be to say, "Nobody probably met the Buddha. He is an invented figure. The scriptures about the Buddha have been written between 500 and 800 years after they were supposed, after the existence of the Buddha. We just don't know. Not knowing is not a disturbing point of analysis, it is actually a beautiful starting point of analysis."

In a superficial way, this is the type of analysis that we have.

Jacobsen: You have met James Randi, so have I. Was he a hero or inspiration for that the work that you do?

Fontanive: I would not use the word "hero." I know it is a way of the language, but a hero implies an authority, but I do not think to make an authority of any figure because it eventually can lead to falling into biases. I believe it is a little bit of processing of venerating, which I do not like.

I have a lot of admiration for James Randi for sure. I do not have heroes. I have people who I do admire. He is an incredible person. I appreciate his passion despite his age, to go on. He is almost 90 now.

Also, his kindness to approach people of different beliefs without trying to impose reason on the but trying to make them reason. It is an enormous difference: between imposing and making people reason.

I met him. We had interesting chats and conversations, but I think we were along the same lines. I have a total admiration for what he has done and is doing. I do not want to make people into heroes.

They are people. They have their fallacies. I would really avoid this process of giving authorities to certain figures. This could be a little bit of a problem. There are people who are not scientists who tend to get too much authority, e.g. social science.

They may have things that are supposedly science but aren't, mumbo-jumbo, such as some of social psychology. There are New Age ideas, or psychobabble coming from motivational stuff in psychology.

I think giving authority to something or someone distracts us from evaluating what the theory is, the person is, and so on.

Jacobsen: If you could some of the ideas in social psychology, in particular, as well as some of the New Age ideas, what are some of the common fallacies between both camps – so to speak?

Fontanive: On the topic of religion, religion at least has a structure. A religious person doesn't have much freedom to create a new theory or way to approach religious ideas (in a new way). People have to stick to the scriptures.

At least, there is a formal structure. Modern spirituality or the New Age does not have the structure. There is a lot of freedom to invent our own beliefs. That, maybe, eventually go together with the New Age beliefs.

This is the problem in the New Age because there is something really dishonest going on in the New Age movement. What they do, they kidnap scientific concepts, even scientific theories, and the twist them in order to satisfy their theories or beliefs.

We often, for instance, in New Age social media – groups, pages – see things like “Scientific study says that we have some vibration or field” and so on.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Fontanive: Unfortunately, this goes unseen by the many because the many really believe – because they don't check the sources. They don't evaluate the soundness or validity of the article or the claim.

Also, because our brain is wired to be gullible, and then also because they are more prone to believe that science really found some New Age concept is actually true, I think it is dishonest.

I think it is really confusing somehow. It contributes to the amplification of credulity in people's minds. I believe, unfortunately, that this is also the reason that New Age is penetrating the field of psychology and psychotherapy.

Because there are many psychologists or psychotherapists, that, nevertheless, are quite gullible people. They don't evaluate the validity of certain claims. They believe that ideas about positive thinking affect our health in a physical way are true.

In psychology, there is no evidence whatsoever, so far, that stress causes physical problems. It sounds strange, but really there is not evidence of something like this so far. Psychological theories cannot be tested in a lab.

It is based on statistics. It can be highly fallacious. I think it goes back to the method of education. We do not have an education based on critical thinking and critical analysis. This is a big problem, especially today where we are facing an overload of information every day.

We do not know how to filter it out.

Jacobsen: What do you think people who hold the title of “skeptic” as almost a placeholder of personal nobility? They look at it as a way to belong to a group. How do they deceive themselves into thinking that they are skeptical in general when some within the movement that would take that title of skeptic just aren't?

Fontanive: I have been discussing this point during my recent lecture I did in Poland at the European Skeptics Congress. I was talking about memes. In a way, skepticism can be a meme.

A meme is a unit of culture or an idea. The characteristic of a meme is that it does not care about self-analysis. It only cares about replicating itself. There are many people that call themselves skeptic because it feels safe to belong to a certain community.

But, in fact, there are no skeptics at all, especially with their own ways of thinking or of mind including emotions. For instance, a person can define himself or herself as a skeptic person, but maybe this person struggles greatly because of emotions.

It is easy to take shelter into a group, believing to be something. It is something that somehow nourishes our identity. Our sense of belonging to something, even out self-esteem. I came across a lot of people who claim to be skeptics and aren't really skeptics at all.

Again, I believe that this is a problem of education. Then there are extreme skeptic people, which is not really quite healthy.

Jacobsen: What do you mean by that?

Fontanive: [Laughing] This is also a problem in science. I also came across these kind of people. They are extreme. It is a bit hilarious. I remember, recently, I was talking about how easily we get conditioned by external influences and memes.

Another person said, “Do you have scientific evidence for this? Can you prove it scientifically? Because if you cannot prove it scientifically, then you shouldn't talk about it.”

Wait a minute, [Laughing] I do not think I need scientific evidence to prove that we can get conditioned quite easily. I think the evidence is right in front of us and historically speaking. I think this extremism is not about skepticism.

It is not healthy. It is not healthy for science. It is not healthy regarding accurate processes analysis and not healthy for thinking. I think it somehow derives from a personal sense of identity that has nothing to do with science.

The beauty of science is that there is not scientific authority. If we mix it with someone thinking, “I am scientist. You are not a scientist and cannot be saying anything with scientific evidence. Therefore, I should be the one providing the evidence...”

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Fontanive: [Laughing] Science is science. Scientists are people. People have brains. Brains are fallacious. Even in that case, I will approach these people the same way, “What do you mean by that?” Then it depends.

Jacobsen: I want to touch on a prior point about psychobabble speak. That prior point was touching on the psychobabble within the psychological community, so as a general point, but those that have gone into the mainstream.

They have been taken over by more or less religious movements or aspects of non-critical thinking taken home. For instance, I would point to Alcoholics Anonymous. They have a wide reach. They impact many lives, especially at addiction to at least one substance.

How do you see a way out of that, reversing the innervations of those into the mainstream?

Fontanive: Regarding the mainstream psychological approaches: I believe that many of them are definitely serious and willing to stick to proper evaluations of psychological theories. However, problem is that on the contrary of many other fields of science, psychology cannot be tested in a lab which means that it's mainly founded on theories and analytic results. This means that it's relatively easy to come out with psychological advices which sound like good, positive ones, but based on biases or even magical thinking, as well ignoring that what feels good is not necessarily what's right, (not right as a value but right in objective terms).

Due to the modern proliferation of internet communication and online material plus actual businesses based on divulgation of countless of different psychological approaches we can found on magazines and articles online for instance, (which are also in competition with each other because of business's purposes); it seems that a lot of made up material regarding psychological suggestions is actually delivered to the public arena in all sort of ways. It also seems that what is going on within some branches of mainstream psychology is a sort of glorification of modern ideologies concerning positive thinking, self-help, life tips and achievement of happiness at every cost. These approaches are substantially ideological: they are de facto ideologies, as well they merely dumb down critical thinking and our intelligence itself and factually block the necessity to cultivate high order thinking skills, which is to me a social urgency today since the overload of information we receive and process everyday is getting faster and faster and more and more overwhelming, as well it imposes us to be more and more accurate with the ways we receive it and also the way we think itself.

There are many blind spots in modern mainstream psychological approaches, for instance it seems that circumstances where a psychologist is also a religious mind do not represent a problem at all, while it is a problem, or where a psychotherapist carries spiritual or even paranormal beliefs and so on: it usually remains an undisturbed thing. Back to less extreme circumstances; there is a major misconception that makes many people ignore that if a person adopts mainstream psychological theories, whether it be a professional or not, that circumstance does not necessarily mean that the same individual also possesses a strong training in hard core critical thinking skills. So for instance; tips like ___ ‘do you have a low self-esteem? Then try to go out and socialise’ ___ are merely superficial ones, as well they can even establish a sort of

shallow dependence which has nothing to do with a logical, sober and mature self-esteem but it has more to do instead with an addiction to urges about receiving attention and in fact depending from people's support and consensus. On modern social media these addictions are currently very devastating, psychological speaking, for so many fragile or even less fragile minds!

A.A. for example is a classical representation of parts of what I'm highlighting: because of the religious characteristics such groups-therapy often adopt; they attempt a recovery of alcoholics through religious mindsets which can eventually result in a positive end of the addiction but then it all turns into a form of psychological dependence to irrational ideologies such as 'surrender to Jesus' stuff and so on.

To me the solution is called education, everything goes back there; to the field of education, or better to say to the necessity of reforming education which is also the primary concern in a series of programs I'm developing for experimental educational projects and institutions. This requires at first a process of 'educating the educators' and the policymakers before approaching the students and individuals in general. If people are trained with deep critical thinking abilities intertwined with critical metacognition and what I call meta-memetic thinking skills then they would be more prone to identify the biases, the superficialities and the made up affirmations within tips and claims regarding pseudo-psychology they come across with on line and in the real life and also about any other interpersonal relationship they engage.

2017 in Review with Professor David Orenstein

February 15, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. David Orenstein is a Professor of Anthropology at the City University of New York, and author of “Godless Grace: How Nonbelievers are making the world safer, richer and kinder.” He can be reached at dorenstein@mec.cuny.edu.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let us take a look back at 2017, which is already over a month and a half has gone into the ether, what seems like the major trend in the United States for the non-religious – pluses and minuses?

David Orenstein: I think we, that the nontheist community in the United States finds itself in a period of ongoing social, political and legal resistance which is in direct response to the current administration in Washington, DC. Nonbelievers are not a monolithic group, and I know there are atheists who are politically conservative. I and most atheists conclude that the Trump presidency has exposed itself to be allied with theists, evangelicals, and a host of anti-humanistic and overtly racist people and organizations which deeply conflict with the worldview of secular freedom and empathy.

We are fighting against an anti-truth, anti-pluralist, and anti-science agenda with deep ties to the Evangelical movement which itself started more than 30 years ago. This movement is repulsed by the accumulation of scientific knowledge and wisdom. and by any philosophy which rejects god while also producing common understanding.

On the plus side, I also think this is the last gasp of the white disaffected working class. I understand their pain as they feel they’ve been left behind by globalism. I also acknowledge that not enough has been done to rectify some of their real fears and loss of jobs and community. Yet, diversity is our natural strength and it builds empathy. I think this is why the non-belief community is so easily allied to other growing resistance groups such as the #MeToo movement, many Pro-Choice groups like Planned Parenthood, immigrant rights groups and human and environmental justice groups who are also pulling and pushing our politics forward under the banner of greater personal freedom, some without the need for a personal god.

Also on the plus side is the increasing number of Nones in the U.S., Gen-X and Gen-Z are markedly churchless and the number of growing nonbelievers is actually frightening organized religion across all quarters as numbers of worshipers and dollars diminish. Certainly the number of Colleges and local nontheist organizations celebrating of Darwin Day and the Day of Reason are growing as well. These are really, really good things.

Jacobsen: When you reflect on the contributions to the non-religious community, who have been outstanding individuals in that? What organizations have been leading the way as well?

Orenstein: Well, there have been so many people involved in helping to support the secular humanist and atheist worldview. I think everyone who links to another skeptic on social media is making a difference by creating more connections in an ever-greater community of nonbelievers from all over the world. We are certainly no longer cowering in the shadows. The force of many

lay leaders has to be considered the oil that greases the nonbeliever machine and propels the movement forward both intellectually, actively and via fundraising.

But absolutely there are specific people, advocates and agitators like. We can reflexively go to the Four Horsemen, but so many other modern authors, activists and thinkers are contributing. Both past and present, certainly Carl Sagan is a perennial personal favorite, and as I read and write my next book on Charles Darwin, I've been reading about the naturalists and freethought activists of the 19th Century (Bradlaugh; Ingersoll, McCabe, etc) that paved the way for the freethinkers of the 20th and 21st Centuries.

From an organizational point of view, there are the stalwarts of course, like the Secular Coalition for America, the Richard Dawkins Foundations, American Atheists, Inc. the American Humanist Association and the Freedom from Religion Foundation. The International Humanist and Ethical Union also plays a supportive role, as do organizations like the National Science Foundation and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. All these organizations protect knowledge, human rights and work towards environmental and other justices.

Jacobsen: What have been the bigger areas of regression for the rights of non-religious people in the United States?

Orenstein: There have been many areas that I'd consider regressive. The overt need to link patriotism with godliness; the attempt by certain states and school boards to enact or attempt to legislate Creationism or Intelligent Design into the public school science curriculum; a re-emphasis on prayer in public schools. Also, attacks on journalism and threats against journalists. The denial of LGBT or transgender rights is also a huge issue, as is the ongoing attempt to overturn Roe v. Wade. All these lead to an atmosphere that leads nonbelievers to feel as though their rights and beliefs, essentially their way of life in a civil secular society, aren't as valued or important as others. Certainly under this administration "religious freedom" – that is protecting the rights of the religious – is especially allied to the President and both Houses of Congress. But hopefully this year and in 2020, with mobilization, this will change and more disaffected groups, which include atheists, will register and vote wisely.

Jacobsen: What story or stories in 2017 made you laugh surrounding religious and non-religious issues?

Orenstein: For me, I'd say the saga of former Judge Roy Moore really scared me at first but also made me laugh, at least in the end. Moore is the former Chief Justice from the state of Alabama who was suspended in 2003 for refusing to remove a Ten Commandments statue on public grounds. Last year, Moore ran to for the Senate to replace Jeff Sessions, who now serves at Attorney General. First Trump backed Moore's opponent, but when that person lost the Republican primary, Trump quickly deleted all his tweets favoring the candidate. Then, as Trump put his advocacy behind Moore, he essentially backed into supporting a man accused of multiple counts of sexual misconduct – So much for religious piety. Moore has been known for decades as a guy who "liked them young." Moore lost the election and thus placed the state into the hands of the Democrats, something that hasn't happened for 30+ years. The loss by Moore and the collateral damage to his and Trump's reputation is, in my mind, irreparable. And also highlights a deep religious hypocrisy found mainly in those who claim the mantle of morality based on their religious faith.

Jacobsen: What are some areas of activism for the non-believing population in the United States, e.g. the Pledge of Allegiance, etc.?

Orenstein: Right after the U.S. election, the Women's March occurred. Since then, other activism has invigorated the civil and human rights movements within the United States. Many freethought organizations are focusing on the ongoing attempt to lessen the wall between Church and State. That's very important. Trump tried to end the Johnson Amendment, which would have allowed Houses of Worship to make political contributions and advocate for candidates. That failed to happen. The real emphasis should be registering and then getting people to the polls to vote. The more people who participate in democracy (or at least America's version of it) the more we can avoid political disasters like the Trump administration. As I've written before, America was founded as a secular nation. Remember that the separation between Church and State is in our politics, policies and god was left out of the government by our Founding Fathers. They couldn't know Trump's name three hundred years ago, but they certainly saw this coming.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Orenstein: I am an optimist and believe in the "American Experiment." I also believe that when American is at its best that we can be the shining city on that hill. But I've come to accept that those who are still Trump supporters have nearly deified the man. As with all religion, once a believer accepts their beliefs there's little, if ever, any turning back. But what comes with accepting this "package" is the amount of energy one needs to normalize the sad and vile actions and comments of the man/king/god, which those beliefs are projected. Trump is the David Koresh or Jim Jones for about 25% of the nation that has become disaffected with the economics and politics of a world system in which they (in some cases) rightly feel is leaving them behind. I do not know how to change their minds, but I do know that surviving this period in American history will require VOTES to change the current political dynamics of our nation. Don't burn out but turn on. Don't become disaffected by the onslaught of this administration. Become vengeful in the voting booth in 2018, 2020 and beyond.

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

In Conversation with Joyce Arthur – Founder and Executive Director, Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada

February 16, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Joyce Arthur is the Founder and Executive Director of the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. She has been an abortion rights and pro-choice activist since 1998. Arthur worked for 10 years running the Pro-Choice Action Network. In addition to these accomplishments, she founded FIRST or the first national feminist group advocating for the rights of sex workers and the decriminalization prostitution in Canada. Here we look into her work and philosophy.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was activism and feminist philosophy part of growing up for you?

Joyce Arthur: I was raised in a conservative Christian home but had strong feminist leanings by about age 9 or 10 and was also very interested in science. My parents did not monitor my reading and I was an avid reader. I discovered the theory of evolution around age 12 and it was an exciting epiphany. I've always been very independent-minded and could hardly wait to be an adult, as I recognized that children were at the mercy of their parents and that really chafed with me. Although I hasten to add that I had a happy childhood and my parents were good people. I was also lucky in that our family was a bit more liberal than some others in the church (Canadian Reformed).

Jacobsen: What were pivotal moments in your life trajectory into becoming a women's rights activist in Canada?

Arthur: In 1972, I was 15 years old. One morning after church, we were all standing outside chatting like usual. The pastor went around and asked everyone of voting age to sign a petition – to repeal the 1969 law that legalized abortion! It was the first time I had ever considered the issue. My immediate thought was: “I think women can have an abortion if they want to.” I said nothing and was not asked to sign the petition because I was underage, but watched as everyone around me did without hesitation, all in agreement that abortion was obviously wrong and must be prohibited. I realized then I was different from everyone else there and didn't belong. I left home at age 17.

The second thing was having an abortion myself in 1988. Up to that point, I wasn't very political, except in the fight against teaching creationism in public school science classes. When I went to my gynecologist and discovered that a committee of doctors would decide whether I could have an abortion, I was rather shocked. However, because it was Vancouver, I was lucky – they basically rubber-stamped abortion applications at VGH. But that was not the case for many other women across Canada as I later learned. And I started to feel angry that this decision was not ultimately up to me, or them.

Ironically, while I was waiting the long weeks for my committee-approved abortion, the 1969 law was struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court and Dr. Henry Morgentaler was making headlines. I don't actually remember any of that at the time. I guess the personal was not

yet political for me, and I was too involved with dealing with my own problems, such as all-day morning sickness.

About 6 months after my abortion, I happened to stumble across a pro-choice rally at the Vancouver Art Gallery. My interest was piqued and I joined the group hosting the rally, the BC Coalition for Abortion Clinics. I gradually became more involved until I was eventually leading the group. It later became the Pro-Choice Action Network.

Jacobsen: Can you relay some of the notable instances within your own life and in Canada of bigger victories for the independence and autonomy of women not only in law but in social life and culture as well?

Arthur: In Canada generally, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has been a huge boost for women's rights. It was the Charter that made it possible to strike down the abortion law (under the right to security of the person) and it's the Charter that continues to protect abortion rights and other women's rights. Since 1988, there's been huge strides in abortion rights and access, with many new clinics opening, the funding of all private clinics (except one in NB which we're still fighting for), and an increase in public support for women's rights and abortion rights. We had a 10-year setback with the Harper government, but it's refreshing to have a Trudeau-led Liberal government that is not afraid to stand up and defend reproductive rights, as well as LGBT rights.

Jacobsen: You won a case against the abortion-counseling organizations. How did you first find out about them?

Arthur: The Pro-choice Action Network did a study that looked at "crisis pregnancy centres" in BC and more generally across North America. We were sued by a Christian group that operated two of these centres in the Vancouver metro area. We had collected some literature from them that showed they misinformed women about abortion and other issues, but we didn't mention them in our report at all, except for a list in the Appendices. But based on a small section of the report where we described some tactics of CPCs across North America, they sued me on the basis that their centres didn't engage in those specific tactics. Our report did not claim that, so I won the lawsuit. It was against me personally, because by then the Pro-Choice Action Network had closed. (Here's a story I wrote about the lawsuit: <http://rabble.ca/columnists/2013/09/anti-choice-centres-lose-lawsuit-what-does-it-all-mean>)

Jacobsen: Now, you are the executive director of the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. How did you find out about the organization and earn the position? Also, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Arthur: After leading the Pro-Choice Action Network in BC for years, I realized there were a lot of pressing national issues to deal with, and not so many provincial issues anymore. My plan was to take our group national, but in the end, I formed a totally new organization. I led some consultations, and the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada was founded at a meeting in Montreal in April 2005 under my leadership. Our official launch was in October 2005 at a Parliament press conference. I led the group as "Coordinator" until 2007 when we became incorporated and have served as the Executive Director since then.

My position involves public advocacy, leading campaigns, lobbying politicians, helping grassroots activists with local campaigns, working with volunteers, communicating with

members/supporters, networking with other reproductive rights groups, maintaining our Facebook page and website, and many other things.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the organization through volunteering, donating money, providing skills, helping with professional and social networking, and so on?

Arthur: It's easy (and cheap!) to join ARCC: <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/membership.html>. Since we are not a charity, it makes fundraising more challenging, and we operate on a very small budget. Please support our political activism! We also have a 'Take Action' page that I invite people to check out: http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/take_action.html. We welcome volunteers, although much of the work involves things like research, writing/editing, graphic design, etc. Not so much on-the-ground work. Also, people can follow our Facebook and Twitter pages to keep up with the latest news and campaigns:
<https://www.facebook.com/AbortionRights/>
<https://twitter.com/AbortionRights>

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Arthur: It's essential that we never be complacent despite our successes in Canada. On the world stage, Canada is currently a leader in reproductive rights. We are the only country in the world (besides China) with no abortion law, and we've proved we don't need one. But that doesn't mean that everything is safe, as we've seen with Trump in charge below the border, and China forging ahead with its global power agenda that does not value human rights. Right-wing and authoritarian forces are on the upswing. Canada should be not become an outlier in respecting women's rights and reproductive rights. This stance must be spread throughout the world, and we need to constantly beat back the forces of oppression. Even in Canada, because the Conservatives will likely be back some day.

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

Arthur: My pleasure!

In Conversation with Dr. Steven Tomlins – Researcher, Canadian Atheism and Nonreligious Identities

February 17, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I read about some of the research done by Dr. Steven Tomlins for the non-religious community in Canada, or on the irreligious community in Canada more properly. I reached out and, as with other articles, felt this may be something of interest to the community: his story, views, and work. Enjoy.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was religion a big part of early life for you? Can you recall some pivotal moments relevant to the discussion around theism and skepticism?

Dr. Steven Tomlins: Catholicism was a part of my life growing up; I'm hesitant to say it was a "big part" because I went to public schools and had non-religious friends, but I went weekly to whatever Catholic Church was near our military postings and I went to Sunday school. My mom was quite Catholic and my dad was nonreligious; he joined the family in church but never converted to Catholicism or any other religion.

I recall a few pivotal moments about theism. The first was when I was in grade nine, listening to Nirvana's *Nevermind* a lot. I misinterpreted the lyrics to "Come as You Are," where Kurt sings, "I don't have a gun, no I don't have a gun." I thought he was singing, "I don't have a god, no I don't have a god." I remember wondering what it must be like to not believe in God, and I also was of the mindset that it's better to not believe in God than to worship Satan.

A few years later I remember listening to Nine Inch Nails *The Downward Spiral* and feeling uncomfortable but curious at the lyrics in the song "Heresy," which called God dead and 'critiqued' Christianity. Music was – and still is – very important to me, and I don't recall these artists who I respected as forcing me to question my religious persuasion, so much as become aware that there were those who don't have a religion, and that's just fine.

Around the same time, a friend moved back from a military posting and we reconnected. When he moved, at the end of grade 8, we were both Catholics, but when he came back around grade 11 he was an avowed atheist, adamant that God was a lie, and he refused to go to church anymore.

We had lengthy discussions about God, neither changing the others mind. Incidentally a few years later, while I was questioning religion and existence, he became a born-again Baptist. Our arguments shifted to his denying of evolution as a devilish lie and my attempting, unsuccessfully, to convince him of its basis in fact.

As far as skepticism in general, I can't recall a time when I wasn't skeptical of ideas and of human motivation. My family has always questioned, discussed, and debated issues; I'm not sure if I learned to be skeptical from my opinionated folks or from the realization as a kid watching commercials that commercials were made by adults to fool kids into buying whatever they're selling. Probably a bit of both.

Jacobsen: How did you get into the disciplined study of irreligiosity in Canada? I may need some help with being precise on the terminology, as you spent a Ph.D. studying these phenomena.

Tomlins: Well, using ‘irreligiosity’ shows a good use of terminology, so I wouldn’t be so humble! In a nutshell, my undergrad was all about learning about other cultures through courses in Religious Studies.

My interest was in how these religions came about, what my neighbors believe in today, and how religious expression (painting, art, texts) spoke to human creativity. For my Master’s I shifted gears and decided to do a discourse analysis on New Atheist literature, because it was new, I was already familiar with a few of the books, and they were bestsellers in the religion section of my local bookstore.

Following that, I wanted to hear the opinions of Canadian atheists – not pop culture atheists like Hitchens and Dawkins, but your average, everyday Canadian atheist – on issues pertaining to religion and atheism.

While I was pondering how to go about finding some atheists to interview I saw a table set-up promoting a brand-new student club, the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa, and they accepted me as a participant-observation and interviewer of their club.

Jacobsen: What was the main research question?

Tomlins: “Why do some atheists in Canada join atheist communities?” I understood many of the reasons why people identify as atheist, agnostic, or nonreligious, and I could understand why some atheists in the United States join groups, feeling persecuted/distrusted, but I didn’t understand the desire to join an atheist community in Canada.

Jacobsen: What were the empirical or statistical findings in the research?

Tomlins: There’s a bunch, but I’ll share one of the most interesting, as it answers the research question. This is a quote from one of the most active members of the atheist club I interviewed:

“I sort of like the idea where there’s this club where you can say all of these things, where you can say whatever you want about religion or not believing in God and you don’t offend anybody, so that’s sort of a good thing.

Because I think in Canadian society we have a tendency to avoid controversial subjects even if they’re important, we don’t like controversy. I think there’s some sort of tendency to be averse to controversy in Canadian society, so we don’t go deep into things, we don’t have deep meaningful discussions about meaningful issues because we don’t want to make anyone upset.

And so the advantage of the atheist club is that you get to have these meaningful issues, and then you get to learn more, and you don’t have to worry about upsetting anybody, and I think that’s a good thing.”

While in practice the club certainly ruffled a few religious feathers, the notion that the club was a safe-space to engage in controversial discourse with like-minded people who wouldn’t get offended answered my research question, and it spoke to a unique Canadian atheist experience.

Jacobsen: What are your upcoming projects for 2018?

Tomlins: Primarily creative. I have a lot of creative writing projects (satires, a children's novel or three) that I've put on the back burner while focusing on academic pursuits. I'd like to take some time and finish those projects.

Academically, I just finished final edits on a textbook chapter for a volume on religion in Canada (my chapter was on the statistics Canada category of "Religious Nones"), and I am toying with the idea of putting together an international volume on Commonwealth Blasphemy Laws – it's historical use and its current status.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Tomlins: Just that the field of nonreligion and secularity has grown a lot in ten years. At my first conference the organizers put my paper on how the New Atheists view morality on a panel titled "Evil Incarnate," in-between papers about Satanism and how devilish Heath Leger's Joker was.

Today panels dedicated to secularism, nonreligion, and atheism are common. Nonreligion is treated as a growing minority religious persuasion worthy of study, but that begs the question: as the nonreligious population continues to grow, in Canada for example (where it's at just shy of a quarter of the population), at what point will nonreligion become treated as the norm, rather than the exception?

Bill Graham is Dead at Age 99

February 21, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

William Franklin Graham Jr., KBE, known as “Billy Graham,” was born on November 7, 1918 in Charlotte, North Carolina in the United States (US). He died on February 21, 2018 in Montreat, North Carolina in the US. Bill Graham was an Evangelical Christian (BBC News, 2018).

He is, arguably, one of the most influential preachers of the 20th century and into the early 21st century. It has been estimated that Graham reached as many as 210 million people spanning 185 countries in personal preaching alone.

His preaching career spanned more than six decades. He had a “fire and brimstone” style that was an influence on “many evangelical preachers” (Ibid.). With the movement of the American civil rights movement, and to his credit, he preached “against segregation and formed a sometimes strained friendship with Martin Luther King.”

In an interesting early life moment at the end of Prohibition in the US in 1933, Graham’s father made him drink beer “until he was sick to persuade him of the dangers of alcohol. He remained a teetotaler throughout his life” (Ibid.).

Early in life, he became a full-time evangelist with Youth for Christ, known for being an organization that ministered to young people and service personnel. He worked as a salesman throughout the Depression and became a main proponent of the Christian faith.

He was opposed to communism because he saw the political ideology as against the Christian religion in all respects. He went worldwide with the religion starting in 1954 with London. That began the long career of evangelization by Graham.

When Martin Luther King died, he declared King a “social leader and a prophet,” taking the Christian language in praise.

In 2002, he made a public apology for talking about the “Jewish stranglehold on the media,” based on a private conversation with Richard Nixon in 1972. He will likely be remembered as one of the if not the most influential North American preacher of at least the 20th century (Ibid.).

References

BBC News. (2018, February 21). Obituary: Billy Graham. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-13374487>.

In Conversation with Dr. Gordon Henry Guyatt, MD, MSc, FRCP, OC – Distinguished University Professor, McMaster University

February 22, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Professor Gordon Guyatt, MD, MSc, FRCP, OC is a Distinguished University Professor in the Department of Health Research Methods, Evidence and Impact and Medicine at McMaster University. He is a Fellow of the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences.

The British Medical Journal or BMJ had a list of 117 nominees in 2010 for the Lifetime Achievement Award. Guyatt was short-listed and came in second-place in the end. He earned the title of an Officer of the Order of Canada based on contributions from evidence-based medicine and its teaching.

He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2012 and a Member of the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame in 2015. He lectured on public vs. private healthcare funding in March of 2017, which seemed like a valuable conversation to publish in order to have this in the internet's digital repository with one of Canada's foremost academics.

For those with an interest in standardized metrics or academic rankings, he is the 14th most cited academic in the world in terms of H-Index at 222 and has a total citation count of more than 200,000. That is, he has the highest H-Index, likely, of any Canadian academic living or dead.

We conducted an extensive interview before: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). This interview in Canadian Atheist does mean pro- or anti-religion/pro- or anti-non-religion. It amounts to a specific topical interview. Here we talk about private versus public healthcare focused on Canada.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You gave a talk in March of 2017 on private and public healthcare. With regards to the advantages and disadvantages of an argument within the talk, I wanted to explore this presentation. You laid out the argument in the lecture.

When it comes to the general factors that come into a discussion on private and public healthcare funding, what tend to be the main factors that tend to come up in such a discussion?

Professor Gordon Guyatt: When I gave the talk, I ask people, “How should we decide? How should we decide on the relative merits of public and private healthcare funding?” There are a number of things that people raise.

One is health outcomes. It depends on the ultimate goal of healthcare such as keeping people healthier: “What is the impact on people’s health?”, “What is the impact on access to care?”, “What is the impact on patient satisfaction?”, “What is the impact on autonomy – often characterized as a choice?”, and so on.

Those are a number of factors that people raise when they are thinking about it. Of course, there is healthcare cost. How much will we be spending on healthcare?

Jacobsen: When it comes to private healthcare funding, what seems like one of the main factors for people?

Guyatt: There is a lot of misinformation. So, one of the major drivers is “things aren’t working the way they are now. There has got to be a better way, at least with respect to physician and hospital services. Perhaps, we should try something different.”

A lot of the times, it will come down to that. You are looking for something different. It depends on who you are talking to, where their perspectives might make a difference.

The outcomes of private versus public funding will differ depending on who you are. If you are very rich, it is a different calculus compared to if you are very poor. It changes across that spectrum. It is very different if you are a healthcare provider versus a healthcare consumer.

So, incomes may influence your outcome. When I talk to audiences, there are notions that people have about what is affordable. There are notions people have about what it will do to their own income.

Those will influence things. Often it starts off with “public funding of healthcare is not sustainable.” To deal with that, I ask, “What do you think has happened to healthcare expenditures as a proportion of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over the last 7 years?”

I give options: gone up every year, most years, and so on and so forth. People are surprised with the answer. It has stagnated or declined. So, as a percentage of GDP, healthcare is lower than 7 years ago. Also, they tend to be surprised when you inform them: in 1991, it was 10% of GDP for all healthcare expenditures.

Now, it is a little bit below 11%. That is over more than 25 years. In terms of public healthcare expenditures, it is more extreme over 25 years, about 7% to 7.5%. This shapes the perception people have about healthcare spending constantly going up as a share of our national wealth when that is not true.

In general, that leads people to rethink the unaffordability of public funding of healthcare. Often, that is the first thing in people’s minds.

Jacobsen: I want to bring some information from prior interviews to contextualize some of this because it may slant some of the perspectives that you may have on it as well. Of course, the facts you are providing are facts, so do not change.

You ran for the NDP four times and lost “honorably” four times.

Guyatt: I do not know about honorably.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] I have friends in their 80s. We go for coffee sometimes. One of them ran provincially and federally. One time for the same party. One time not. In that context, NDP tends to have platform positions and policies that lean particular ways, often in the favor of the public regarding healthcare.

When it comes to people, taking an outside perspective, who are looking at the favourability for themselves or people they know, the private funding model for healthcare had a big item on the freedom to choose.

Often, the people who would have the disposable income and the perspective that may orient them towards that would be an older population with the disposable income and with a more conservative or libertarian stance.

Guyatt: In terms of that, first of all, be careful, there are older people who have managed to accumulate income during the course of their lives. There are people who have not managed to accumulate as much at retirement.

Those are different perspectives. The issue is if one were talking about the values issue. The value comes down to equity versus what people call “autonomy” or “choice.” On the one hand, there are people who say, “You should not have financial barriers to high-quality healthcare. Everyone should get the highest quality healthcare that the system has to offer.” That is one value.

Another is “people should be able to choose how to spend their resources like in pretty much every other area of our world. They should be able to spend their money on a better house or a better car. It should be the same in healthcare. You should be able to choose how you spend your resources *vis-à-vis* healthcare.”

That is a fundamental value and preference divide, which tends to follow a left-right distribution. The folks on the left value equity more. The folks on the right value choice or autonomy more.

Jacobsen: If you take out the one value of autonomy or choice, overall, what provides a better outcome for the general citizenry?

Guyatt: Let’s go through it:

Let’s say one thinks it is a good thing to constrain healthcare expenditures and says that you do not want too much GDP going towards health, the dramatic contrast with that concern is the United States and more or less the rest of the high-income countries.

The United States is about 55% private and 45% public. The rest of the Western world – Canada is relatively low at 70% public. Scandinavia, you have a number of countries over 80% public. France and Germany are about 75% public.

The United States is this big outlier with a much smaller proportion public than the rest of the Western world. Not coincidentally, they take the cake in terms of percentage of GDP spent on healthcare in the vicinity of 18% now.

So, the reasons for that is administrative costs are in Canada perhaps 16 and 17% of our healthcare expenditures. In the US, it is over 30%. As soon as you make people pay privately, everybody has to buy health insurance, then you have *huge* administrative costs.

Insurance companies have to be set up. They have to set up packages, compete with one another. There is huge documentation required for every health service, so you have this big administrative cost associated with private funding. That is one thing.

Second thing, governments cannot constrain healthcare costs, essentially. They cannot set boundaries effectively within a private funding model. In terms of constraining healthcare costs, public funding is an out and out winner by a long margin.

Jacobsen: What internal to the society variables makes the United States such an outlier with the other developed nations, especially the rich developed nations?

Guyatt: I think most people would say that the United States in terms of that value that we were talking about earlier. That is, the value one puts on autonomy versus the value one puts on equity or social solidarity. The US public has extremely different values.

So, that the fact that it could even be an issue that you could legally insist that people purchase insurance for their healthcare in one way or another – by governments making it available to them. It would be inconceivable in Western Europe that that would be a question.

It is generally the attitude towards social programs right across the spectrum. Social solidarity, equity, support for the disadvantaged, so on and so forth, is much more highly valued in Western Europe and Canada than it is in the United States.

Jacobsen: I see this attached to your work with Evidenced-Based Medicine with the part that was added on later in the research with “values and preferences.” Culture influences values and preferences even to the extent of administrative costs being swallowed.

Guyatt: Yes, you are absolutely right. Way back in 2002, when Roy Romanow did his work on a recommendation to the government about a healthcare recommendation, he surveyed Canadians in a variety of formats.

He found we put a high value on equity. If you were making the same survey in the United States, you would get very different results. I think in terms of the implications of financing and what you pay. There is a lot of misinformation.

Even having said that, definitely, Americans would be horrified at the idea that you couldn't pay for quicker or better healthcare. Certainly, in terms of social solidarity and equity as values, the United States and Scandinavia are perhaps at the extreme poles.

Jacobsen: With aging populations in North America and Europe generally, what will likely have to be the next moves in cultures that value equity over autonomy with regards to the amount of taxes that are taken from the public for the healthcare expenditures?

Guyatt: Most of the Western world in terms of the aging population, and also Japan, are substantially ahead of North America. A big thing that people do not realize in terms of healthcare for populations and the aging of the population is that the huge bulk of expenditures comes in the last year of life.

The implications of that are that we are all living longer, but whether our last year of life occurs between 70 and 71 or 90 and 91. That is the big bulk of healthcare expenditures. People get sick. Then in the last year, when they are sick, that is when they need the big expenditures.

We have done pretty well in constraining costs. The drivers that have put costs up are less the aging of the population and more technological advances. Technological advances that have really driven up costs when they have been driven up.

It depends again on what we are ready to pay for. The technological advances, be they drugs or surgical devices or whatever, improve health. We live longer, longer, and longer. Yes, we may have to, if we want to take advantage of all of the technological advances that are going to continue even though the last 7 years it has not gone up, spend more of our GDP on healthcare.

If we want to do it efficiently, it will have to be public expenditures. It reminds me of where we can be very confident. In the next 100 years, we will next have to get to what the US spends at 18% of its GDP as long as we stay with public spending.

Jacobsen: Technology becomes cheaper over time. Phones were for the rich decades ago. They were not good. But they became better. The poorer were able to afford them and the phones were far better.

Guyatt: It is a great point. 50 years ago, everybody had to live with their debilitating hip osteoarthritis or knee osteoarthritis. Now, hundreds of thousands of people are getting their hips and knees replaced.

That ended up costing money for years. The hip and knee replacements have become much more efficient. People used to stay in the hospital a week after the hip replacement. Now, it can be the same day. It is a good point.

I guess that is part of the reason that we have over the last 7 years have not had health care cost going up as a percentage of the GDP. Some of the technological advances drive up costs, but some of them end up constraining costs as we learn to do things more efficiently.

Another huge example of that is it used to be 45% of our healthcare expenditures were spent in the hospital. Now, it is 30%. There has been a gigantic shift to doing things as an outpatient, which is a much more efficient way of operating.

Jacobsen: If you look at Canada and its valuing of equity more than autonomy, does the trajectory seem clear in terms of funding that the public will be supporting for healthcare?

Guyatt: People continue to put a high value on healthcare. I would anticipate that if, in fact, the curve starts swinging up again. We could quite reasonably tolerate, for instance, a 1% increase in our GDP devoted to healthcare. People will tolerate that pretty easily.

Jacobsen: That is something I want to make more concrete for the 1% increase. What would that look like in practical terms?

Guyatt: Everyone [Laughing] would have to pay 5% more in tax burden. Of course, it is how you distribute that. If it were in a Trumpian way, the rich would pay less and everybody else would pay more.

Or you could distribute it in various ways. It means a relatively marginal increase in taxes across the population.

Jacobsen: What do you think the American administration is not necessarily getting right?

Guyatt: It is clear that the US way of delivering healthcare is extremely inefficient, extremely inequitable. It turns out on average that there are not better outcomes achieved and probably not as good outcomes in many areas.

They are wasteful and poor outcomes. It is not a very good deal.

Jacobsen: People are paying more for worse outcomes.

Guyatt: So, we did a study in the vicinity of a decade ago. We did a systematic review of health outcomes for similar conditions in Canada and the United States. There were about 30 conditions that we looked at in the research.

There were 15 of them for which there was no difference, essentially, between Canadian and US outcomes. There was about 10 of them with Canadian outcomes as better and 5 with American as better.

Our first submission, when we first submitted this paper, said that the US is paying more and they are not gaining in anything. The reviewer said, “What do you mean they are not gaining anything? The Canadian outcomes on average are better.”

We became less conservative after our peer reviews. On average, the Canadian outcomes are better. The very conservative statement is that the Americans are paying more on average for worse outcomes if you look across the spectrum.

We are constantly decrying the support for evidence in political decision making (academics). The continued support for universal healthcare. The governments, Kathleen Wynne extended healthcare to the under 25.

But we would be paying less for equal or better drug coverage on a national pharma care program, whether politicians got that message and were able to communicate it to people. You would pay less, but the total expenditures would be less because you would be paying less for your drugs.

In the way the US may be paying somewhat fewer taxes – even though that is somewhat questionable, but their payments are gigantically more. Were we to have a national pharma care program, what Canadians would gain in terms of decreased drug expenditures would more than make up for any increased taxes, there is no groundswell for universal pharma care.

Jacobsen: One other variable comes to mind when you say that to me, which is the split between long-term and short-term planning. If you take a long-term perspective or style of planning tied to an equity perspective, the financial outcomes for the country as well as the health outcomes of the citizenry go up. is that true?

Guyatt: Yes, it is the same thing. If we had a national pharma care program, the administrative cost would go way down. There are big administrative savings, immediately. Secondly, it puts the government in a much better position to negotiate with the people who are producing the drugs.

When health economists have modeled this, there is no question that what we as a citizenry would pay for drugs would go down.

Jacobsen: You are one of the leading voices or authorities in the country in terms of the medical field, medical discipline. So, what do you think would be preventing the public going into an equity perspective on all relevant domains in medicine given the obvious benefits laid out?

Guyatt: A number of things, the intense misinformation, I give these talks about what has happened to healthcare costs over the last 7 years; nobody gets it right. Everybody thinks they have gone up as a percentage of GDP. *There is massive misinformation.*

I am speaking to people in medical school and doctors. You would think that the people who would know would be the people in medical school. They would know more than others. The facts I am talking about are largely repressed.

Jacobsen: Why? [Laughing]

Guyatt: We can speculate about that. However, the balances, when we say, “Okay, for the country, it is going to cost less to have the public funding. Outcomes, if anything, are going to be better. Equity is a hands-down winner.”

But that perspective differs. In other words, that may be true for the population as a whole, but the wealthy may do better in terms of finances because they are the ones who pay proportionately more taxes.

They would prefer to be accessing and paying for higher quality care. Who controls the media? Well, I would argue the people with money control the media. When I give these talks, I start off saying, “You got it wrong! You are all completely wrong with regards to healthcare spending. How come?”

I ask people to speculate. Somebody comes up with all sorts of interesting answers. Somebody eventually comes up with the answer I suggested to you. I think it has to do with what is best for Canadians on average is not necessarily best for affluent Canadians who control the media.

Jacobsen: Also, taking a generational and emotional perspective, you have trained generations of leaders in the field. Being involved in some of Academia, I know some of how it works.

You know people as friends either deceased, unfortunately, or are still some of the leaders in the field who themselves have trained people who have become leaders themselves. It is a big tree of people who know one another.

So, you have a much greater sense or better sensibility of the feelings of the doctors when they likely also realize, discuss, and debate the misinformation that is out and the source that you just pointed to.

What are those feelings?

Guyatt: First of all, my point once again. I can go before just about any medical audience, including an academic audience, and only a small proportion will get it right about what is happening with regards to healthcare funding.

Even the most educated in the profession, we are insular. We tend not to take a broader view of all sorts of things. Second, I gave the talk where I go through all of this stuff. I was invited to give the talk to the ophthalmologists in Toronto.

Who are generally known as a conservative group of people, they are among the highest billers, but smart people. They listen to the facts. The other thing I end off with. I go through the public healthcare being the winner in health outcomes, cost containment, and equity. The only one it is a loser in is autonomy.

I say, “With this balance sheet, why is there still a debate?” One of the things that was pointed out was that these guys do the LASIK surgery. It is private and so on. They are aware that within a privately funded system their incomes will be better.

These guys have *big* incomes. But the other thing that is going on in terms of societal perspective for individual rich people, it differs from the societal perspective for the rest of us. The story differs for healthcare providers, especially clinicians.

So, the winners and losers are different if you take a broad societal perspective or if you take particular groups within society.

Jacobsen: There are responses that aren’t very strong in my perspective, but that can be made in response. People will say, “These are class differences of interest. That is a liberal hype or conspiracy theory.” Something like this.

What would be an appropriate response to that?

Guyatt: Do you think the interests of rich people differ from the interests of poor people?

Jacobsen: [Laughing] Yes.

Guyatt: Well, there's your answer.

References

Bennett, K. (2014, October 31). New hospital funding model 'a shot in the dark,' McMaster study says. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/new-hospital-funding-model-a-shot-in-the-dark-mcmaster-study-says-1.2817321>.

Blackwell, T. (2015, February 1). World Health Organization's advice based on weak evidence, Canadian-led study says. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/health/world-health-organizations-advice-extremely-untrustworthy-and-not-evidence-based-study>.

Branswell, H. (2014, January 30). You should be avoiding these products on drugstore shelves. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/health/you-should-be-avoiding-these-products-on-drug-store-shelves/article16606013/?page=all>.

Canadian News Wire. (2015, October 8). The Canadian Medical Hall of Fame announces 2016 inductees. Retrieved from <http://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/the-canadian-medical-hall-of-fame-announces-2016-inductees-531287111.html>.

Cassar, V. & Bezzina, F. (2015, March 25). The evidence is clear. Retrieved from <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20150325/life-features/The-evidence-is-clear.561338>.

Clarity Research. (2016). Clinical Advances Through Research and Information Translation. Retrieved from <http://www.clarityresearch.ca/gordon-guyatt/>.

Craggs, S. (2015, July 21). We can actually win this one, Tom Mulcair tells Hamilton, crowd. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/we-can-actually-win-this-one-tom-mulcair-tells-hamilton-crowd-1.3162688>.

Escott, S. (2013, December 2). Mac professor named top health researcher. Retrieved from <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/4249292-mac-professor-named-top-health-researcher/>.

Feise, R. & Cooperstein, R. (2014, February 1). Putting the Patient First. Retrieved from <http://www.dynamicchiropractic.com/mpacms/dc/article.php?id=56855>.

Frketich, J. (2016, July 8). 63 McMaster University investigators say health research funding is flawed. Retrieved from <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/6759872-63-mcmaster-university-investigators-say-health-research-funding-is-flawed/>.

Helsingin yliopisto. (2017, March 23). Clot or bleeding? Anticoagulants walk the line between two risks. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/03/170323083909.htm>.

Hopper, T. (2012, August 24). You're pregnant, now sign this petition: Group slams Ontario doctors' 'coercive' tactics to fight cutbacks. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/youre-pregnant-now-sign-this-petition-group-criticizes-doctors-who-encourage-patients-to-sign-anti-cutbacks-letter>.

Kerr, T. (2011, May 30). Thomas Kerr: Insite has science on its side. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/thomas-kerr-vancouvers-insite-clinic-has-been-a-resounding-success>.

Kirkey, S. (2015, October 29). WHO gets it wrong again: As with SARS and H1N1, its processed-meat edict went too far. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/health/is-whos-smackdown-of-processed-meat-a-considerable-overcall-or-just-informing-the-public-of-health-risks>.

Kolata, G. (2016, August 3). Why 'Useless' Surgery Is Still Popular. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/04/upshot/the-right-to-know-that-an-operation-is-next-to-useless.html?_r=0.

Maxmen, A. (2011, July 6). Nutrition advice: The vitamin D-lemma. Retrieved from <http://www.nature.com/news/2011/110706/full/475023a.html>.

McKee, M. (2014, October 2). The Power of Single-Person Medical Experiments. Retrieved from <http://discovermagazine.com/2014/nov/17-singled-out>.

McMaster University. (2016). Gordon Guyatt. Retrieved from http://fhs.mcmaster.ca/ceb/faculty_member_guyatt.htm.

Neale, T. (2009, December 12). Doctor's Orders: Practicing Evidence-Based Medicine Is a Challenge. Retrieved from <http://www.medpagetoday.com/practicemanagement/practicemanagement/17486>.

Nolan, D. (2011, December 31). Mac's Dr. Guyatt to enter Order of Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/2227923-mac-s-dr-guyatt-to-enter-order-of-canada/>.

O'Dowd, A. (2016, July 21). Exercise could be as effective as surgery for knee damage. Retrieved from <https://www.onmedica.com/newsArticle.aspx?id=e13a0a94-5e96-43b9-86b7-7de237630beb>.

Palmer, K. & Guyatt, G. (2014, December 16). New funding model a leap of faith for Canadian hospitals. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/why-new-funding-model-a-leap-of-faith-for-canadian-hospitals/article22100796/>.

Park, A. (2012, February 7). No Clots in Coach? Debunking 'Economy Class Syndrome'. Retrieved from <http://healthland.time.com/2012/02/07/no-clots-in-coach-debunking-economy-class-syndrome/>.

Picard, A. (2015, May 25). David Sackett: The father of evidence-based medicine. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/health/david-sackett-the-father-of-evidence-based-medicine/article24607930/>.

Priest, L. (2012, June 17). What you should know about doctors and self-referral fees. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/ask-a-health-expert/what-you-should-know-about-doctors-and-self-referral-fees/article4267688/>.

Rege, A. (2015, August 5). Why medically unnecessary surgeries still happen. Retrieved from <http://www.beckershospitalreview.com/population-health/why-medically-unnecessary-surgeries-still-happen.html>.

Science Daily. (2016, October 26). Ultrasound after tibial fracture surgery does not speed up healing or improve function. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/10/161026141643.htm>.

Spears, T. (2016, July 7). Agriculture Canada challenged WHO's cancer warnings on meat: newly-released documents. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/agriculture-canada-challenged-whos-cancer-warnings-on-meat-according-to-newly-released-documents>.

Tomsic, M. (2015, February 10). Dying. It's Tough To Discuss, But Doesn't Have To Be. Retrieved from <http://wfae.org/post/dying-its-tough-discuss-doesnt-have-be>.

Webometrics. (2010). 1040 Highly Cited Researchers (h>100) according to their Google Scholar Citations public profiles. Retrieved from <http://www.webometrics.info/en/node/58>.

In Conversation with Professor Colleen MacQuarrie, Ph.D. on Abortion Rights Activism

February 23, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Professor Colleen MacQuarrie, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Prince Edward Island. Also, she is a media contact for the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. Here we talk about abortion rights activism.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have worked in abortion rights activism as well as a researcher in Canada. So, I wanted to get a perspective historically as well as presently into what is happening and what happened regarding abortion in Canada.

Professor Colleen MacQuarrie: With regards to abortion research in Canada, there are a number of different answers to that question depending on the regional focus. When you look across Canada, there is patchy access to abortion.

So, abortion research could be focusing on the barriers and the policy changes needed to address those barriers. In my own research, in 2010, I understood the local context. I think that is one of the most important pieces when you are working from a social justice process.

You need to know the local context because it is a matter of head and heart, or head, heart, and hands. Unpacking that academically, that means that there may be a certain evidence base. There may be a certain policy environment, but often the link between that would be community attitudes, standards, ideas, and notions.

Which would then be influenced by a whole interlocking set of assumptions in this case with women, pre-formed understandings of what women will do, enforced motherhood, notions of morality that concern governing women's bodies and women's bodily autonomy; within the context of PEI, I that context well; being immersed here as a feminist activist.

I am 52 years old now. I have been involved with feminist organizations in this place for little more than 35 years or so. I understood the complexity of the culture around abortion and stigma and the history of how we lost abortion access in the 80s.

I started from the networks here in the local community and pooled together the research advisory group from the existing network of abortion activists. I also had achieved tenure at my university; I was using the dual-privileges of tenure and academic freedom to create a politically engaged research project.

I knew without tenure academic freedom was meaningless. I had to wait. In hindsight, that was really smart. The University of PEI, universities in this region have a long religious root that did attempt to trip me when I was launching the research by putting pressure on the university administration to stop the research.

What we had were a series of longstanding pleas from feminist organizations such as the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, the Women's Network, Canadian Abortion Rights Access League – which had been defunct by the time I started – the PEI Rape Crisis Centre, PEI Transition House, and so on.

You had these organizations pleading for abortion access. I came across the idea that a liberation psychology project would probably be the right approach to do research on this project. I used community collaborative action research approaches.

I constructed a research advisory group. Together, with the community, I started to devise a project that would look at ultimately framing research as a way forward for a policy change – a phenomenological approach to change PEI's abortion policies.

I framed it discursively within health and discursively within the experience of people's health. I was moving decidedly away from any notions of whether abortion is good or bad. Who the hell cares? That is not what we are asking here.

“Here we are, this is ground zero. What is it like being a woman over the last 20 years and needing an abortion?” The results were astounding. There was a diversity – in terms of age, SES, professionalism – there was a lot of diversity on the research team. We were cutting across a number of different sectors. Fascinatingly, when people came forward – at first, there was an expectation of reluctance of coming forward.

We launched in 2011. Within 3 days, we had more than 600 hits to the call for participants from more than 11 countries around the world. The tinder had been sitting there. The match was struck. It was an *amazing, amazing* response.

People wanted to talk because they hadn't been able to tell their story. It was because we asked to have the stories told to change policy, not because they hadn't told them in a decade or two. Fast forward, within research as you know, if you have overwhelming evidence in the early preliminary analyses, that shows harms, you have a duty to report early findings.

By the end of 2012, we had sufficient evidence of substantial harms that were happening to women and women's health, and substantial lapses in the medical system when women were presenting to emergency rooms at the hospital for support for abortions that had gone wrong.

There was almost every woman who came forward that talked about self-harm. One of the first thoughts, if you are a woman in PEI during those decades, is “what am I going to do?” Poor and more marginalized women resort to more dire acts to try to bring back their periods.

Women who were poorer, or in dire circumstances – were more likely to try poisons or other self harm. Anything to try to ingest something to do enough harm to the body to bring about an end to the pregnancy, but *not to die*.

Even women that you would think that would have lots of access to resources, 30-year-old women who were university educated and were searching on the internet: “How can I get an abortion if I live in PEI?” But they couldn't. Women were faced with being pregnant and trying to finish school and/or already parenting a child or children they were struggling to care for.

A woman confided she imagined walking out into traffic to cause just enough harm to her body to bring about an abortion. These kinds of stories were not uncommon. I'm sorry this is so distressing.

Jacobsen: No, no, it's okay.

MacQuarrie: Also, we started to look into the government's own records. We found -through a Freedom of Information Act; there were illegal abortions that were being documented by the system when women were presenting for help at physician offices and the hospital.

In two cases, suspicious deaths, there are so many wrinkles here because the coroner at the time was an ardent anti-abortion person. So, when I had a conversation with him about the two cases where a toxicologist was brought in and where the RCMP were called in, he quickly dismissed.

He said, “Oh no, it wasn’t because they were attempting an abortion.” But there were documented cases in the province’s own records going back to 1996. There were documented incidents of illegal abortions where renal failure had happened, where intense medical care was ongoing.

There was evidence within the provincial billing system as well as evidence from our own study. Also, some pretty dire things happening at the time of the study. So, in the months leading up to when we released our preliminary findings, we were finding fresh accounts from women who had just been at the emergency room and had not been treated with care for their abortion that was going wrong.

It was a medical abortion in those cases. We presented those cases in 2013- the preliminary results calling for action from the health system, specifically better supports from women who were sourcing their own medical abortions.

At that time, they were using a cocktail of off label prescription drugs – mifepristone and misoprostol, which was before RU-486 was approved by Health Canada in, I guess, 2016 in the Fall.

Unfortunately, at every point along the way from the release of findings trying to use the evidence to show the health system the harms that were befalling us, there was a callous indifference from our government leaders.

You can look it up yourself from the CBC news reports at the time – that they’d say, “Not everybody agrees with abortion, so we’re not going to have them here.”

It is a fascinating story of how entrenched the anti-abortion discourse was here because somehow or other politicians could cavalierly say, “Sure, some women are getting hurt. But, my God, some people don’t want to have abortion here,” as if that was a good enough compromise.

Jacobsen: This brings up an associated question, which is like a premise underneath the conversation so far. It has two parts. On the one side, what seems like the fair representation of the anti-abortion argument as well as the source of it, e.g. social, finance, and moral concerns?

How did that become that dominant at that time – where we are in the discussion so far?

MacQuarrie: The premise or the dominant discourse in PEI at the time that was in the media. That the politicians were spouting was “it is a special place. It is a life sanctuary. This is not a place where abortions happen.”

There was almost as if you think about a jewel in an anti-abortion crown – PEI is one. The notion or idea of life sanctuary was part of the marketing image of the organizations like the PEI Right to Life organization.

The dominant discourse is that abortion is murder. That abortion is also abetting a crime, is a murder. That it is not a choice. It is a baby. That, basically, life/birth begins at conception and, therefore, it is a human being and not a choice.

Those were the dominant discourses circulating. How did it become so prevalent? That is a very good question. I think it is partly understood by looking at bounded geographical spaces such as islands and looking at the notions of separateness and being apart.

It is connected to the conflation of religiosity. PEI has, I think, 97% of the population identifying with either the Roman Catholic or the Protestant religions. Performance in religion is a part of the fabric of how people do things in PEI.

People who may not be particularly religious might still want to be religiously affiliated because it is about performance and fitting in. PEI is the most densely populated province in Canada. It is a small province, 140,000 people.

There is a sense everybody knows your business. Your actions reflect on your family. Also, the fact that PEI is in itself, the entire province, is a diocese of the Catholic Church. The bishop here has been involved from the early days in decreeing abortion a sin.

So, there has been a very strong emphasis on obeying God as part of keeping abortion away from here. There is that. That has been happening. How did it become so entrenched in systems of government?

For a while in PEI, you had to run a Catholic and Protestant in every riding in order to get elected. Religion and commitment to religion were entwined within the political landscape. What should be secular, it never really was secular.

If you look across time, there has been this conflation of church and state in the legislation. Historically, in the early 80s, when the right to life associations across North America were amping up the eradication of abortion access by targeting hospital and therapeutic abortion committees.

That fight came to PEI when first the Catholic hospital. The medical system or the health system was also divided. The education and the medical and the political systems were all aligned with faith organizations.

So, the Catholic and the protestant hospital were amalgamated in the early 80s to create one large non-secular hospital.

Jacobsen: Even for that other 3%, whatever the terms for those alternative faiths or non-faiths, do they orient themselves within the same positions of the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Church in PEI?

MacQuarrie: The research does not speak to that because the demographic is so tiny. I can theorize about that.

Jacobsen: Please do.

MacQuarrie: I do not think that you would rock the boat. There are so many anti-immigrant and xenophobic tendencies. There is so much xenophobia here. That you just wouldn't rock the boat on that.

So, when the hospital was being merged, there was an effort to eradicate abortion access in the newly merged hospital. That was a long and rancorous public battle that ended up with having the therapeutic abortion committee being taken out of the hospital.

That win taught the anti-abortion movement here how to launch a successful campaign. Then the effort turned to the last abortion committee in the province, Prince County Hospital. That meeting to eradicate abortion access is still living in the memories of the women – the 4 or 5 women who spoke out for abortion rights. They remember that as a very hostile and terrifying time.

Jacobsen: I reflect on Human Rights Watch saying, “Equitable access to safe abortion services is first and foremost a human right.”

So, individuals or organizations – who are often religious – that hold a pro-life position that would deny equitable and safe access to abortion amount to anti-human rights positions, which is troubling to start.

MacQuarrie: Right. They do not see an individual. The PEI response to the Morgentaler ruling was basically that the rest of Canada may learn from PEI which they bragged about in 1988 on March 30th – the Morgentaler Ruling came down January 28th in 1988 – effectively opening the door to abortion access as a constitutional issue. The PEI Legislature on March 30th passed its own Resolution 17 declaring ours an anti-abortion or an anti-choice province. Originally, Resolution 17 said that even the life of the mother, which harkens back to the way things were in Ireland, would not warrant an abortion.

An amendment said that if a mother’s life was in danger then an abortion would be permissible, but all other circumstances. PEI did declare itself anti-abortion based on the ruling of the constitution. That is what we took them to court on and won based on the Morgentaler Ruling.

We needed years of evidence and 105 points of law before we could actually get the province into court. We had to take them to court to acknowledge that abortion services should be provided in the province. Fascinatingly, once the province decided not to fight us on the case which we launched on January 5th, 2017, they went above and beyond.

They said that we will provide a whole set of health services for women and others including sexual and reproductive health services including transgender health. Abortion is just the tip of the iceberg quite frankly when we are talking about gender autonomy rights here. As alluded to before we started taping, PEI has a high rate of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships. But I suspect if you look at child abuse rates that you might see high rates also, but it is so horribly underreported. So violence and control are major political issues here.

So the root of violence and control here is partly why PEI was able to have such a tradition of politicians just run as a member of a faith organization for a political party and be elected and then stand in the house and to voice to the entire house their anti-woman stance. Resolution 17 – it was unanimous and all-party agreement that PEI was an anti-abortion province. The Minister of Education during that time period sanctioned the busing of every single grade 7 student to the University of PEI for a mass screening of *The Silent Scream*; A lecture about the sanctity of life and the handing out of little feet pins to show the little feet of fetuses and the request that all children continue to wear those to hold up the sanctity of life, and that they would let other people know what they had seen there including their parents.

Of course, at the time, there were a number of mothers active in the choice campaign in trying to hold onto abortion. They felt they had to withdraw from the activism for abortion because they feared retribution for their children at school in bullying.

So, there was a cultural impingement upon advocacy and voice. It really is an elegant example of how oppression operates and sustains itself and continues to create silence. When we launched the campaign in 2010 to have a research project, that would examine and interrogate those taken-for-granted notions that abortion is murder and instead frame it as a women's health issue and instead collect stories of that, it was very threatening to the status quo that had just assumed that we would never have abortion here.

Jacobsen: If you focus on religion in this instance, the religious organizations such as the Catholic Church. They seem to have a strong position, in their terminology, of pro-life regarding abortion and women's reproductive health rights.

There are other groups, even within the Abrahamic traditions and the Christian traditions in particular, who have a more liberal orientation such as the United Church of Canada, which, as you know, was the first, I think, to allow women ministers.

MacQuarrie: Also gay.

Jacobsen: Also gay... on that view, it can be seen as the progressive movement within the Christian community in the country. What the United Church of Canada allows, as it is the edge of Christian culture, broadly speaking, that is what Christian culture would allow. What are sects of Christianity friendly to women's health issues in the sense that they are more or less pro-choice?

MacQuarrie: Rightly, you name the United Church, but also we have to think of diversity and complexity within Catholicism. We brought in – I was a baby feminist at the time...

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

MacQuarrie: Catholics for Choice, we had a nun come in and speak about the importance of women's health. We were working with the disparate voices that were willing to come forward. I mean, the cavalier attitude of the leadership of the church went so far as to simply take out pages in the newspaper that just simply printed every church members' name as standing with the church.

There were many citizens who never agreed to have their name published in that way. The Diocese wanted to make it appear as if it was a solid block of resistance to the community standards violated and sustained regarding abortion.

Status of Women did some polling that showed that many people thought that abortion should be restricted, but there was about 60% of the population that thought in some circumstances it should be allowed.

It was only the leadership, the politicians and the church leaders, who portrayed it as this monolithic impasse. Unfortunately, they wielded a lot of power in all different kinds of ways. Also, when we get back to the geographic and bounded nature of this as well, there is a sense that everyone knows your business.

You may personally feel very confident and proud. They didn't want to jeopardize their family, their kids, their husband, their business; they didn't want to be ostracized. An ostracization is a tool and a technique of control. That works in small places like this.

So, I think that the reasons are multifaceted and interconnected and form this fascinating case study of what does it take to undo these kinds of cultural and community suppression. Quite frankly, it takes small and dedicated groups working away to show evidence.

But even when we showed evidence, it took a legal system that could respond. So, if we hadn't had the macrostructure of Canadian jurisdiction, where federal criminal law applied and the Morgentaler Ruling supporting our constitutional rights, if we didn't have the structure of the Canada Health Act and the way the provinces must respond to that, we would have to use a different set of strategies. The federal/provincial relationships actually allowed the province to sidestep the constitution with regard to health care, but not when we were able to get enough resources and support to challenge that. It has always been unconstitutional for us not to have an abortion here but it took years for us to challenge the province and take it to the court system. If we had taken the province to court prior to our collaborative community engagement, the province might have conceded the court case but might not have offered up the abortion services in the manner they did.

What made the difference was the community mobilization along with this larger macrostructure as well as a chronosystem, where, perhaps, in Canada at that time, it was seen to be a shifting of what happened to politicians when they supported abortion.

In the neighboring province of New Brunswick, a liberal premier had just been elected who had proclaimed himself pro-choice. I think there is a whole constellation of factors that fed into how things were able to shift in 2017.

Jacobsen: Because it is 2017.

MacQuarrie: [Laughing] I said it first by the way. *VICE* interviewed me about the research we were doing. I talked about the callous indifference of the politician and trying to compromise women's health against someone's view that abortion was immoral. I said, "It is 2015, time for that to end."

It took another while. There have always been resisters. There's always pockets of resistance no matter where you look.

Jacobsen: I know a guy named Paul Krassner who published *The Realist* for decades. He did interviews with Lenny Bruce. Same crowd as Mort Sahl. He ran an underground abortion referral service when it was illegal.

MacQuarrie: We were helping women to go to the mainland to get an abortion for a long time. There was resistance in terms of helping women to leave. A resistance in the sense that we are going to make it fair that you can have an abortion.

But ultimately, I think that that form of support is a bit like charity. It doesn't shift the system. It doesn't challenge the system. Ultimately, what you need to be doing is exposing that vile underbelly, the system is meeting its needs by harming the most vulnerable.

I think that if you are constantly doing charity work then you miss the opportunity to challenge the status quo. You have to do both. You can't walk away from somebody who is in dire need and say, "Yes, I am going to let you drown while I walk upstream and see who is throwing people in." You have to do both. You have to do resistance during all times oppression.

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

Interview with Catherine Dunphy – Author & Former Executive Director, The Clergy Project

Posted on February 24, 2018 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

By Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Catherine Dunphy is an Author, Operations Manager for Rational Doubt, and the Former Executive Director for The Clergy Project. Dunphy wrote From Apostle to Apostate: The Story of the Clergy Project. Here we talk about The Clergy Project and Losing Our Religion, and her background.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: To begin to set some framework, so people know where you're coming from, what was personal and family background in brief – geography, culture, language, and religious affiliation if any?

Catherine Dunphy: Sure, okay, so religious affiliation: Roman Catholic. My whole family was Roman Catholics. I go into detail into in my book. In The Clergy Project, I tell my story.

I was raised in a Catholic home. We went to mass all the time. So, I was raised in a religious environment. I did an undergraduate in theology and an M.Div. I used to work for the Archdiocese of Halifax.

I worked for non-profit groups that were an arm's length away from the Church but were affiliated via ministry. So, that's a brief summary of my background. I was training to be a chaplain in the secondary school board here in Ontario, but then I had my crisis of faith in seminary.

Jacobsen: It's an interesting place to have it.

Dunphy: Yes, superficially, this is not the place to have a crisis of faith, but I would say it is the place to have a crisis of faith. I say that, specifically, because of the vocal scholarship. When you first start studying Biblical scholarship, you take the Bible and look at it – like you would any other book.

You tease apart aspects of it. You look at the origins of the text and what scholars tell you about how it was originally written, and then compiled and hammered together: as if the greatest MacGyver story ever told.

Being exposed to that, I didn't have a challenge with it. My cognitive dissonance was strong at the time. I thought it was cool and interesting, but it didn't plague me the way that it plagued other students at the seminary.

It bothered them to hear about the origins of the Bible. To think, it wasn't issued by God in one fell swoop. It was piecemealed together.

Jacobsen: I talked to an Edmonton school board trustee who stepped down from the role, Patricia Grell, who has been in the national news for Canada. When I was interviewing her, she did mention something similar, when she was studying her own M.Div.

She had a major – I guess you could call it a – 'crisis of faith,' which is past the time she got her M.Div. However, she reflected on it and noted that the source was probably back to when she got her M.Div., in a similar manner you're describing.

Looking at the text, looking at the history, and then doing a proper critical analysis of it, I think that's interesting that comes up as a point of critical inquiry about it and further doubt.

Dunphy: Yes, that's a consistent theme among The Clergy Project members. Reviewing the Bible, reading biblical scholarship, you encounter it. For example, from an Evangelical background, from a denomination that didn't require an M.Div., it was self-recovery.

They would review some of the biblical criticism scholarship that was available. They would read and be shocked by it. There's this huge disconnect between what's taught in seminary and what's preached from the pulpit every Sunday.

The reality is that most parishioners probably wouldn't be able to take the whole of it. The virgin birth is a myth. There was no Adam and Eve. Even the stuff that is obvious once you're aware of it, like two creation stories in Genesis, most people think, "There are two creation stories in Genesis?" Yes, there are.

There's two. The reason there are two is because they were written by two different Jewish groups. So, this comes as a huge surprise to theology students. Then it would be a huge, upsetting surprise to parishioners in churches too.

They would be devastated by these realities.

Jacobsen: I want to shift the conversation more to the documentary film, *Losing our Religion*, if I may. But within the context of the background provided by you. So, what is the content and purpose of *Losing our Religion*?

Dunphy: The story is about members of The Clergy Project. Some who left religious life many years ago like myself. Others who are still caught in the pulpit. The documentary takes the time to look at the founders of The Clergy Project.

Some of the original members of The Clergy Project and a few newer members who either were in the process of leaving their Churches, or their congregations, or some that are staying.

So, the whole purpose of the film, based on Leslie Mair the documentary film maker, her whole purpose, is to be able to tell this story because it's unique. But also because she thought it would give hope to people that are struggling.

That is struggling with their faith to realize ministers and clergy people struggle too. Sometimes, the conclusions that they come to are not as what you would expect. Because in seminary, for example, the idea of doubt is something that comes up, but it's always like, "Go back to prayer. Reinvest in your prayer life. Double down on your Hail Marys."

Something in order to reinvigorate your faith process. So, it's the goal of the documentary to give a voice to these voiceless people. I don't think most individuals walking down the street would think that their clergy person could be an atheist, but they could be.

It's definitely a possibility, maybe even likely depending on the denomination. Some background can help here. The membership of The Clergy Project. My book goes into this. I analyzed the content from the website, and took it apart and broke it down according to denomination, location, gender, and so on

However, a good percentage of The Clergy Project members – both of the current clergy and former clergy – are Evangelicals. So, they are Biblical literalists, who are fleeing their churches. That is not what you would expect.

Even that surprised me, because you would think with the literal religious people, it would be an easier ride out of religion. They would have deconstructed and baby proofed the faith. You softened all the sharp edges.

You put the electrical plugs in the outlets to protect you from getting shocked. You've taken away all the nasty, cranky bits of it, and then turned it into this hippy-dippy, "Jesus loves you," stuff.

Jacobsen: You use the term "fleeing" from their community.

Dunphy: Yes.

Jacobsen: You also mentioned "baby proofing" some things, in other words, softening of the sharp edges of doubt, particularly the difficult ones.

That makes me think a bit in reflection about the defence mechanism, either in community from a pastor, a preacher, or a priest to an individual, lay member in the pews, saying, "Go to your bible, pray more, do not doubt, it's the Devil's work," and so on.

Are the defence mechanisms relatively pervasive based on your own research and knowledge on this?

Dunphy: Religion is like a Jesus meme-making machine. Christianity is anyway. It's like, "What's your response to the fact that bad things happen?" That's soul building if you're a Catholic. That's the thing you would hear.

Something bad happened? Jesus is testing you. There are definitely go to responses that are a cop out. Bad things happen because they do. It's God testing you or God gave you this burden because he knew you could bear it.

So, there are definitely their calling cards. They're very much a cliché. I think that most of, not The Clergy Project people and even the active ones but, the parishioners and everyone, in general, has this fatigue about these ridiculous nothing sayings.

The "Let's pray for New York because of the terrorist attack" or Paris when it happened. But prayer doesn't accomplish much other than to say, "I'm thinking about you guys." It is like a get out of jail free card.

I did something. I said I would pray and I did. You can't prove otherwise. It's not my fault if God doesn't listen. Maybe, he listened, but you missed his cue. There's always a way to shuffle the responsibility for God's failing to respond to a crisis. We weren't deserving.

If you're Evangelical, it's God knows you can do this and bear this. That's why he's given it to you if you're a Catholic. It's, "Life sucks sometimes if you're Jewish." A different type of religious response would have its own monotonous plotting.

I would call it a dance more than I would call it pastoring or taking care of someone. It's like, "You stepped there. So, I'm going to move there." It's completely mindless actually in my opinion.

Jacobsen: In a way, does this make the ordinary follower, a decent citizen who wants to do the right thing, not only for their country and their fellow person, but also wants to be an upstanding individual within their church, their synagogue, their temple, and so on, the best representative for the failings of what they would term their God?

In other words, they're filling in the gaps and making excuses?

Dunphy: It's hard. I don't want to burden people with the guilt of perpetuating an ideology, so that they can have a need met. But that's what they're doing. They're perpetuating an ideology whether it be Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, or Islam because they're getting something from it.

There's a cost-benefit ratio. They're having a need met or trying to get a need met. They're in the process of actually trying to get that need met. They're utilizing this religious ideology in order to accomplish it.

I think part of me is like, "You know what? Wake up! Go get some therapy and stop leaning on this crutch that you're using to direct the ebb and flow of your life because, maybe it's not helping you make the best choices."

But it's hard to have that conversation with people because they have free will. They are individuals. As an individual, I need to respect the autonomy of another individual because I want my autonomy to be respected. So, it's a precarious balance. The only time I would need to intercede is when a particular ideology tries to eclipse the commonality, the secular commonalities in Canada, the US, or Europe. Or even what's happened in Turkey, where you used to have secular Turkey, it is being morphed into an Islamic state.

I think it's a question everybody needs to be asking themselves because we're seeing things like that unfold. On the microcosm, you think about individual relationships within families. However, if you look at what's happening on the macro level, you look at what's happening in Turkey or with Indonesia as with the Islamization of Indonesia.

Even in America is now, where now you equate religious people with Evangelicals specifically being more patriotic, this God-patriotism tool is used as a control mechanism. It's fascism. So, it's hard not to want to intercede when you see it happening on the macro level.

You have to intercede. You have to speak out. When you're talking about one-on-one, for my instance, my mother is still a religious practicing Catholic. We didn't speak for a number of years because I left the Church. However, we found a place, where we can be nice to each other for the sake of my son. Trying to tease apart, "Where's the commonality?" That work is important on an individual level as much as the work to make sure that there are no transgressions from religious ideologies to compromise rights.

Jacobsen: Some feel concern over recent work done by Will Gervais, Ara Norenzayan, and others. But there's a recent publication, I think in August (2017), it was about "global evidence of extreme intuitive moral prejudice against atheists." That was by Gervais and others. It was looking at the potential extended co-operative networks provided by religion while at the same time creating the possibility for the strong intergroup conflict and tacit prejudice against nonbelievers. So, when you speak of rights, whether reproductive rights for women or human rights generally, I think in North America in particular. It comes up, repeatedly.

Dunphy: The Nones. Maybe, I'm more optimistic about this because I know that the Nones are a growing trend. Yes, because someone is not religiously affiliated, it doesn't mean that they don't believe in woo. They could still believe in reading minds, horoscopes, séances, and so on. There are all sorts of woo. I'm not going to police everybody's particular brand of crazy. It's not as dangerous. That type of crazy is not as dangerous as the crazy American Fascist Christian stuff ongoing. Where you have people creating these crazy disturbing images of Jesus leaning over Donald Trump as he signs these documents in the White House, that is creepy beyond belief.

So, I understand the concern with atheists. The fact that we're so stigmatized. However, I am hopeful because the Nones are growing faster than any other religious group. A study is showing that there's an increase in the non-religious.

Most non-religious people don't give a shit if someone is an atheist or not. They are like, "Okay, whatever." It's a non-issue for many, many non-religious people. It's only the deeply entrenched religious Right or fundamentalist religions that have an issue with atheism. Yes, right now, they're the majority worldwide, but I don't think that is going to be forever. Maybe, I'm being overly optimistic, but I do think that in my lifetime: atheism has grown. In my son's lifetime, it will grow more.

My hope is religion will slowly continue to erode more and more. Churches are already empty. They're already dying. They're in the process of decaying and losing their relevancy. I think, "Yes, it's not nice. It's not a good thing, but you have to also look at in the context of eons, generations upon generations, where apostasy was treated in Europe the way that apostasy is currently treated in Saudi Arabia."

So, it's not that comforting when someone like my friend Jerry Dewitt loses his job because someone he knows discovers he's an atheist. Because he has a picture on his Facebook page standing next to Richard Dawkins.

However, we need to be optimistic. We need to be proactive. If that means talking about it, filling up the internet with atheist content, then let's do that. If that means Sunday assemblies and Houston Oasis, then let's do that. It's a problem. But there are people out there that are chipping away at it.

Jacobsen: That leads me to an opposing question to balance the budget – so to speak. I do mean this as also a moderate concern within the community. So, for the formal non-religious or the formerly religious, within that community, what social trends and conversational strategies with the religious or the public at large with media, concern you? In other words, counter-productive tactics to the goals of the more active members of the community.

Dunphy: I don't think that sitting around or arguing with Christians online worked. I think that's a waste of time and energy. I'm saying this as someone who has engaged with Catholics about Mary and abortion.

I'm like, "No, you're not going to say that because you think that's so. Mary is not a feminist. I'm sorry. She is a Bronze Age Barbie. No good for women. Let's stop right there." So, you can have arguments on the internet with theists, but they're not going to go anywhere. They're only going to be further entrenched. You'll be further entrenched. My thing is this: I think Ecumenicalism is a tool that non-believers can use to pony on up to the table for interfaith dialogue.

You're probably scratching your head going, "Why should we have interfaith dialogue?" Because that conversation is going on without us. And it shouldn't. We need our voices at that table. We need to volunteer.

You're at a university. Here's a suggestion for universities: for a period of time, I was the humanist chaplain at the University of Toronto or one of the humanist chaplains at the University of Toronto. We worked out of the multi-faith center at U of T. We had to get along and be nicey-nicey. We were working collaboratively to support the students on campus. So, that's one thing. Be engaged wherever the multifaith center is and have a voice at that table.

Akin to this is the social justice work, because, why should the Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Baha'i, and whoever else, have an opportunity to work as a community for the betterment of society at large?

Why aren't we doing that? I know that there are different groups that do that. I think about Responsible Charity, out of India, and then there's the Foundation Beyond Belief. But why isn't there a connected university social justice system? That helps students who are nonbelievers, who are humanists and have a community. Not only for the community, but also for doing good for the sake of doing good. That will go a long way to help improve the reputation.

Even though, we don't need our reputation improved, mostly, for atheists and nonbelievers. Because we care about the planet too. We care about other people too. We recognize how valuable the one life is that we have to live. That it's important to do what you can to improve your wellbeing and the wellbeing of the people around you. So, I think that's the missing component right now. That is, there's no goal within the atheist community. Right now, it's clamouring to be heard. Maybe, we can be heard if we're doing something while we're being heard. Then we're changing minds and changing hearts.

I had that pull from the whole context of the question, but it works because we're doing good because we want to because we want to make things better. So, I would challenge atheists out there to volunteer at a soup kitchen, to go volunteer at their kid's school, to spend time at a nursing home, to engage with refugees, or people in a mental health crisis, or whatever it's going to take to help eradicate that idea that we're immoral.

But also it would help us too. I think that's the one thing that we're missing. We go to these big conferences. We see our rock stars, our movement. That's awesome. But what's our takeaway? How are we taking that information and going back into our communities and making our communities better? For us, but for everyone else too.

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

Dunphy: Thank you.

The Eventual Questions for Faith with Pete

February 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Pete is a former member of the Jehovah's Witnesses. As with many transitioning through the difficult questions and moments of life from leaving a worldview, there come difficulties in building a new life and in processing the regrets and thoughts of lost time, which seem substantiated if you read the stories. Those leaving religions are growing communities and part of understanding is telling the stories. Here Pete was kind enough to share some of his story.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you grow with religion in early development?

Pete: In my formative years, I don't remember being unhappy, but then again my dad was very new to the religion. In my opinion, he wasn't following the rules to the letter. Being a Jehovah's witness child, I never celebrated birthdays, Christmases, or Easter, so I never knew what I was missing out on.

I was quite keen under the age of 10 to make my dad proud. I was active in Bible studies, talks, and the ministry. Some of my earliest memories are knocking on people's door offering them a *Watchtower* and *Awake!*.

Jacobsen: What seem like some of the impactful moments in that early development, certain "aha" moments?

Pete: Lol. My whole childhood was based on fear.... fear of God, fear of the authorities, fear of my parents, fear of death.... you name it; we were fearful. I remember from a young age going to our kingdom hall and many of the topics were highly inappropriate for young children... sex and masturbation being a regular discussion and not really for kids under the age of 10, especially being sat next to your parents.

Jacobsen: How does someone begin to question their faith? Also, what emotions arose for you, as you felt the intellectual distance from the faith of youth?

Pete: I'm in my mid-thirties now. I never questioned my faith until the last couple of years. I have spent over a decade in fear that if I didn't return to the religion, then I would die at Armageddon. I think since being in a loving relationship my partner has pointed out that my relationship with my dad is damaging.

I have always had a distant relationship with my father who is an elder of a JW congregation. He is expected to be exemplary in his actions and must adhere to the rules of the governing body in New York.

I've suffered terribly over the past few years with OCD, which has progressively gotten worse and started to affect my health. I have gone down the path of unraveling the years of childhood indoctrination and looked at trying to make my own decisions as to whether religion, in general, is factual and can we have faith in something even when there are stacks of evidence disproving it.

I think that for me I had to wait for signs that my past was physically affecting me in the present and this has been the catalyst for me to begin questioning. There has always been a huge fear

questioning something that you just believe is correct, but the emancipation I have felt since being able to use my own mind to draw conclusions has been amazing.

If I could speak to my younger self now, knowing what I know – I would've encouraged myself to do this earlier.

Jacobsen: How did you find solace after leaving the faith?

Pete: I left the religion at age 14 and moved in with my non-witness mother. I was allowed to do this because myself and my brothers and sisters were physically abused terribly over many years.

After one specific event, and being bullied terribly at school due to being covered in bruises and welts, I threatened to go to social services... my dad and his wife got worried, so they let us leave.

I had very little solace in the first few years. I believed I was going to die in the not so distant future. I had nightmares every night and slept with my mum regularly. Due to this constant fear, I just realised that life should be taken as a joke. I went off the rails with drugs, alcohol, and stealing. However, this was a phase that I grew out of.

Jacobsen: How would you recommend others lean out of the community if they fear reprisal from leaving the religious community?

Pete: It's a difficult question to answer because there is not one textbook answer that would suit all. I think if someone is looking to leave a high control group like the Jehovah's Witnesses, then they need to build up a security network around them beforehand.

They need to have people that love and care for them around them that understand the abandonment they are going to have to endure in the years to come. Regardless of how you choose to leave this cult, there will be lasting reprisals.

It's a decision that mustn't be taken lightly. The person leaving needs to understand that their family will treat them as dead. That they will have to start from the bottom in most instances. But the choice to be free outweighs everything in my opinion.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Pete: Please help to shine a light on this terribly damaging cult... I feel like I have been so lucky in my life to still have my brother and sister and been able to leave early enough to recreate my life..... there are so many people out there hurting and who are alone..... this needs to stop! Thanks.

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

Shaykh Uthman Khan on Ayesha and Fatima

February 25, 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, I gather three things from the previous conversations: epistemological sectarianism, chronic inerrancy, and ethnic divides. But then, if you take two figures Fatima and Ayesha, what is the big takeaway when interpreting the text there in terms of gender roles?

Uthman Khan: It's the culture. Most times the culture defines how the scripture is interpreted. In reality, it's the scripture that is being distorted. It is like children's Play-Doh. Everyone molds it differently. What is done is the scripture is taken, objectified and then starts getting molded according to how one wants to mold it.

In reality, I would never want to live in a city that followed Shariah law. Because I have seen and lived a life wherein 100 people had 100 different interpretations of Islam. This is because of the molded interpretation of the scripture. And then if a city was to follow or impose Shariah law then it is literally just an interpretation of a person's bias or molded understanding.

This is probably the biggest reason for sectarianism and each sect tends to break up further into smaller sects.

If you keep on digging deeper, every single person literally is following their own Islam. Gender roles are defined that way as well – strictly through culture. I actually read an article published in a traditional seminary that women shouldn't be educated and that Islam was actually saying this. It was very clear that this was another version of a molded understanding of the religion based on the patriarchy a particular culture defined. It stems from having a preconceived idea and then trying to fit that idea into the scripture.

Technically all gender roles were defined by the culture but implemented as if they were religion. This is a very broad topic, but the result of it is that there is a culture and there is a mindset and there is some external motivation. This is then applied to the scripture and the scripture is understood this way. This mindset is then taught to the next generation and then the next generation and then it becomes an indoctrination. Eventually, a whole society ends up indoctrinated on a message that the Qur'an really never initiated. In your initial question, Fatima may have defined gender roles according to how she perceives her role of how she has been indoctrinated about her role and considers it Islam. Ayesha, on the other hand, will probably believe the exact opposite but consider that Islam as well. Very convenient approach haha, but a very nice way to discredit anyone who doesn't agree with you. It is subjective and biased.

On the Evolution of Atheism with Dr. Stephen LeDrew

February 26, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You wrote *The Evolution of Atheism: The Politics of a Modern Movement* (2015). Your doctoral degree is in sociology. In its presentation of your professional research, you look at the rise of a modern branch of atheism called New Atheism. What have been the impacts of the New Atheist movements in North America and Western Europe?

Dr. Stephen LeDrew: The first and most important impact is that it made atheism, and atheists, visible in a way they had never been before. It also inspired a lot of people to get involved with atheist organizations, which have been around for a long time, but were fairly small and insignificant. The New Atheism brought attention to these groups and made people aware that they existed and that there were others like them out there. Outside of formal organized atheism, the success of people like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris brought atheism into the spotlight and played a major role in bringing critical debates about religion into the public sphere. It's debatable to what extent there were a catalyst or a symptom of the sudden interest in religion's place in the world, but at the very least we can say that it was a sign of a significant cultural shift where speaking critically about religion in public became much more acceptable. The increase in the number of atheists and non-religious people in recent years goes hand in hand with the rise of the New Atheism.

Jacobsen: What factors constitute the main drivers of the increase in the religiously unaffiliated in the New Atheist movement?

LeDrew: Well the religiously unaffiliated and the New Atheism are two different things, and it's important to keep that distinction in mind. Surveys have shown that the number of people who say that have no religious affiliation—the group that scholars refer to as the “nones”—have increased pretty dramatically in the past ten to twenty years, but those people aren't all atheists. But generally I think it's safe to say that there has been a significant episode of secularization in the past couple of decades as young people especially are showing little interest in religion. As far as the nones are concerned, there's a significant generational shift happening where people aged 30 and under are much more non-religious than previous generations. There are some different theories to explain this. One is the association between religion and conservative views on sexuality. Young people today tend to be far more accepting of homosexuality than their parents' generation was, and for many of them, religious values on this issue conflict with their liberal attitudes on sexuality. There is also the impact of the internet and social media to consider, which exposes people to different beliefs, opinions, and even cultures. Merely being exposed to different beliefs might lead people to question their own, though that is certainly not always the case, and sometimes the opposite can happen. In terms of the New Atheism and the atheist movement specifically, 9/11 is a signature event. It brought religious extremism to public attention in a way it never had been before, and growing fears about violence fueled by religion certainly contributed to people embracing a critical perspective on it.

Jacobsen: How has the New Atheist movement impacted organized secular activism in North America and Western Europe? Also, have these movements impacted the discourses and activism within other regions of the world?

LeDrew: The impact can't be overstated. The secular movement was quite small up until about 2006, when it exploded after Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* was published and the New Atheism phenomenon began. Nobody really knows the numbers, but it's fair to say that membership in atheist and secularist organization grew exponentially in the few years following the publication of that book. The New Atheists gave activists a language and set of theories for voicing their opposition to religion, grounding their critique in scientism, or the view that science is the only legitimate form of knowledge. They attracted a lot of people to the movement just by attracting a lot of media attention and appearing at events held by secular organizations. But just as importantly, they've alienated perhaps as many people as they've inspired. Some people who were already in the movement, and many others who joined in the early years of the New Atheism, later lost interest as they discovered that people like Dawkins and Sam Harris were not what they thought they were. In particular, New Atheists' views about Muslims and their attitudes about sex and gender started to creep out, and it became clear that these people were not really the progressive liberals they claimed to be. Some people felt that their ideas about Islam and Muslims went beyond criticizing religious doctrines and veered into bigotry against an entire ethnic group. On the issue of gender, the New Atheists have resisted the idea expressed by some feminist atheists that the movement has issues with sexual harassment and sexism, which escalated into a major intra-movement conflict that ended with a lot of women and younger activists leaving, as they perceived it to be dominated by group of older, generally conservative white men. So the New Atheism has been controversial and produced a lot of tension. The New Atheism has definitely had an impact in other parts of the world, though it's more difficult to assess what that impact has been and to quantify it in any way. *The God Delusion* has found readers in parts of South Asia and the Middle East. Secular activism in those places is not nearly as prominent as it is in the West, but it exists to various extents. One good example is Bangladesh, where in recent years a number of atheist bloggers who were inspired by the New Atheism have been murdered by religious extremists. So its reach has really been global, though obviously the impact has been felt most strongly in the West and particularly in America, which of course is exceptional among western countries for its high levels of religiosity.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

LeDrew: One thing that I'm interested in, and that I think has not been given the focus it deserves, is the idea that the New Atheism might itself be understood as a kind of "secular religion". This is a controversial idea, but from a sociological point of view that focuses on religion's social and psychological functions, it makes sense. First, the New Atheism itself essentially takes this view by explicitly positioning science as a replacement for religion. New Atheists believe that religion is a pseudo-scientific explanation of the natural world that is replaced by modern science, most importantly the idea of evolution, which is applied well beyond the confines of the natural world to explain society, culture, politics, ethics, economics, whatever. In that sense it becomes so vast in its explanatory power that it becomes something like a religious myth. So that's the first religious function it performs: explaining where the universe came from, and the life that exists within it. The atheist movement also replaces some of the social functions performed by religion, namely by providing a community and sense of belonging through participating in atheist groups, whether in physical spaces or online. I think the idea that New Atheism, as a set of beliefs and as a social phenomenon, is both consciously and unconsciously a replacement for religion, and perhaps a form of religion itself, is something that should be taken seriously.

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

Atheism, Humanism, and Islam with Ammar Anwer

February 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are a columnist for the *Daily Times*. How did you begin writing there?

Ammar Anwer: I had been blogging for The Huffington Post and The Nation before I began to write for the Daily Times. I felt that my articles on Islam in general and Islamism in particular needed to be read by Pakistan's audience, after all we have been one of the prime victims of both. This was primarily why I started to write for the Daily Times.

Jacobsen: You are from an orthodox version of Islam. What was family life like for you?

Anwer: I come from a Family that adheres to the Deoband School of thought. Deoband is a sub-sect of Hanafi-Sunni-Islam that was established in the late 1800's in India. It follows the traditional form of Islam. In addition to that, my grandfather was also influenced by Syed Abul Ala Maududi, the influential Islamist scholar of the 20th century, and in my view one of the spearheads of the modern Islamism. So, my family was intact not only with the traditional Islam but also the Modern Islamic revivalism. I was raised in a similar fashion, where I acquired not only the traditional set of values of Islam, but also the need to establish Islam as a state religion.

Jacobsen: What is your current stance on religion?

Anwer: As an atheist, I am opposed to the concept of religion. I am opposed to the idea that we have to rely on an imaginary being and centuries old books in some aspects of our life. Therefore, my atheism isn't just confined to disbelief in the existence of God, but also includes an activism to confront the idea. That being said, I do realize that it would be rather unrealistic to assume that religions would simply fade away from the surface of Earth. They are a part of human history and even in the modern scientific world, there are still people who honestly believe that religions provide answers to some of their queries. I, therefore, do understand people who only adhere to religion on a spiritual level and do not intend to convert it into an organized set up. It is the organized religion which I deem a menace, because it tends to infiltrate in every level of society and put's an entire nation's intellect into jeopardy. It was only after the demise of organized Christianity that the Europe really progressed, and it is precisely the reason why the Muslim World is so backward when compared to West.

Jacobsen: As an atheist and a humanist, what do these two worldviews tied together provide for you? How do these provide more than the orthodox Islam of early life?

Anwer: Atheism is merely a rejection of the existence of any deity. It says nothing about someone's sociopolitical views. You can be an atheist, and still be a cause of misery for humanity, Stalin and some other Communist dictators are an example of that. This is why I believe that being a humanist is more important, in addition to being a non-believer. As a Humanist, I put individual liberties and human freedom over all other beliefs and ideologies. I believe that we must always adopt such stands that bring about constructive and positive impact on the entire humanity. I regard human reasoning, consciousness and evidence to be a sufficient guide for humanity, in lieu of dogma, religion and God. These principles, of course stand in

conflict with my earlier upbringing in an Islamic household, where I had to judge everything from a dogmatic Islamic lens instead of humanity and reason.

Jacobsen: You have written on Pan-Islam. What is it? What debunks it?

Answer: Pan-Islamism is the idea that all Muslims across the world, irrespective of their racial, territorial and cultural differences, constitute a single nation. Theologically, the term “Ummah” is used to describe Muslims as a single distinct nation from the rest of the world. It states that Muslims should give up their distinct national identities and strive for a single state (Caliphate) where all Muslims would live equally. It is somewhat a similar sort of notion to that of Christendom. It may have been real once, but in an era of nation states, where nations are formed by a sense of common heritage and history and not faith, it is at best a myth re-created for rhetorical purposes. Islam is not a race and Muslims are not monolithic. Muslims in subcontinent have a different culture than the Muslims in Arab or the Muslims in Indonesia. Even the effort to unite all the Arab nations under a single flag (Pan-Arabism) has not been successful, given that even an Iraqi Arab carries a distinct nationality and history than other Arabs.

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

Interview with Dr. Teemu Taira – Senior Lecturer, Study of Religions, University of Helsinki & Docent, Comparative Religion, University of Turku

February 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are a Senior Lecturer in the Department of the Study of Religions at the University of Helsinki and Docent in the Department of Comparative Religion, University of Turku, Finland. How did you first become interested and involved in these topics?

Dr. Teemu Taira: I have spent more than half of my life in the Study of Religion departments (although the exact titles vary in different universities and countries), first as a student, then as a doctoral candidate, and now as an established staff member.

However, I have not spent my adult years in studying one topic. For instance, I started to focus seriously on religion and media a bit more than ten years ago. It was after my Ph.D. when I wanted to examine how religion-related public discourses are constructed and how they are part of social practices.

My interest in atheism and non-religion developed soon after, because they started to be talking points in the media and public life more generally – and atheists themselves tend to speak a lot about religion. I also became interested in atheism as an identity: Who are the atheists?

What do people mean when they identify with the term? What do they wish to achieve by doing so? My interest in the category of religion – how negotiations about what counts as religion are part of how scarce resources in society are distributed – has been there for a longer time.

Although these are analytically separate areas of study, I see a lot of overlap between them. My interest in these issues is primarily intellectual. I do not belong to any religious or atheist organization, but I like to talk to different groups by ‘academicizing’ (to use one of Stanley Fish’s favourite terms) about the topics they may be interested in.

Jacobsen: How is religion portrayed in the media in general? How does this compare to non-religion?

Taira: It is very difficult to generalize, because media portrayals vary from one country to another and from one medium to another. I would argue on the basis of my studies in Nordic countries and Great Britain that people tend to have a somewhat misleading understanding of how religion is portrayed in the media.

For instance, some say that religion is mostly absent from the media. It may appear so, if you only focus on the big news stories, but if you dig deeper, there is quite a lot about religion in the media – in newspapers, television, and social media. And it is not limited to Islamic terrorism.

Another misconception, and this is more interesting, is that religion is treated primarily negatively. I have argued that this is not the case, at least not as negatively as some people assume. Especially in countries with one dominant or established church, religion is seen in a rather positive light in the media and society more generally.

Why do some people see it differently? I would argue that people tend to remember negative examples, especially when the news deals with their own group. They forget or bypass everyday news flow in which religion gets relatively positive treatment.

This applies primarily to the dominant religious traditions and institutions, particularly to liberal Christianity that shares similar values (though not necessarily the same beliefs) with the rest of the society and media professionals.

It is clear that conservative Christianity, Islam and so-called New Religious Movements (often labelled as 'cults' in the media) are portrayed more negatively in countries with a strong Christian heritage.

It is possible to come to this conclusion if you focus on 'religion', but it becomes more evident if you study media portrayals of atheism and non-religion at the same time. Being non-religious is almost a norm in some countries, particularly when public matters are discussed, but when atheists become noisy and demanding, their media treatment changes.

Media portrayal of celebrity atheists is a good example. In Britain, for example, Richard Dawkins gets his message through in the mainstream media and he is appreciated up to a point, but when he speaks against religion and for atheism, the journalists turn against him.

Although nuances between media outlets should not be forgotten, this pattern applies to more liberal and left-wing media, too.

Jacobsen: How did atheism become more visible than ever before, more acceptable than ever before?

Taira: These are two very different, though intersecting, questions. Increasing visibility does not necessarily mean 'more acceptable' (it can also mean 'more problematic') and their duration is very different. Atheism becoming more acceptable is a story that covers approximately three hundred years, if seen as beginning from the time when atheism becomes a term people use to identify themselves, whereas the increased visibility is more related to past 15 years, to so-called 'New Atheism'.

To put it simply, atheism has become visible for at least three reasons. First, the increased visibility of religion in society has made atheism more visible at the same time. The narrative about the return of religion begun to dominate in the 1990s and it preceded the visibility of atheism, so in one sense the visibility of atheism is a reaction to that narrative.

Second, people have started to campaign for atheist and non-religious identities. This applies to celebrity atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, but also to grass-root level associations. Some of the campaigns have not been successful in achieving their stated aims, but they have gained visibility for the atheist cause. A big part of that has been to get people more vocal about their (presumably dormant or latent) non-religious or atheist identity.

Third, and this is not emphasized enough by scholars who study atheism, the development of 'third culture' in which natural scientists start to address non-specialist audience directly, without mediating intellectuals, has brought the defence of natural sciences, jointly with atheism, to the public discourse.

When contemporary celebrity atheists play their role as public intellectuals and popularize natural sciences, they construct religion as one of their key enemies. They are not criticizing only

religion; they also attack non-religious standpoints they consider, rightly or not, challenging the trust in natural sciences ('postmodernism', 'social constructionism' and the like).

Jacobsen: What is religion as a category? How does this influence our most basic conversations and misunderstandings about it?

Taira: To put it very generally, I am interested in categories, discourses and identifications – how people construct their meaning systems by categorizing various items and by producing particular ways of representing the world, thereby creating various points of identification.

'Religion' (as well as non-religion) is one of such examples. Individuals use it for identifying themselves and others, but also governments use it to identify privileges and restrictions. In other words, 'religion' as a category is part of our social practices.

When I study religion as a category I approach it so that it is a term people use in order to promote their interests, rather than a term that describes (more or less) accurately what the world is like. That is why it is extremely interesting to study the public discourse on religion and atheism/non-religion alike.

One obvious example is religion-related registration systems in which some resources are distributed to those who qualify as religions. Then one can study who has the power to decide about the 'religiosity' of the applicant, how the decision-making happens and what particular groups may gain from becoming registered as religions.

Another example, more related to atheism, is that when contemporary atheists speak about religion, they tend to approach it as a system of propositional statements about the nature of the world. Why?

Because that is how it can be compared with science. It is a comparison in which religion cannot beat science. I am not saying that religious statements are never attempts to describe what the world is like, but the point is to make it clear that to conceptualize religious statements that way is only one option among many.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Taira: If you are interested in my work, please visit my website for more information. Some of my writings are freely available online. Although most of my detailed empirical work is based on Finnish and British data, I have also published several articles about 'New Atheism'. I also share some of my thoughts on Twitter. <https://teemutaira.wordpress.com/>.

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

Interview with Dr. Christopher Haggarty-Weir – Scottish-Australian Vaccine Scientist and Venture Capital Analyst

March 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Christopher Haggarty-Weir is a Scottish-Australian vaccine scientist and venture capital analyst currently based in Edinburgh. He received his Bachelor in Biomedical Science from the University of the Sunshine Coast, then completed a Master in Molecular Biology at the University of Queensland's Institute for Molecular Bioscience where he worked with the Australian Army on novel malaria mosquito control technology. He recently completed a joint Doctorate in malaria vaccine development at the University of Melbourne's Walter and Eliza Hall Institute and the University of Edinburgh. During his Ph.D., Dr. Haggarty-Weir undertook a mini-MBA in Melbourne and business studies with MIT. He has published in various scientific disciplines in addition to philosophy, and has previously worked in intellectual property management and business development in the biomedical sector. In his spare time, he enjoys spending time with his wife, author Stephanie Haggarty-Weir (<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/stephaniehaggarty>), writing for MostlyScience.com as the co-editor (<http://mostlyscience.com/>), reading broadly and watching bad movie reviews. He currently consults on vaccine development projects and venture capital investments and is completing an MBA at the University of the People in conjunction with Yale and Oxford universities.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early development life for you – geography, culture, language, and religion if any?

Christopher Weir: I grew up in a Scottish-Australian family in a town called Redcliffe (just north of Brisbane, Australia). It was a fairly typical Queensland town, which is why I was never a big fan. The culture was fairly anti-intellectual with an over focus on sports and a prevalent drug element that only got worse over time. However, despite coming from a low socioeconomic background, my family (mum in particular) was very pro-education as they saw it as a means of upward social mobility. This manifested itself in a positive way, with no pressure put on me to go into a certain field, but reinforced to aim very high and dedicate myself to what I took an interest in. My family was not overly religious, more culturally Christian you might say with a slight theist outlook. Nowadays both my mother and I are atheists (with me being particularly anti-theist).

Jacobsen: What concerns you about some of the subsectors of the progressive movement, which can seem not as progressive as self-proclaimed at times?

Weir: I have several concerns with subsectors of the progressive movement, with certain things being prevalent amongst subsectors of the far right (which really is quite ironic). These include: rabid Antisemitism, use of pseudoscience, identity politics, racism, a general lack of nuance manifesting itself as a 'with us or against us' mentality, anti-free speech, and lack of broad critical thinking skills. There is also the use of severe bullying tactics by some which should always be called out. I am also very concerned with subsectors wanting to deform and demonise

healthy expressions of human sexuality. At the end of the day some of these groups behave like an authoritarian cult of sorts.

Jacobsen: How did you come into the world of writing? What would be your advice for those want to get involved in writing and progressive politics and activism in particular?

Weir: I first started writing during my Masters degree after being invited to contribute to a science communication website, Mostly Science.com, by a student in the semester above me. I always enjoyed discussing and teaching science, so I jumped on board and still write for them today as the co-editor. Arguably my passion for writing came before this when I wrote and published a literature review on diet and allergy amongst Australian Aboriginals with one of my undergraduate professors at USC in Queensland. Eventually, I started branching out from pure science after studying philosophy and getting an academic paper published while I was studying my Ph.D. in malaria vaccine research. So now, I write about quite broad topics from science to philosophy to business and politics.

If one wants to get involved in writing then I would say start by identifying what interests you (as you really need to have passion) and just get writing! Of course, it obviously helps to plan out what you are going to write, and this will take several forms depending on the type of writing you work on (i.e. writing an academic paper takes months or longer compared to an opinion piece or blog post). As for getting involved with progressive politics, identify the political party/parties that you consider progressive, read their manifesto to see if your image of them is somewhat correct and follow this up by getting involved in things like student groups or the party itself. I did went through this process before I joined the Scottish National Party, and now the few things I have significant disagreements about, I engage with them over (as I am pro-nuclear power and pro-GMO). I think it is healthy to write to politicians and about politics of parties you are associated with but in a critical way; this helps prevent you from falling into a trap of being another ‘yes-man’.

Jacobsen: When you reflect on the state of the academic system, what concerns you? For example, some have concerns over trigger warnings, safe spaces, and other infringements on freedom of inquiry, debate, and speech in the university environments.

Weir: I could write entire essays about the problems in academia globally at the moment, but I will try to keep it relatively brief. Firstly, there is what no one seems to be talking about and that is more equal access to university and uni life for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Often in countries like the US, Australia and the UK, universities make their accommodation unaffordable for these students, and don’t offer much in the way of scholarships and support despite their enormous wealth. This is what led me to set up the Haggarty-Weir Scholarship at the University of the Sunshine Coast (where I did my undergrad) whilst I was finishing off my graduate studies in Edinburgh, because I know from experience that often poorer students forego things like food in order to buy equipment and books.

With respect to the whole trigger warning nonsense, I think that should die off for the most part. I have never come across it in a course in any of the 5 universities from 3 different countries I have been to, but I did STEM and business. So it seems to be a problem concentrated in the arts for the most part. The only time I have come across it was in a philosophy society discussion group where we were discussing the philosophy of suicide; I think this was a legitimate time for it to be brought up. Ultimately, the problem with trigger warnings is overly coddling people to the point where they are not taught how to deal with problems, instead they are taught to avoid

and fear; that is not healthy. Likewise, for the concept of safe spaces, they serve almost like segregation chambers that prevent healthy emotional development. Further, in a university environment, you should be actively seeking to challenge your ideas and perceptions so that you can intellectually grow.

Another significant problem I see is not only the enormous power difference between a professor and their student, but the lack of pathways to deal with when things go badly for the student. I had a supervisor who tried to take my scholarship from me, as in, he asked me to write him cheques for it. Another time he lied about his expertise and I had to find someone who could teach me the technique I had gone abroad to learn. This same professor also tried to get me to write them cheques for £14000 once he found out I got another scholarship. But there are very few ways of dealing with this and being able to finish your degree. Another example I have seen is the horrendous sexual misconduct that goes on at universities, but it generally is tolerated or brushed aside. To be a little more specific, what I am talking about here is lecherous lecturers engaging in sexual relations with undergraduate students. Now there are ways this can occur which I would say are ethically fine overall; if the student is of age and is getting no special treatment (for example, the marking of assessment is passed on to another faculty member); but this is rarely the case.

Aside from these issues I would finally say that other problems I see include: rising costs of education whilst university executives have salaries growing at a rate faster than finance CEO's, university staff being treated appallingly and having less academic freedom, less job security post-study, student unions that care more about playing politics than looking after students best interests, slipping academic standards so long as you can pay, and discriminatory immigration policies in the UK where they try prevent students from poorer backgrounds from coming (even if they have a 'free-ride' scholarship).

Jacobsen: Of the trends ongoing in the UK for progressive political and social movements, what seem like the bigger positive trends and the negative trends?

Weir: Of the bigger positive trends, I have enjoyed seeing more nuanced criticism of both the main left and right parties (Labour and Conservative respectively) from groups like Conatus, the National Secular Society, Ex-Muslims of Britain, and pro-Eu organizations (i.e. Scientists for the EU). I also have enjoyed seeing certain political parties embrace progressive values on the whole, such as the SNP and the Lib Dems (specifically under the new leadership of Sir Vince Cable). But in my opinion these pale in comparison to the rising negative trends of anti-progressivism. Demagogues are still very popular (i.e. Jeremy Corbyn, Jacob Rees-Mogg and Nigel Farage) indicating people here have not learned any lessons from the United States, a type of stubbornness to keep demonising parties like the Lib Dems for past errors under different leadership, more isolationism, growing conservatism in Scotland (which I am hoping is merely transient), persistence of regressive media, and persistent antisemitism.

I do not see any easy solutions to this, but I am also someone that believes one should try to pose some level of solution after identifying a problem. I think that there needs to be more aggressive litigation against regressive media when false libellous and defamatory claims are made, secular organisations need to try and increase their viability to the general population, and more people do need to try and shed their political apathy. This final point has been made more apparent by the fact that Corbyn has now come out backing membership of the Customs Union after thousands of Labour supporters and members wrote in to their MP's about it. If this pressure can

be sustained then the people might even stand a chance of having convince him to show real leadership over Brexit and come out against it. People can make a difference, but they need to stop being lazy and make the effort to engage in politics; after all this is why we have a democracy. However, our current democratic system can only really function when the people do make the effort to be active players in it.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Weir: I would ask those on the far-left to really consider if their actions are going to really allow them to meet their goals, or are they just fuelling conservatives? If they continue to attack the mainstream left and the centrists over petty things such as their own fringe ideas on gender identity and rejection of capitalism instead of reform towards ethical capitalism, then they truly will isolate themselves and become obscure aside from having memes made of them. Common ground must be met. If it is not then society will continue to suffer as the conservatives keep pushing through antiquated policies whilst everyone else fights amongst themselves. As for those on the right/centre-right, particularly those who are pro-capitalist; you must ask yourselves if continuing to support the current Tory administration's isolationist and anti-free market approaches is really in-line with your traditional economic liberalism and if it really is beneficial in the long-term? I could give you my opinions but I want you to think for yourself and try to challenge your currently held ideals. This is what made me go from a campus socialist to a staunch ethical capitalist that is pro-banking and pro-social rights; the two do not have to be mutually exclusive.

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

Weir: Many thanks for your time and the discussion.

Interview with Gauri Hopkins on Cult Upbringing and Contemporary Feminism

March 2, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early living like for you? In other words, what was the geographic, familial, cultural, and religious life for you?

Gauri Hopkins: My parents joined a religious cult when they were teenagers. My father is from Wales and my mother from Mauritius. Both joined on their Islands of residency. Their spiritual father forced their marriage for some illegal economic agendas, which I will not go into. In my early years, the institution was primarily centered on propagating the religion and so growing up involved living in different countries. I lived in India, Mauritius, Georgia, New York, South Carolina, Washington DC, France, Belgium, Holland and of course the UK. Despite my travelling to many parts of the world, I didn't have much exposure to the real world as there were strict rules in place forbidding association with outsiders unless to preach or convert to them and so, the world I grew up in, was always with the same community, practicing the same culture, within the same social structure, but with different faces.

Due to the religious teachings and practices, my older sister and I mainly lived in ashrams (monasteries) and therefore had little parental guidance for the first 7 – 9 years of our lives. Our days were dominated by prayers from as early at 4:30am to as late as 9:30pm (festivals would go past midnight), in between which we had temple service and the institution's schooling where we were seldom taught Maths, English, Science, and other important subjects. Although reading and writing were basic parts of our education, overall, we were focused on studying the religious teachings. We were raised to be prodigies of the movement and essentially priests. Over the years most of the children's ashrams were closed down and turned into day schools due to the global and systematic, traumatic incidents that took place within them. It was not too long after these changes that my mother settled us and my three younger siblings in England and sent us to state school, in the real world with real people.

Jacobsen: How did these important factors in the context of an upbringing influence you?

Hopkins: Tough question. The list is endless really, but to list a few:

I did not understand the importance of school so after mostly failing at it, I had to make up for it quickly when I was 15 and on my own. Because of this I appreciate the value of education and stability intensely and urgently and cannot help but be an advocate for them.

For the majority of my state school life and even parts of my late teenage life, I struggled to make friends and assimilate into social groups as I saw people as demons or victims of their past life (past karma). This made most of my social experiences difficult and confusing and at times incredibly dangerous – being unable to see real threats lead to some unfortunate circumstances. As a result of this, I have developed the habit of reading into people through a self-protective lens, which is socially crippling most, if not all of the time.

In the past 2 years, I have started to understand what is, to most, westerners, the strikingly obvious differences between history and mythology – something that I found so foreign and difficult to comprehend, thanks to my cultural conditioning. I call this weird thing I have my

“logical impairment” and I think it resulted from never being taught the difference between fact and fiction and having these literally presented as the same thing and having to unlearn this on my own. For the first 10 years of my life, I negotiated reality on mythological grounds and fantastical spiritual experiences. I grew up with (what I would call) dishonest and mentally unstable people who made it very difficult for me to see the world as it was and so I perceived the world as it was taught to me. Anyway, this lovely revelation has helped me view the world much more pragmatically and objectively now, rather than in my former highly strung, emotionally reactive ways. When you do not understand where to find the facts because you do not quite know what a fact is you panic and overreact a lot- mainly because you do not know if you are safe or not, or worse if others are safe or if others are the “danger”. So, I have a deep appreciation for facts, objectivity, and balanced views. I have a lot of empathy for those that do not understand the value these conceptions bring, and I have much sympathy for those that have no desire to explore them.

Another big one is that I was not able to think unless it involved reciting what I had been told for the majority of my life. At 23 I finally got the hang of thinking for myself and only in the past year I have gradually become pretty fluent at it. I owe a lot to my surrogate mother for this. She was never afraid to challenge me and be fiercely honest and she showed me nothing but love and support whilst I was overcoming heavy doctrines and institutionalisation.

As I was incessantly taught I am a sinner and a fool from birth and as a girl/woman I am equal to a dog and/or a Dalit (lowest caste in India), I suffered from poor self-esteem which at times catches me today. However, I am fortunate to live in England where these internal conflicts pass quickly as they are not reflected in the external world. They not nurtured and reconfirmed like they once were on the compounds I grew up on.

On a positive, I graduated in Bharatnatyam (traditional south Indian dance) when I was 13 and ran my own dance school every Sunday up until I was 17. I traveled a lot, teaching workshops, performing all over Europe and some parts of the East. This helped me gain some useful skills that I still use today.

It influenced all of my core interests, such as: literature, anthropology, history, economics, morality, religion, theatre, neuroscience, primatology sociology, phenomenology, and philosophy.

Jacobsen: In terms of stances on feminist issues, broad question, how would you define a reasonable perspective? I ask because the recent rhetoric in North America and Western Europe has been ‘heated’ – to say the least of it.

Hopkins: Broad would be the word here. I will skim the surface with this one, Scott if you do not mind.

I am not a fan of the Contemporary feminist discourse – it seems the sexist card is the new get out of jail free card these days. Contemporary feminism, or intersectional feminism or radical feminism, who knows what it is or what angle individuals are coming from; like shattered glass, it makes a painful appearance in everything, everywhere, all the time. To me, it seems that Contemporary feminism has broken and mocked the core virtues of feminist ideology, which was all about equal opportunity. Traditional feminism was about challenging the legal system that limited the rights of women. That is my very general understanding of the subject of feminism as a whole, anyway.

Despite this, to some extent, I do agree that some of the social issues raised by Contemporary feminists have shed light on some serious detriments buried in the shadows of the “Western world”, like Hollywood for example. However, I battle a lot with these social problems. I do not know how much of the law should be involved in resolving these issues or whether it is the individual that should be responsible for defining their boundaries and executing their legal rights. Accountability is becoming more and more difficult to assign and even reason with at the moment and that worries me. You cannot make progress without solid reasonable judgment and assign accountability is sort of a part of that. It is tough.

In terms of giving a reasonable perspective, I really do not know much about it all to offer a well-informed opinion on the matter. All I can say is, I grew up in misogyny and when I left that world I utilised all my rights as an equal citizen to overcome my disadvantages and although I am no genius or millionaire, I am most certainly not a victim and I am most certainly not oppressed- but I am in debt.

Jacobsen: How did you find and become involved with Conatus News? How does a centrist progressive message provide the reasonable perspective on some of the more intense issues – relative to the rest of the world – for North American and Western Europe?

Hopkins: I am not much involved with Conatus News, but I do keep up with the articles as much as I can. My surrogate mother, Helen Pluckrose, writes for them occasionally and I support her and her ideas. It was through her I learned of what Conatus News is about. I am in support of centrist, balanced and empirical views and I encourage this as a person who came from what Dawkins would call ‘magical thinking.’ I understand how susceptible to irrationality and tribalism we are and so I strongly believe that using reason and evidence is the way forward to progress.

Jacobsen: Does religion influence you? If so, how?

Hopkins: Not as much as it used to. I see religion now as I see fairy tales, mythic legends or just fiction in general. It is fun to read with some good, maybe even great, lessons to learn. The doctrine itself does not influence me, but the culture in which it grew upon and the institutional aspects of religion do bear weight on me and perhaps it will take a lifetime to overcome.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Hopkins: This was much harder to answer than I thought, but thank you for interviewing me. I hope I was able to help with your research.

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

Interview with Roger Dubar – Writer, Conatus News

March 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: There are various epithets floating in the interwebs: Social Justice Warriors or SJWs, Alt-Right, radical feminists, Leftists, far right conservatives, radical Left, and so on. How do these worsen the online dialogue on important political and social issues? Do they have any positives?

Roger Dubar: Labels are useful until they stop being useful. Writing off a person or an idea because of the labels you've put on them is an attack on the person, *Ad hominem* – not an actual argument. For various reasons this has become standard practice in most discussions, in all sides of the political spectrum. Ideas that meet with a person's ideology are supported no matter what, and ideas that go against ideology are dismissed no matter what. So these labels are useful for discussion – and for satire – but they don't have any bearings on whether arguments are good or otherwise.

Jacobsen: You have written on political correctness and no platforming. What are these? How do these hinder proper and full debate on important, and even trivial for that matter, topics in an academic setting such as a research university with international repute?

Dubar: Political Correctness is supposed to mean this: “the avoidance of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against”... But the clue is in the title. It's about the “correct” politics. There is only one way to view any idea, and that is in the framework of the “correct” ideology.

It creates a hierarchy of oppression: we must not raise the issue of gangs of mainly Muslim men in the UK targeting vulnerable white girls for sexual abuse, in case this gives ammunition to a nebulous “far right”. We must pretend Islam has nothing to do with terrorism, while terrorists use Islamist language and ideas to justify killing people – mostly other Muslims. We must not question contemporary gender ideology, because the people involved are vulnerable.

People within minority communities speaking up for human rights and reform routinely are smeared by so-called “progressives” as “right wing” and “uncle toms” – as if they are traitors for having wrong opinions. White people calling out minorities for not being regressive enough. How crazy is that?

Political Correctness is about defending ideology from challenge. We see this of course not just from the Left, but from every other ideological group too. In a way it's just part of the human condition, I guess.

“No Platforming” is the notion that certain people or ideas are so repellant that they should not be heard in society. It began targeting actual genuine fascists, but not it's spread to tarring anyone who questions the <<current ideology>>. It's anti-intellectual and to my mind deeply dangerous.

Jacobsen: In terms of your own educational background and experience with universities, what do you see, within the domain of academia, as the main issues sourced from and

continually self-denigrating the otherwise honorable traditions of the post-secondary university environment and institutions in North American and Western Europe?

Dubar: The most dangerous issue for me is that much “Progressive” academia has come to reject even the possibility of objectivity. Ideology comes first. Of course you can criticize western history, western values and western academic practice – but if you are not prepared to put your own ideas to the same scrutiny you are not doing science or reason.

Jacobsen: What do you see as a way forward for universities on the issues of free speech? What do you see as the more important issues within universities and wider society? Of course, different people rank different values as more or less important, so this can seem like a highly individual question.

Dubar: I hope it will work itself out – that the current ideologically driven approach is a fad and that it’ll fade over time. My fear is that “progressive” politics is becoming so alienating to so much of the population that it will seriously damage the “Left”. I think we’ve seen that already, with the election of Trump in the USA and the vote for the UK to leave the European Union. If the Left – of which I’m part of politically – keeps driving away people for not having the “correct” opinions, I can’t see it gaining and holding power.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the progressive movements, whether writing, donating to organizations, or helping with the promotion of relevant publications?

Dubar: Everyone needs to find what works for them. All I hope is that people are prepared to question their own beliefs and preconceptions. Otherwise, we will be stuck with absurd quests for ideological purity – which are always a race to the bottom.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Dubar: My own outlet for the current climate of craziness is *#satiria*. I hope your readers will join us there on Facebook & Twitter!

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

References

Dubar, R. (2016, October 11). *#WearWhatYouWant* but speak out against compulsory hijab in Iran. Retrieved from <https://nation.com.pk/11-Oct-2016/wearwhatyouwant-but-speak-out-against-compulsory-hijab-in-iran>.

Dubar, R. (2017, January 8). 2017: Post-Truth, Post-Intolerance, Post-Understanding. Retrieved from <https://conatusnews.com/2017-post-truth-post-intolerance-post-understanding/>.

Dubar, R. (2016, March 30). A Bad Week For Religious Tolerance. Retrieved from <http://thepashtuntimes.com/a-bad-week-for-religious-tolerance/>.

Dubar, R. (2017, April 4). Anyone Who Disagrees With Me Is a Nazi. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/roger-dubar/anyone-who-disagrees-is-a-nazi_b_9592174.html.

Dubar, R. (2017, April 8). Fear of a Black Hairstyle – Cultural Appropriation? No Thanks. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/roger-dubar/cultural-appropriation_b_9625720.html.

Dubar, R. (2017, April 26). No Platform: Is Free Speech Worse Than Murder With Machetes?. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/roger-dubar/no-platforming_b_9771848.html.

Dubar, R. (2017, April 9). On White Guilt and Social Justice: Put Human Rights First. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/roger-dubar/social-justice_b_9643566.html.

Dubar, R. (2017, March 30). Political Correctness Is Bad: Discuss. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/roger-dubar/political-correctness-is-_b_9562364.html.

Dubar, R. (2017, May 3). Roger's Rules for Online Behaviour. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/roger-dubar/rules-for-online-behaviour_b_9804340.html.

Dubar, R. (2016, March 14). Mobile World Congress and a Scottish man with random thoughts in Barcelona. Retrieved from <http://thepashtuntimes.com/mobile-world-congress-and-a-scottish-man-with-random-thoughts-in-barcelona/>.

A Call from the World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO)

March 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO) made a call asking for some help on March 1 in an email. I received it. In solidarity with the WSO and the Canadian Sikh community, especially knowing of some narratives marked within the Canadian conscience and historical record including Insp. Baltej Singh Dhillon and the SS Komagata Maru, I will oblige the request (Johnston, 2016; Foot, 2016). A small note of social solidarity seems better than silence, as “silent as moonlight on a gravestone” sometimes. I cannot speak for others, but I can speak and act for myself.

The WSO notes that the Conservative Party of Canada is using the “precious time in the House of Commons” in order to “force a debate condemning ‘Khalistani Terrorism.’”

The WSO points to the concern that the time that could be used in order to benefit the general population of Canadians is being used for less than optimal issues on behalf of Canadians; however, the Conservative Party of Canada has decided to target the Sikh community to tarnish their image as extremists with a ‘forced debate on Khalistani terrorism.’

They consider no reason for the broaching of this debate but do point to the easily expected effects on ordinary Sikh Canadians and their image within Canadian culture.

“Fellow Canadians are starting to see us as terrorists when we are not. This will damage us in the public eye and hurt our community immensely, particularly our youth,” the email from the WSO explains.

The WSO representatives, on behalf of the organization, have an idea to act on the issue, which would not take much effort, and straight from the email:

Please call and leave voicemails at the offices of Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer and Erin O’Toole (who is bringing this motion forward). Please communicate to them that if the Conservatives carry through and bring this motion forward then they will lose support from Sikh community and our Gurdwaras. The Sikh community will not forget this.

*Yours truly,
WSO Canada*

N.B. Please find the contact information for the M.P.’s below.

ERIN O’TOOLE

Telephone: 613-992-2792

Erin.OToole@parl.gc.ca

ANDREW SCHEER

Telephone: 613-992-4593

Andrew.Scheer@parl.gc.ca

References

Foot, R. (2016, November 14). Baltej Dhillon Case. Retrieved from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/baltej-dhillon-case/>.

Johnston, H. (2016, May 19). Komagata Maru. Retrieved from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/komagata-maru/>.

In Conversation with Lucas Lynch – Editor-in-Chief, Conatus News

March 4, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Lucas Lynch is the Editor-in-Chief of Conatus News. He trained in physics at Harvard University and has an affinity for Christopher Hitchens. I did not know his story, felt curious, and so reached out in order to find out more about him. Here is the result.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you grow up? Was religion a big part of life? How did you come to find the non-religious community?

Lucas Lynch: I grew up in a split household in multiple ways. My father was Jewish, but totally secular. He was the parent that made sure I got extra science classes at the Boston Museum of Science early on Saturday mornings.

My mother was ostensibly mildly religious – she wanted us to have *some* religious background, so she took my sister and I to a very liberal Unitarian Universalist Church for a time.

There were some very kind people in this Church, and I never experienced the kind of terrible things that I've come to hear about from so many others who have even risked their lives to leave their religion.

It was thanks to my father's love of science passed on to me that it became clear in due time that religious claims and arguments did not stand up to scrutiny. That, coupled with extracurriculars in high school that met on Sunday, saw my exit from church attendance.

A more profound experience of 'leaving religion' came from a different avenue, though I didn't recognize it as such at the time. Though my mother was ostensibly mildly religious in the traditional sense, I realized later on her true religion was modern social justice, which was really the gospel we heard preached at home around the clock.

It was exactly her brand of 'feminism' – and I do say this in quotes, because I certainly don't want to lump it in with the kind of feminism I believe in – that preached a very stern flavor of male hatred.

This led to a very bad situation at home, under which both myself and my father suffered. I eventually had to learn to recognize much of the behavior preached under this ideological context as abusive, and after my father died I had to separate myself from my mother completely.

Being 'non-religious' in either sense was not particularly important to me until approximately 2013 or 2014 or so. I was a pretty standard liberal Democrat – I genuinely believed that all religions were more or less the same, that they were all at their core peaceful, and that the problems that seemed to arise from them came from other causes.

I genuinely believed, for example, that with Obama's election, both his seeming willingness to correct the disastrous foreign policy mistakes of the Bush administration and to reach out to the Muslim world in friendship really would ameliorate the problem of terrorism in the post 9/11 world. With the rise of ISIS in 2014, I had to come to grips with just how wrong I had been.

This coupled with the rise of the modern social justice movement was a perfect storm for me. I started to see this new religion making very intelligent friends often unable or unwilling to speak honestly about the problem of terrorism, and I began to see how our obsession with identity was poised to ruin our discourse and our politics.

I began warning my friends in the coastal bubble that this could contribute to making Donald Trump a viable candidate, and sadly I think my predictions came to pass.

I still see it has having a stranglehold on the Democratic party – making many so-called Democrats more than willing to throw suffering people under the bus if they do not check all the identity boxes, and tone-deaf in many respects to any concerns that fall along class lines.

More than that, the ideology has made enemies out of different groups of people that I believe could otherwise be united in common cause. Until this ideology is successfully challenged in liberal circles, I see Trump or a figure like him continuing to hold power, though naturally I hope my concerns turn out to be wrong.

With both the rise of ISIS and the rise of nationalist movements all over the world, I no longer see debates about religious ideas or postmodernist notions of truth as trivial. It is no accident we find ourselves in a post-truth society, with a president able to lie and suffer no real penalty for it.

It's one thing when the religious find the concept of real, scientific truth threatening – this I expect – but it was a rude awakening for me to realize just how damaging the postmodernist assault on truth has done to our society at large, particularly as its core ideas went viral thanks to social media.

Fortunately, I realized I wasn't alone. Finding people similarly dedicated to reclaiming what could be described as Enlightenment notions of truth helped keep me sane. I really believe such a movement is the only thing that can help us get out of this morass of untruth we find ourselves in.

Jacobsen: You seem to have an affinity for Christopher Hitchens. How did you first come on to him? Why do you like him? What do you consider his more powerful arguments for irreligion?

Lynch: Even more important than his specific arguments against religion, Hitchens for me represents a truly independent thinker – most importantly, one willing to challenge ideas within his own ideological sphere.

He was fearless in challenging political correctness and identity politics early on, while simultaneously being willing to admit his own errors in his early thinking about Marxism.

He was also willing to unapologetically challenge religion and the role it plays in inspiring terrorism while remaining a committed man of the left who cared deeply about the suffering of the oppressed, unwavering in his opposition to racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Some people claim that so-called “New Atheism” is a movement of the right, but I believe this is mistaken. I didn't come to find challenging ideology important because my values had radically changed – I began to see that such challenges are inevitable and necessary if I wished to fulfill my values.

Of course, there are certain things I think Hitchens was wrong about. Even his most committed fans now admit that his support for the Iraq War was probably his single biggest blunder.

But we must respect and admire that even this error came from his willingness to challenge taboos within his own community – a critically important trait we should aspire to if we really going to live lives committed to the truth.

Jacobsen: When you peer into the landscape of the non-religious, what do you see as the modern promising and troubling developments of the movement?

Lynch: The so-called Atheist movement – a label that I don't think really describes it accurately, seeing as both Communists and Ayn Rand Objectivists are atheists and yet could not be more different in their central values – currently seems to be suffering a deep schism right along the lines of the Social Justice movement, which has ensconced itself within it, as it has in almost every major intellectual sphere in our modern society.

In one camp seem to be those who think the Trump-enabling identity politics are good and worth defending, while the other camp sees them it as a major obstacle to truth and progress, both scientific and political.

The two camps are also starkly divided on issues regarding free speech, with the hard leftist faction more than happy to restrict speech in the name of 'protecting' disadvantaged groups, while the left-libertarian faction still believes that free speech, even when it offends, is critical to defend in the pursuit of truth, and the answer to bad or harmful arguments is better arguments.

The leftist view on free speech I believe is one of the central obstacles to tackling the problem of terrorism in our time. Christianity and Judaism only came to be compatible with what we understand the modern world to be thanks to the relentless assault on their ideas since the Enlightenment.

By making it taboo to allow this process to unfold with Islam, committed leftists have become the collaborators and fellow-travelers of religious extremists everywhere who seek to subjugate women, persecute homosexuals, and endanger the lives of freethinkers.

This postmodernist ideology has served as a kind of ideological immune system to religious extremism, enabling it to preach hatred – as all unchecked, fundamentalist religious inevitably do – without the same kind of pushback we usually see from feminists, LGBTQ activists, and committed liberals, all needed to counter its toxic arguments.

Perhaps the most infuriating aspect of this is that the ideology ends up doing this in the name of protecting the very groups it ends up harming by committing to this process

Jacobsen: You trained in physics at Harvard University. How did you end up there? Why the interest in physics, especially at one of the great universities for it?

Lynch: I loved science and was very lucky to gain early admission. During my time there, while I realized that my love of science was unabated, I also realized that I wasn't *quite* at the level I would need to be to make significant contributions to the field, and I knew it was going to be quite a challenge to get an academic position.

And while I found labwork fascinating and illuminating, I found the social isolation very difficult.

Jacobsen: You took on the role of leading Conatus News. What tasks and responsibilities come with the position? Where do you hope to take the newspaper in 2018?

Lynch: I was very honored when Benjamin David, who founded Conatus News, asked me to become its Editor in Chief. I had written articles for it in the past, and had read articles written for it by brilliant writers.

This opportunity was totally unexpected, and initially quite daunting, but getting to work more closely with brilliant writers has been incredibly inspiring. It has been great to see our writers move the conversation, being quoted and retweeted by some of the biggest figures in our sphere.

This is my first time being involved in a project at this level – fortunately I inherited a wonderful team of editors, without whom this project would be impossible

We plan to soon do a site redesign, a push on Patreon, and as well as a revamp of our social media strategy. It's daunting, but also thrilling, to think about how we can take this platform to new heights.

We continue to be a platform dedicated to three core values – reason, free speech, and universal human rights. It's because of our commitment to these core values, not in spite of them, that we hope to challenge taboos in the name of progress.

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

Interview with Frances Garner – Member, Central Ontario Humanists

March 4, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Frances Garner is a Member of the Central Ontario Humanists. I wanted to gain some more of the smaller stories, especially those with novel perspectives and experiences apart from the international figures who travel the lecture circuit and repeat the same arguments and talking points, often, and the national figures who make the rounds on issues of the day. Here is our conversation.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let us start from the top and talk about your own personal and family background, what was it – geography, culture, language, religion or lack thereof?

Frances Garner: I grew up in Southern Ontario with a lapsed catholic, probably alcoholic father and an evangelical, fundamentalist mother. My father died of pancreatic cancer when I was a young teen and I regret that I didn't get the chance to know him better.

My mother took her four children to church every Sunday with the full support of my father. It wasn't our religious training that my father was concerned about so much as having the house to himself for half a day.

From the age of two weeks until I was 36 there were very few Sundays that I was not in the pew. We were steeped in the fundamentalism of the Fellowship Baptist Church.

I was raised with a very strict God. He was always out of reach and he was waiting with hand poised to strike if you screwed up. It was pretty frightening. My mother was a little bit like Him as far as personality went.

So, I spent my childhood, youth and adulthood in church many days of the week; Sunday school, church service, evening service, pioneer girls, youth group and choir. I even got baptised twice... just to seal the deal I guess.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] There is a story about Anne Frank in the Mormon church. They baptize the dead. She had to be baptized several times because she just wouldn't take.

Garner: After my father died, my mother married a very fundamentalist retired minister which only steeped me in further. Although I had plenty of questions about why we believed what we did, I was too frightened to ask or express any type of doubt at all.

Of course, I married a guy who was also brought up like me, but he was willing to let me take on the religious upbringing of our children. (who ever said 'you marry your father' knew what they were talking about in my case)

We moved to Muskoka in 1993. A co-worker who I had had many discussions with about my belief must have gotten sick of listening to me, said to me one day 'You sound like someone who has never had the courage to question your own belief system'. That shut me up for the day and then I went on a journey to prove to this person that my faith was real and show this fellow why he was wrong.

Be sheer coincidence, I was in the public library a couple of days later and happened upon a book written by Charles Templeton, Farewell to God. Before I was half way through the book, the scales fell off my eyes and I was done.

Maybe I never really did believe it. Maybe I was just too frightened of losing what I thought was my foundation because it seems like an awfully easy deconversion. But that was it...eyes wide open and my faith gone in an instant.

Jacobsen: How do you move forward so steeped in it?

Garner: I didn't run out and tell the world right away but eventually it comes out. My mother and brothers were not at all impressed. It ended up setting me apart from my family and things can still get pretty tense all these years later.

I spent some time over the next few years checking out other belief systems, each of them making about as much sense as the one I had left. But it took very little time to realize that in all likely hood we are on this dot of a planet by ourselves and there is no one out there watching over us or judging us.

It's frightening and freeing at the same time. I still carry a little bit of that feeling that there is always this invisible someone watching me. There is a children's hymn from my youth that haunts me now and then...Be careful little eyes what you see, be careful little hands what you do... There's a father up above and he's looking down with love so be careful... Creepy, isn't it?

Around that time and separate from my spiritual searching, I took an in-depth meditation course called Mindfulness Meditation. Twelve weeks of practice with a minimum of two hours a day. Admittedly, I didn't fully apply myself to it but I thought it was very good.

Jacobsen: How did you find the new community?

Garner: Fast forward a few years, divorced, having raised three kids into adulthood pretty much on my own and living a pretty good godless life. My middle child very suddenly died. In the blink of an eye and with no warning she was gone leaving behind a husband and two little children.

It rocked my world to the core. As every parent believes, our children will see us to the grave, not the other way around. It taught me something about belief. You can believe staunchly anything you please and it counts for nothing. Belief is not truth.

Those days of mourning were unbearable, unimaginable. I was so fortunate that my partner Jim was there to hold me up and to give me a soft place to land. Our dog Heston wouldn't come near me for three days.

I think he couldn't comprehend who I was underneath all that grief and then he did what 'man's best friend' does. As I was sinking into despair he got to work. That dog got me out of bed and made me walk. Three, four, five times a day that dog insisted on going for a walk.

And so we did. Miles and miles and miles and slowly the grief began to ease. It will never go away but I have learned to live around that huge hole that my daughter left in my life. I think that dog may have saved my life because I was very tempted to join my daughter in death just to stop the pain and grief.

I wonder, if I had still been living a life that told me there was something after this life, that she was out there somewhere, I may have joined her. Anything to end that kind of pain.

A few weeks later I saw an add in the paper that this Mindfulness Meditation course was happening again and I realized that during those days of sitting vigil over my daughter that I kept coming back to one of the things we were taught; watching the breath, returning to the breath.

I realized that that is what I had been doing those first few days. It was how I kept present in those moments. I took the course again and today I practice being ever present in the moment.

The one thing that church provides is a place for others who think like you to gather. I did miss that. About a year ago, I joined the Humanists of Canada and attend the monthly meetings in Barrie about an hour south of here.

It is a great pleasure to socialize and learn along with others who realize that the best path in life is to take responsibility for yourself and to know that we are the only ones who can make this world what it is.

My goal is to become a Humanist Officiant so people can celebrate life's events without having to give the nod to God. I would also love to see a group started here in Muskoka and would happily be a part of that.

Leaving religion has been scary, lonely and empowering over these last years and today I am a stronger more fulfilled person for it.

Jacobsen: What role do you play in the humanist community now?

Garner: I go to the Barrie, about an hour South of here. We have one meeting a month. I am there for that. I am like a support person on the Board of Directors. I do not hold a position, but I am a support person.

I am working to become an officiant. Something, I would love to do as a humanist officiant. Hopefully, by the end of this year, I can provide humanist weddings or baby namings. Living in Muskoka, it is a treasure trove.

There is a wedding on an island every weekend around here. We live on a lake as well. That is what I would like to be doing by the end of this year.

Jacobsen: I know there is a lack of services for humanists and other associated types of people who are public service in that way – officiants and so on – in the prisons, in the army, and in universities.

If you take the army or universities, something like a humanist chaplain might be a deep need for a lot of humanist on campus. Do you know what the process is for doing that? Is it similar to becoming a humanist officiant?

Garner: I do not. But I would be very interested in doing that. We have one federal and one provincial here in Gravenhurst. That work appeals to me. I guess that I would start with an officiant. You never know where that can go.

Jacobsen: When you think about the activists of the Barrie Humanists, what are some of the practical everyday things that they have in the community that you would value that you would find in a traditional religious community or something that doesn't come with a bunch of supernatural baggage – so to speak?

Garner: Since I am new, the thing I get is the freedom to question whatever I want to question. it is freeing coming from a fundamentalist background. The ability to question anything that you

want. Living where I do in this small community, I would love to see them come North and would love to play a part should that ever happen.

As a humanist, in order for me to not shine my light – do not want to say that and it is not cool considering where I come from [Laughing], the people who know me. I have had so many people ask where I get my morality.

If you read Leviticus, where do you get your morality?

Jacobsen: By not reading Leviticus...

Garner: Are you familiar with the Bible?

Jacobsen: It happens now. It happens in international politics where people want to punish others with the Curse of Amalek which had to do with the slaughter of the Amalekites. I am familiar. It is quite striking.

The genocidal impulse, I have heard it said. People are told to be more like God. Then if you look at page after page within the Bible, you see killing and genocide. This may explain international politics for centuries.

Garner: It may explain the gun laws in the United States. They seem to be taking each other out at alarming rates.

Jacobsen: If you look at international politics, where it has apparently been the case, it does work as a basic heuristic for an explanation.

Garner: One of the things that are a little bit alarming is how the United States is moving towards more of this – more of the Christian Right philosophy, which is quite alarming.

Jacobsen: You have the mix with Mike Pence as a Christian fundamentalist as his prime identity in life. Then you have Paul Ryan who takes on an Ayn Rand – who was an atheist – laissez-faire capitalism.

It is a strange mixture in the richest, most powerful country in the world.

Garner: Anyone who is an atheist is considered to be lower on the scale than a pedophile.

Jacobsen: Yes, that research that was done. They were seen as that in specific contexts. So, I do not want to overstate the research, but based on the new more preliminary research that has been done.

When they give an example and ask who this is, atheists come off, in terms of the numbers, worse than but, in terms of the statistics, statistically significantly equivalent bad in certain circumstances.

Garner: What amazes me, today, after this journey that I have been on since 1996, I would consider myself far more moral and ethical than I ever claimed to have been as a Christian back then.

Jacobsen: Why is that?

Garner: I can't say, "Whoops! Sorry, the slate is wiped clean. Whoops, sorry! Jesus forgives me, I get a pass. My sins are forgiven." I have come to realize that I am responsible for the one life that I have been lucky enough to be thrown into.

I am responsible for me. Putting me in that place and not some deity has just really changed the way I see almost everything I do, and I am accountable for that. It is not my church dogma that drives my morality.

It is not how I was raised. It is not the invisible uncle in the sky. It is me who is doing this. It is Frances Gardner who decides right from wrong. That is why I think I am far more moral and ethical person today.

Knowing that my every action shapes the world around me is why I stopped eating any and all animal products.

Not only because I feel that it is part of my humanism or atheism by any stretch, but that moral and ethical responsibility that I feel for the planet and for other sentient beings just said, "You cannot participate in this any longer."

I just can't see myself as a vegan Christian. I would not be welcome at the socials for sure! [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Garner: "Have some ham!" It is how I feel a connection with the planet as a whole.

Jacobsen: When you are looking at the trends in the country now, and I want to keep things consistent with the specifics of Ontario, what are some concerns you might as to certain movements or organizations developing, growing, and trying to influence maybe the political situation or the social situation in Ontario?

Garner: I think Ontario is quickly becoming more and more and more secular. We do not have some of the problems that other parts of the country and the world have. One thing that I would like not to see is for our nation to become "spiritual."

"I am not religious but I am spiritual." I would hate to see that attitude seep into anything politically. I wonder if that might be a little bit sometimes about where we are going. As long as there is someone out there going to look after it in the long run, then it takes away our own responsibility.

As far as movements go, environmentally, we are on the cusp of some pretty awful things. As a humanist, I would like to see us work towards bettering the landscape of the planet for the next generations, where we are responsible for that.

I am not a real political animal. So, I am not sure if I would join any political movement. Maybe, the Green Party or the Libertarians, I might support them, but I am not political enough for a Conservative or an NDP or a Liberal government.

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

In Conversation with the President of the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, John Carpay, B.A., LL.B.

March 5, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

John Carpay, B.A., LL.B., is the President of the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms. Here we talk about some of his work.

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

John Carpay: Born in the Netherlands; came to Canada at age 7; grew up in BC (Kitimat and Williams Lake); raised Catholic; B.A. in Political Science from Laval University; LL.B. from University of Calgary.

Jacobsen: You have argued Canadian universities remain tolerant of behaviors preventing free speech, such as obstructionist tactics of activists. What are some of the prominent examples that come to mind – an event or two, and an individual speaker or two?

Carpay: Case 1, at the University of Victoria:

Youth Protecting Youth (YPY), a registered student club is “a group of undergraduate students from the University of Victoria who share a common love and respect for all human life, without regard for gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, level of development, or physical capabilities.”

On the morning of November 16, 2017, YPY members erected a display in an area of the UVic campus known as the “Quad”, consisting of 10,000 small blue and pink flags planted into the ground. The flags represent the approximately 100,000 abortions that occur in Canada annually. The purpose of this and other similar flag displays are to raise awareness of the fact that Canada has no law regulating abortion. YPY had emailed Campus Security to notify them of the event on November 15.

At about noon, UVic students began to gather to protest the display. The protest became larger as time went on, increasing in number and intensity. At approximately 1:30 pm, the crowd of protesting students grew to approximately 30 individuals. Some of the protesting students became verbally aggressive and told YPY members that they would remove the flags themselves if YPY refused to do so. Concerned about the protesting students’ threats, YPY called Campus Security. Many protesting students then began pulling up the flags and putting them in piles.

As the protesters began to destroy the flag display, two Campus Security officers arrived, but declined to take any action. The officers simply watched as the protesters dismantled YPY members’ flag display. The officers explained to YPY members that they must remain “neutral” and that they could not take any action to protect the flag display because it could be interpreted as Campus Security taking a position in support of YPY. The officers further explained that intervention could “escalate” the situation.

Unopposed, the protesters completely destroyed the display.

Case 2, McMaster University:

On March 17, 2017, a debate took place at McMaster University on the subject of gender identity, political correctness and free expression. The debate, which was to include three McMaster professors and University of Toronto professor Jordan Peterson, was disrupted by students and protesters who used tactics including clanging cowbells, blowing air horns and chanting to drown out Peterson's remarks. One individual was seen blowing an air horn very close to Peterson's ear. Another person reportedly threw glitter on Peterson's face and suit. Eventually, Dr. Peterson retreated outside the hall, where he continued speaking while standing on a bench.

One day prior to the event taking place, the President's Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community issued a statement which read that it was "deeply troubled that Dr. Jordan Peterson has been invited to speak at McMaster."

McMaster University failed to provide adequate security to ensure the debate could proceed as organized.

Jacobsen: Free speech seems like an increasingly important topic to some academics and postsecondary students. Why is this the case? What are perennial, and then modern, threats to its practice in Canada as a whole and especially in academic settings as well?

Carpay: Universities only became known as bastions of free expression in the 20th century. Before that, universities routinely placed restrictions on offensive and controversial expression, i.e. John Wycliffe being banned from Oxford for translating the Bible to English in the 1300s; Oxford's ban on an openly gay student magazine called the Chameleon in the 1800s; American professors fired and discredited for expressing opposition to the Draft; Anti-Vietnam protests banned at Berkley, and the list goes on. Ironically, many of those who were sympathetic to, or part of, the campus anti-war movement of the 60s and 70s now find themselves in positions of power at these universities. Yet, rather than learn from their experience being on the butt end of censorship, they employ the same silencing tactics against the new generation. Ultimately, universities are image-obsessed; they wish to avoid controversy at all costs, despite the fact that controversy and discomfort are often prerequisites to intellectual discovery. They will always trend towards restrictions on expression, unless professors, students and concerned citizens take a stand against these tactics.

Jacobsen: Who are prominent spokespersons on free speech in Canada who you admire or, even if you disagree with, those who you consider important voices on the fundamental principle of freedom of speech?

Carpay: Jordan Peterson has been able to reach millions of young Canadians through his Youtube channel and speaking engagements, and has been something of a lone wolf among faculty in taking a stance against compelled speech. This is much needed at this point in our culture and history.

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

Interview with EJ Hill – Former Reformed Evangelical Christian Minister

March 7, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are a former missionary and church planter. What were moments for the crisis of faith or something akin to it? Were these singular momentous deluges or slow drips of doubt upon which you built an ocean to sail your non-religious boat?

EJ Hill: I was a very dedicated believer, until the moment I realized that there were errors in the Bible, that no-one denied. What these folks seem to miss, however, is that the God of the Bible promised to protect His Word against corruption, meaning that he either lied or failed. That, along with the fact that we do not have an original copy of the ‘original Bible’ led to a ‘singular momentous deluge of doubt’ that left me devastated and depressed for months.

Jacobsen: How does the religious and skeptical environment compare in North America and South Africa (your place of residence)?

Hill: Well, I have never had the opportunity to travel to North America, but I do have a couple of online friends and follow a number of atheistic websites from there. It would seem like non-believers in North America has way more support in the sense of support groups, magazines, fraternities, and a number of celebrity intellectuals to champion their cause – Neil deGrasse Tyson, James Randi, Penn Jillette, and until recently Christopher Hitchens. While, here in sunny South Africa we have very little of that. But we are working on it, and we also benefitting from what is happening in North America.

Jacobsen: If you could take some of the big preacher names such as the late Billy Graham, Rick Warren, T.D. Jakes, Matt Chandler, Mark Driscoll, Francis Chan, Tim Keller, Dr. Ed Young, Sr., Craig Groeschel, Chris Hodges, Joel Osteen, and others, what tends to describe their approach in bringing people into their fold?

Hill: As a former Reformed Evangelical Christian Minister I had very little time for most of these guys, including Benny Hinn, Jesse duPlantis, Jerry Savelle, Kenneth Copeland, and Kenneth Hagin.

As far as I was concerned, Billy Graham was an ecumenical hypocrite, who watered down the gospel to accommodate as many people as he could via an appeal to emotion. Rick Warren promised God’s “blessings” to everyone, and that based on a flawed interpretation of the prayer of Jabez. T.D. Jakes is a typical prosperity preacher who fleeces his simple-minded flock with promises of wealth and prosperity. I initially liked Mark Driscoll, because of the somewhat reformed evangelical nature of his ministry, but I did not approve of his arrogant leadership style. He seems to be employing the “cowboy approach” to bringing men, in particular, into the fold with gimmicks like mixed martial arts, sex talks, etc. Joel Osteen is yet another prosperity preacher, promising his flock wealth and prosperity for a quick buck. I know too little about Matt Chandler, Francis Chan, Tim Keller, Dr. Ed Young, Sr., Craig Groeschel, or Chris Hodges, to comment on them.

Jacobsen: What seems like the 10-year future of the ex-pastor community in terms of becoming public, telling their stories, and becoming accepted members of mainstream society rather than fringe?

Hill: By “ex-pastor community” I assume you referring to The Clergy Project, which will have a bright future, if they could manage to work out some organizational technicalities. If not, they will become nothing more than a mailing list, most of the members being swallowed by local atheistic groupings, where they will provide invaluable consultation.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Hill: To my atheistic friend. Please double-check what you say. If you do not know what you are talking about – consult. But, whatever you do, do not spread misinformation. Most of those “bible contradictions” I see thrown around the Internet, are not contradictions by a long shot. The only reason why you think they are, is because you lack understanding. These types of flawed attacks on Christianity only serves to strengthen believers in their belief, that the Bible is inerrant, and atheists do not know what they are talking about. Do everyone a favour, and do not speak on a subject, until you earned the right to do so, having done your research. And, no, reading a single article or book does NOT constitute research.

“Is Christianity or Secular Humanism a better foundation for human rights?”

March 8, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

There was a recent conversation entitled “Is Christianity or Secular Humanism a better foundation for human rights?: A conversation Between a Christian and a Secular Humanist.”

Steve Kim was the moderator of the conversation. Kim earned “a diploma in Worship Arts and a BA in Biblical Studies from Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford, BC. He has completed a master’s degree in Christian Apologetics through Biola University.”

Dr. Andy Bannister was the Christian side of the conversation. Bannister is the “Director of the Solas Centre for Public Christianity and an Adjunct Speaker for Ravi Zacharias International Ministries” and holds a “PhD in Islamic studies.”

Ian Bushfield was the Secular Humanist side of the conversation. Bushfield is the “Executive Director of the British Columbia Humanist Association” and “also the co-host of the PolitiCoast podcast.”

The dialogue covered a wide variety of subject matter including human rights, ontology, the Third Reich, the Silver Rule and the Golden Rule, varieties of societies around the world and across time, the source of morality, the binding nature of human rights, Down Syndrome, Canadian culture and Western civilization, reflections on Friedrich Nietzsche, good and evil in relation to human rights, metaphysical beliefs around morality, empowering people as part of ethics, relativism, rational discussions, and many others, especially entertaining and enjoyable because it was framed as and turned out as a “conversation” rather adversarial as a debate – and was covered in a humorous and respectful light. Kudos to Kim, Bannister, and Bushfield! Take a peak:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=PugT_mhjgio

Interview with Damon Conlan – Writer and Magician

March 8, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early development life for you – geography, culture, language, and religion if any?

Damon Conlan: I grew up in England, in the West Midlands. I was lucky in that no one was particularly religious in my immediate family, other than to be culturally Christian; the only time they would end up in a church was usually for a wedding, a christening, or a funeral.

Even Santa Claus was not thrust upon me with too much gusto, and I was left to my own devices to figure out whether or not all these myths had any validity.

The primary school I attended (when I was 5 until 11), in the last few years I was there, rebranded as a Church of England school; I think my initial objection to the new name was based primarily on its linguistic aesthetics.

Alongside the occasional sermon at assembly when the vicar turned up, the mandatory collective worship that took the form of a prayer, and hymns decrying how great God was, that was my first exposure to the concept of religious imposition into an otherwise secular space.

Jacobsen: As a magician, how does this inform your own view on our ability to be easily deceived – as James Randi says, “You too can be fooled!?”

Conlan: I have always found magic to be a fine bedfellow of skepticism, science, and reason. In its purest form, it presents a paradox: a coin cannot vanish from within a closed fist, and yet the magician’s hand is now empty. To be convinced of a lie whilst being fully aware you are being lied to is an incredibly useful learning tool. The inherent irony of magic provides us with a constant reminder that we can be misled.

Whenever I perform, that is always the subtext in my head. The easiest path to deception is to assume that you cannot be deceived; once you cease to question something, you censor yourself from discovering new truths.

As James Randi would say, magicians are honest liars, and I like to think that they serve to inoculate the populace from contracting faith by reminding them that they too can be fooled.

Jacobsen: What is your own view on religion and the progressive politics, i.e., their relationship and compatibility?

Conlan: I do not think it is any great revelation that the less someone takes a religious tome seriously, the less likely they are to abide by its rules and ideas. And there are plenty of them, from the beguilingly benign to the acutely wicked. Faith, the willing suspension of critical thinking, ultimately poisons the well.

Apply that to anything outside of religion and you can end up being convinced of anything, confine it to religion and you can be made to do anything; it is hard to talk someone out of something that they think God wants them to do.

To quote Steven Weinberg, “With or without [religion] you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.”

If a religion insists on not having its ideas scrutinised, which often betrays much, then it follows the traditional pattern of being dragged, kicking, and screaming, into the future. Questioning, open discourse, the battle of ideas: these are the things that should be at the forefront if we want any kind of societal progress, and religion has always been the antithesis of those things.

Jacobsen: Safe spaces, trigger warnings, and so on, are new phenomena. How do these conflict with the ideals of an academic environment?

Conlan: A university, a place exactly designed for the battle of ideas, should not be a place than overprotects or infantilizes. You only short-change students if you seek to inoculate them from the ideas that might offend.

Ideas need to be readily and freely discussed because free speech, in actuality, is the way in which we unshackle ourselves of bad ideas, maintain plurality, and protect the minority voice.

How do you know if an idea stands up to scrutiny unless it has been scrutinised? Why wouldn't we want students to develop good arguments for the ideas they hold, and develop effective critical thinking?

I am always reminded of the “be careful what you wish for” trope; the perils of the literal genie. A benign request for something positive, when carried out thoughtlessly, can wreak havoc on the wisher. What we see more and more of, and not just on campuses, is the pursuit of a kind of puritanism. This new religion demands you to think and behave according to a strict set of dogmas not just in the present, but also in the past and the future, lest you be ostracised from the in-group.

The Christian notion of being “created sick and commanded to be well,” to quote Christopher Hitchens paraphrasing Fulke Greville, finds a pseudo-religious home. This is not the pursuit of amelioration, but a totalitarian exercise in creating a utopic society.

The intolerance towards anyone who does not comply with the in-group is a symptom of our tribalistic human nature, and one which we must out-grow. This is why free speech is so important, as true progress is only achieved if we properly confront the ideas we dislike, and fully scrutinise our own.

Jacobsen: What do you recommend for those interested in either magic or writing about the issues around free speech if those are topics that interest you?

Conlan: For those interested in magic, I would probably start by recommending a visit to your local (or virtual) magic shop or joining a local magic club. If you are interested in free speech, I would start typing immediately.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Conlan: It has been a pleasure to have been interviewed for Canadian Atheist.

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

International Women's Day in Canada

March 8, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Canada seems poised for a proper celebratory day, today March 8, for *International Women's Day*. Of course, this allies with two other days: *Women's Equality Day*, and *Women's History Month*.

These mark important celebrations for women throughout the world with a recognized day. Canada remains an important proponent of the rights of women in the legal context and privileges in the socio-cultural environment.

There appear a number of women of prominence or modest achievement in the world – “Hypatia of Alexandria, Elizabeth Anscombe, Hannah Arendt, Margaret Atwood, Simone de Beauvoir, Hildegard von Bingen, Marie Curie, Lady Anne Conway, Sarah Margaret Fuller... and innumerable others” and many of whom I do not know the full biographies – and, indeed, in Canada (Jacobsen, 2018).

In recognition of Canadian women's achievements, often overlooked, we find the 2018 recognition from the substantive to the trivial. On the ledger of the more substantive, we find the boost in pro-women initiatives at the level of the federal government (O'Malley, 2018).

Also, the symbolic importance of a change in the ten-dollar bill image with a printing of Viola Desmond, which is signal a representation of a woman of achievement in Canadian history on a Bank of Canada note (Bank of Canada, 2018).

Finance Minister Bill Morneau stated, “Two years ago today—on International Women's Day—Prime Minister Trudeau and I announced that the time had come for a Canadian woman to be represented on Canada's bank notes. Since then, thanks in large part through her sister Wanda, more and more Canadians have come to know Viola Desmond's remarkable personal story of courage and dignity. Her story serves as inspiration to all Canadians and acts as a powerful reminder of how one person's actions can help trigger change across generations” (Ibid.).

On the moderate, middle-part of the ledge, we find a change to the Barbie line of products (Batha & Taylor, 2018). Also, the hashtag #MyFeminism is a decent symbolic gesture in more modern media, social media, too (Status of Women Canada, 2018). Then into the trivial side, as Abedi hints at in the title and so on, we have the upside-down McDonald's “M” into a “W” standing for “Women” instead of “McDonald's” (Abedi, 2018).

Overall, it seems okay as a celebration of the day for women around the world in Canada, but, as the cliché goes, there is (always) more to be done.

References

Abedi, M. (2018, March 8). McDonald's flips arches to honour International Women's Day — but it backfires. Retrieved from <https://globalnews.ca/news/4070137/mcdonalds-international-womens-day-flipped-arches/>.

Bank of Canada. (2018, March 8). New \$10 bank note featuring Viola Desmond unveiled on International Women's Day. Retrieved from <https://www.bankofcanada.ca/2018/03/new-10-bank-note-featuring-viola-desmond-unveiled/>.

Batha, E. & Taylor, L. (2018, March 8). How the world is celebrating International Women's Day. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/barbie-flashmob-womens-day-1.4567692>.

Jacobsen, S. D. (2018, March 8). Rick G. Rosner: Giga Society, Member; Mega Society, Member & ex-Editor (1991-97); and Writer (Part Ten). Retrieved from <https://insightjournal.com/2014/12/15/ick-g-rosner-giga-society-member-mega-society-member-ex-editor-1990-96-and-writer-part-ten/>.

O'Malley, K. (2018, March 8). Team Trudeau to mark International Women's Day by boosting pro-woman budget initiatives. Retrieved from <https://ipolitics.ca/2018/03/08/team-trudeau-mark-international-womens-day-boosting-pro-woman-budget-initiatives/>.

Status of Women Canada. (2018, March 8). Government of Canada celebrates International Women's Day 2018 – #MyFeminism. Retrieved from <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/government-of-canada-celebrates-international-womens-day-2018—myfeminism-676251983.html>.

License and Copyright

License



In-Sight Publishing by Scott Douglas Jacobsen is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Based on a work at www.canadianatheist.com.

Copyright

© 2012-2019 by and *In-Sight Publishing* 2012-2019. Unauthorized use and/or duplication of this material without express and written permission from this site's author and/or owner is strictly prohibited. Excerpts and links may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to Scott Douglas Jacobsen and *In-Sight Publishing* with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.