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SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

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Scott

In Conversation with Scott – Founder, Skeptic Meditations

March 9, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott is the Founder of Skeptic Meditations. He speaks from experience in entering and leaving Self-Realization Monastic Order, a hindu-inspired ashram headquartered in Los Angeles and founded by famous Yogi Paramahansa Yogananda. Here we talk about meditation beliefs, and Westerners who are Post-Christian and consider themselves atheist or spiritual but not religious.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You were part of a community with many cult-like aspects devoted to meditative techniques and a monk lifestyle. What was it? How did you become wrapped up in it?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: I was an ordained monk for 14 years in Self-Realization Fellowship Order, founded in 1920 by famous Yogi Paramahansa Yogananda. It is essentially a Hindu-inspired religion with heavy blend of Christianity.

I got involved while in college I considered myself a mystical musician. Basically, I saw myself as a creative-music type, played guitar, sang, wrote music, and played in punk rock bands, sang in Choirs.

I was looking for ways to be more creative, more intuitive. To tap into the hidden, unknown creative powers within myself. At a party, when the band took a break I spoke to my buddies Uncle who was a Yoga Meditator. He recommended I read Autobiography of a Yogi by Paramahansa Yogananda.

Long story short: I read the Autobiography and had a "come to Yogananda" experience. At the time I felt that everything I wanted–mystical union with my soul, God, and Creative Cosmic Om–was to be found in following Yogananda's teachings, which were articulated by his organization Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF).

Within 12 to 18 months I gave up everything–college, business/job, friends, family–not involved with the SRF and ran away from home to live at SRF Hidden Valley Ashram. My aim was to see if I could dedicate my life as an SRF monk. I intended to be a monk for the rest of my life.

I worked my way up the spiritual-monastic food chain of SRF Order. For 18 months, I was a postulant (bootcamp for new monks) at Encinitas Ashram north of San Diego, California. Then I transferred to the SRF Mother Center, the International Headquarters, on top of Mt. Washington, in Northeast Los Angeles between Glendale and Pasadena, California.

At the SRF Mother Center ashram within two years I took Novitiate vows and three years later took Brahmachari vows. Each vow tier was meant to dedicate the monk's life more fully to loyalty, obedience, celibacy, and simplicity to God, guru, and the SRF. Looking back it all seems like a bad dream. It turned out after several years it was a nightmare to be a monk.

Jacobsen: How did you get out of it, following from the previous question?

Scott: As life gets, it was complicated. After a decade and a half of struggling to make the monk life work I realized the monastery wasn't the right place for me. What I needed was to grow, try new things.

In secret I would "sneak" out of the ashram under some pretense to buy and read books on escaping religious cults, to visit a life coach and talk over my challenges with a certified psychologist.

Over a period of 1-2 years I gradually got up the courage to leave the Order, the ashram. But how? I needed money, a place to stay, car, job, virtually everything. I renounced everything to be a monk and now I had to find a way to survive in the world outside.

(Incidentally, fear of making it out in the world is extreme in the SRF Order as it is in all high-control groups. The longer members stay the harder it is to leave on practical grounds. Where will you go? What kind of work can you get? How will people see you since you've lived under a rock, in a closed Hindu-meditation cult. These and more wild thoughts raced through the heads of monks who entertained escaping the clutches of the ashram Order.)

Fortunately for me, I cobbled together enough cash to buy myself a car, to rent an apartment in nearby Glendale, and to cover my basic living expenses for several months so I could get a toehold out in the world on my own.

Also, I had moral and psychological support from my family and key friends. (SRF treated former monastics as pariahs, as traitors, or so couldn't rely on SRF…]

Jacobsen: Now, with this foundation, the "I have been there" framework for this series. I want to delve into a variety of topics. For a first one, which was your idea in correspondence, the idea of post-Christian spirituality. What is it? Why is it a relevant, timely, and intriguing topic to you?

Scott: What I mean my post-Christian spirituality I'm referring to the underlying puritan ideals of the West: purity of mind and heart which turns to stilling thought, emptying mind, or no thought as somehow special or sacred.

In the process of secularization, prayer, contemplation, or meditation turns from religious to mind cure. Meditation is somehow secular form of magical "healing". Meditation is supposed to be beneficial to everyone, to be enlightening, to free practitioners from suffering.

Thinking God's thoughts becomes thinking "right" thoughts, enlightened thoughts, or no thoughts. That is stilling the mind. Mastering thought. Meditation is actually a subtle version of religion, with a system of enlightenment and an elite with authority.

The system of enlightenment is based on a subtle form of religious thinking. This is why I called it post-Christian or Western secular spirituality.

Good question. Post-Western Christianity is probably not the best way to say what I meant. I'm talking about Westerner's interest in Eastern spirituality and meditation. Those who are in PEW surveys when people are asked their religion they call themselves "Nones" or spiritual but not religious.

The spiritual but not religious and even many people who identify as atheists who cringe at the term "spiritual" sometimes harbor magical beliefs in things like meditation practices. So this magical thinking about meditation practices, like Buddhist-inspired mindfulness, creeps in.

It goes like this: There's something deep, magical, and mystical behind the darkness of closed eyes. The Yogis and Eastern Enlightened Masters were onto something. "Science" is proving that meditation cures depression which is not actually the case when we carefully examine the studies of meditation we find that at best meditation practice has a moderate benefit if any compared to other methods of relaxation, exercise, or drugs.

My blog, skepticmeditations, rants about what I call these hidden sides of meditation, regardless whether we call meditation practice secular or not.

Jacobsen: These explorations post-Western Christianity can lead to many areas including meditation, yoga, Buddhism/Hinduism, the New Age philosophy, and Eastern cosmology. What are some cognitive-behavioural traps from the post-Western Christianity explorer's side?

Scott: Haha. Lots of booby traps. We will never escape them all. But we can gradually, hopefully avoid falling into them endlessly. Each person has to untangle the cognitive traps themselves. It's a lifelong process of discovery and exploration.

Some may overcome of the obvious traps of Christianity, the Catholic or Protestant doctrines and rituals. Realize that the communion wafer is not the body of Christ but is a cracker and so on.

That probably there is no God, at least not the kind of Divine Intelligence that culturally we are led to believe. But underlying our cultural indoctrination is a system, a framework for Protestant puritan ideals or enlightened masters or authorities and so on. We are products of the culture of the West.

Calling ourselves atheist or secular means we might be post-Christian but still have much of the subtle Christian-Western puritan worldviews. Even simple notions like "Work hard and you will succeed". "Control your thoughts and control your destiny", and so on. These are sublter versions of God beliefs or based in religious worldviews.

Jacobsen: What are some of the traps from those who wish to bring those post-Western Christianity explorers into their particular fold?

Scott: The scientific research into the benefits of meditation are inconclusive. We don't yet have enough good data. Yet, many people scan and read only the headline that says meditation is beneficial for everybody.

So this kind of surface exploration of claims, like we've seen now with so-called fake news, should cause us to pause. It takes time and effort to dive deep into a topic like religion, meditation, or atheism.

Whatever, these are just labels. I think we should not take headlines and labels too seriously without first doing our homework and diving deep into the underlying premises and assumptions.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Scott: Well, I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today. I enjoyed your questions and grappling with how to respond. I really like your conversational and interview style. I think back and forth dialogue is one of the best ways to try to understand ourselves and others. Thanks.

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

Anouar Majid Talks About Islam and the West

March 9, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Anouar Majid is the Founder and Editor for Tingis Magazine. Majid has authored several books on Islam and the West, and has been on Bill Moyers Journal and Al Jazeera television. He is the Founding Director of the Center for Global Humanities. Here we talk about Islam and the West.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We have done an interview for *Canadian Atheist*. We have one, forthcoming in *Conatus News* as well. We talked about another series focused on the "grand theme" of Islam and the West, which is, of course, an area you have published a great deal in.

I would hope for this to remain conversational, as a dialogue, where I aim to learn from you. To begin, what demographics can provide an image of Islam around the world and the United States?

Anouar Majid: The number of Muslims around the world is fast approaching the 2 billion mark. (I think it is now above 1.8 billion.) Like Christianity, Islam is everywhere, on all continents, and in most countries.

Jacobsen: What core beliefs define a Muslim and a non-Muslim? What core do beliefs define someone from the West, a westerner?

Majid: Muslims believe in one God (called Allah in Arabic) who created everything and to whom we are accountable after death. To be good in the eyes of Allah, one must have absolute faith in him and his prophet Mohammed, pray at least five times a day, fast at least one month a year, give at least 10 percent of one's wealth to charity, and go on pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in a lifetime, if possible.

There is another sub-set of obligations, but the aforementioned are known as the pillars of the religion. A Westerner, in this sense, is not the opposite of a Muslim, since she can be secular or religious. In fact, millions of Muslims are Westerners, in the sense that they live and are citizens of Western nations.

Generally speaking, though, we use the term in the sense that it includes a set of ideas that originated in Western Europe, including belief in secular government, human rights, rule of law, democracy, freedom of speech, and other traits.

Jacobsen: Where do these belief sets tend to conflict?

Majid: In Islam, all power belongs to Allah, and the role of Muslims is to execute Allah's wishes. Muslims are servants of Allah and, as such, cannot legislate on their own. Everything, according to devout Muslims, has been prescribed in the Koran and the Hadith (compilations of sayings and deeds attributed to the prophet Mohammed).

In principle, notions like "democracy" or "republic" do not exist in Islamic political thought. Sovereignty belongs to Allah only, not to nations or individuals. Nowadays, Muslims use the concept known as "*shura*" (advisors or consultants) as an example of how Islam makes room for

democracy, but being an advisor to a caliph is not quite like voting for candidates running for office on a socialist platform, for instance.

Also, nations like Saudi Arabia do not believe in a human-made constitution, believing, as most Muslims do, that the Koran is sufficient in that regard.

Jacobsen: How does this conflict, in general terms and keeping in mind the demographic question at the outset, play out in American culture? Sometimes, as described in "Muslims in the West: Chronicle of a Crisis Foretold," this can lead to lethal outcomes based on internal conflicts, in the individual.

Majid: I am glad you mention that article. The clash of cultures, if not of civilizations, is quite real, although it is not fashionable to say this in polite circles. People who grow up as devout Muslims in Muslim-majority nations have a hard time assimilating into Western secular societies, even though most Muslims covet the West's education, products, and even freedoms.

From a strictly cultural point of view, though, there is no doubt that a real conflict exists between Islam and the West. There are other aggravating (or attenuating) factors, but this is not our focus here.

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

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In Conversation with Melissa Krawczyk – Atheist, Secular Humanist, and Skeptic

March 10, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Melissa Krawczyk is an atheist, skeptic, and secular humanist by worldview and science mom, Arabic speaker in training, and author-to-be by professions, and has worked in a variety of domains including materials and engineering science, ergonomics consulting, and skincare. Here we talk about her work, views, and upcoming-unfinished book.

Note: This interview was conducted on Friday, August 4th, 2017.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You grew up in an Evangelical home on the east coast of the United States up to 2000. After 2000, you moved to California. What was life like in an Evangelical "born again" home?

Melissa Krawczyk: Until I was about 15, I grew up outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was a great home. I had a great family. We went to church a lot, but not excessively. Most of my friends were probably from church, and I had friends at school as well. We went to church every week. Sometimes, we had Bible studies. In the Summer we spent at least a week or two at Vacation Bible School. Some of those are my best memories. My parents were very loving and friendly people.

We had restrictions like not listening to music. We described it as only being able to listen to elevator music, so if you'd walk into a major building downtown and you heard it in the elevator, that's about all we could listen to. So, no pop music. We didn't get to watch many movies. We did get to watch television, but it had to be pretty bland, and generic. Nothing offensive.

I didn't see a PG-13 movie until I was actually 13. My mom would let me go to dances, but we couldn't tell my grandparents. It was restrictive, but it didn't feel that restrictive as a child. There were just things we didn't do that other friends got to. But I had a lot of friends and we had a lot of fun at church.

I don't think I really realized that there was anything different from anyone else. It was just the way it was. It was a happy home life. I will say that I became much more fundamentalist and Evangelical myself as I grew older – late in high school and college. More so than my parents. My own views diverged greatly as time went on.

Jacobsen: What were the views of the young earth creationist family members when no one else was watching?

Krawczyk: I don't think any of us ever, ever thought of ourselves as young earth creationists. It was just the way it was for us. God created the Earth and everything in it in six, literal, 24-hour days, with a day to rest called the Sabbath. Adam and Eve were real people created by God and imbued with souls. They lived in this magical garden where there was no death. Everything was happy.

Dinosaurs, as far as I was aware, lived at the same time as people. There were references in the Bible that I was told referred to dinosaurs as "leviathans" or creatures with legs like Cyprus trees. They were big things. We were told that these were the dinosaurs. They lived alongside

people. I never had any concept of how old the Earth was according to modern, real science. A couple thousand years seemed plenty old to me.

There were two original people. When Eve was tempted by Satan in the form of a snake in the Garden of Eden to eat an apple, she shared it with Adam. They were kicked out and everything perfect went bad. Therefore, we had original sin from that day forward. Basically, that mistake cost all of us ever after. When we are born, we are separated from God because of that sin by that first man and woman.

I think the most important features were that God created the Earth and everything in it. He created man and woman as they are today. There was no evolution at all. Everything was created as individual species. There was no change from one thing to another. I remember hearing things like "Well, we're not descended from monkeys." I don't remember talking to my parents too much about it. I remember in school, the few times we started to talk in science about something that might touch on evolution, I remember them saying something like, "Just learn what you need to learn at school, we'll tell you the real truth at home."

They didn't make waves. They went stealth, under the radar. This is the right thing, anyone who teaches you otherwise is deceived. Sometimes people would say that scientists were being used by the Devil. That wasn't very common, and I can't say that I heard that from my own parents.

It was literal, 24-hour days. Humans appeared as they are. Even was created from Adams rib to be a helper, which subsequently meant that – I don't if if the word subservient ever came up, but man was the head of the household. Those things all go together.

Jacobsen: When did the young earth creationist view become untenable for you?

Krawczyk: I never really ran into anyone who questioned that until I was in college. Even then not a whole lot, because most of my friends were Christian from the Rensselaer Christian Association. I do remember, probably towards my senior year or even my first year in grad school, reading some books that were trying to reconcile the age of the Earth according to science with some of the creationist accounts in the Bible. I don't remember finding anything convincing, but I do remember reading a few books. I am surprised I found anything at the time, because they would have been in the Christian bookstore. We didn't really have the Internet resources yet, so it was a bit hard to find information. It was still tenable to me, even though I got to a point by the time I graduated as an undergrad where I didn't think it was a big deal if another Christian thought an old earth was possible. As long as they believed that God created everything or had a significant hand in moving it along, I wasn't so attached to the age of the Earth. It wasn't not a core belief.

It wasn't until a couple years after I graduated, that I was really encouraged to question things by my boyfriend at the time, who is now my husband. He would point something out as we were walking: "Look at that spider. Isn't it amazing that spiders evolved to do these amazing webs." He would tell me some scientific information and I would say, "It is an amazing example of God's beautiful design work." [Laughing] He would look at me. He couldn't believe that I really thought those things and he would ask me questions. We would argue back and forth about it. Eventually it got to the point when I realized that I didn't really understand enough of what evolutionary theory was to combat it. So I decided to start reading. [Laughing] You know what happens when you read… You learn things, [Laughing]!

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Krawczyk: Let me go back a bit, I think this was my year of grad school at RPI. The church I was involved in there was a Baptist church and they were the most strict, and most fundamentalist church I had ever been to and I was really involved with that church my whole time at school. They had an outreach program, where they would reach out to the new engineering students at RPI. They would suck us in, bring us to church, take care of us, feed us, love us. They were wonderful people. They were loving people, who were really happy to make us feel like we had a home away from home. One of the things that I do remember is going to an intensive course in young Earth creationist science. I think the guy whose material we used was Kent Hovind. Looking back now, there were some very fantabulous ideas about how the great flood came about, with a canopy of water over the Earth, how they fed all of the animals on the ark, etc.

I had gotten a full indoctrination on some of these theories of "creation science." I felt confident that this was really what happened. My pastor was telling me, and he'd studied, so clearly this was it. I don't think I ever thought to question anything or look at any source materials.

It wasn't until a few years after I graduated when my boyfriend was questioning me. I got frustrated that I couldn't win the argument, so I started reading more books, and I started learning about what evolutionary theory was. I realized I didn't know anything about it. The little snippets I got growing up were that we are not descended from monkeys. Well, no! That is not what evolutionary theory says. It doesn't say we're descended from monkeys. I learned about natural selection and about common ancestry and things I had never heard before. It was until I found a book called *Finding Darwin's God* by Kenneth Miller who I believe was either a microbiologist, or a cell biologist, but also a practicing Catholic, which, by that point I had decided *did* fall into the realm of Christianity.

Reading his book – and I read it twice, though I couldn't recall much of it right now – but he gave me permission to allow myself to think about the science as potentially true and yet not have to discard my belief in God. It had been framed as a choice like that to me for years. You either believe it all, or you're not a real Christian.

Jacobsen: I believe there is a term for that called False Dichotomy.

Krawczyk: Yes! Reading his book was a big turning point for me. It allowed me to look at the science and learn. I still believed in God. Miller gave something that was a potentially plausible way for both to be true – for me to continue believing and not have to turn my back on everything, but still advance with science.

I was an engineer. I was in materials science and engineering. I wanted to be an astronaut. I was not anti-science. I just had this big section of things that I was not allowed to touch. I didn't let myself analyze it. You are not encouraged to question these ideas as a child. It just is. It just is the way it is. I'd say about 15 years ago was when I really accepted evolution, but I was still a believer.

Jacobsen: What were your rationalizations for being a good Christian?

Krawczyk: We were taught from a very young age to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your soul." God is the person you love above all other people.

We were created to worship Him and to love Him. So, my rationalization for trying to be a good Christian was to show God that I loved Him. I wanted to do what was right. God was right. Anything that he said was right. Whatever commandments were in the Bible – those were right.

Showing your love for God was obedience to his commands. The Bible was literally true. I wanted to please him. I wanted to show that I was a good person. I wanted to go to Heaven.

Even though we were told that once you accept Jesus Christ into your heart as your personal Lord and Savior, and have a relationship with Him, that you were saved, and that you'd be together with God in Heaven, there was also definitely fear. Fear that I wasn't really good enough. Fear that I wasn't really saved, that I hadn't done it right. I've met a lot of other Christians who came from similar backgrounds who always worried that when they asked Jesus into their heart to save them from their sins, to wash away their sins. That we didn't do it right. That quite a few of us found ourselves doing it again. That saying the sinner's prayer – Lord forgive me, I accept Jesus into my heart – still left fear in the background.

Mostly, I was doing what I thought I was supposed to do. I believed there was an omniscient, omnipotent Creator who was up up there watching everything I did and I wanted to please Him. He was our Father; our Father in heaven. You want approval from your parents.

There was one other thing that made me want to try to be a good Christian. In high school, I wasn't terribly good. I fell away from the things that we were supposed to doing, like most teenagers, you get involved with relationships and I was a bit promiscuous, that sort of thing. When I got to college, that was my chance to really get it right. I was going to do everything right. That became a strong driver for me. That is when I became really, really rigid and much more fundamentalist than I was growing up.

Jacobsen: When did you fall in love after graduate school? And how, was the time simply ripe?

Krawczyk: It was shortly after I had mutually broken off an engagement with a guy in Scotland. I was determined to date no one, but I met Tom through a mutual friend. He was a great guy and I really liked him. He called me and wanted to take me out after we met at a party. The biggest problem was that he was not a Christian, not a believer. That was a *huge* problem, even though I liked him. That was unacceptable. You are taught not to be yoked with non-believers, because you will pull in different directions and you'll go in the wrong direction. You are only supposed to marry another believer, and really only be close friends with other believers. He had grown up without any religion at all.

His parents left Catholicism when they were teenagers. He was sort of a blank slate. He was willing to come to church with me. He came to Bible studies, he came to youth group meetings. He did all of these things. I figured that he was very interested and that if he was not a believer then, that he probably would be soon, so it was probably okay to date him. Once I told myself that, it was very fast. I just met the right guy. He was a great guy. It was pretty quick. It was a problem, though.

Jacobsen: Is that a common theme in interbelief partnerships or potential partnerships?

Krawczyk: I think it is a problem for a lot of people. It is a difficulty at least. It depends on how rigid your own beliefs are, how strong your own beliefs are, what type of background you came up in. There's a lot of negotiation. For Tom and I, it wasn't very difficult. He came to church but didn't believe any of the stuff. As long as I didn't try to make him believe anything, he was fine,

he was supportive. He didn't try to change my mind on anything. In this case, it was an overall easy situation. I was by far the most devout person he had ever met in his life. But I think it becomes more of an issue for a lot of people when you end up having children. We have two. Once we had our first child, it became more difficult because we had to navigate what things we would be teaching to our child.

Jacobsen: On the day after Christmas in 2010, you bought the book by Dan Barker entitled *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists.* **Did this trigger a transformation for you?**

Krawczyk: Absolutely. I have no idea how I heard about his book. Absolutely none. I don't know if I heard about it on a radio show or heard it being bashed or promoted. I have no idea. This is a plug for e-readers, because if I did not have a way to anonymously purchase that book, I would have never bought it. Kindle was a win. I had already had a number of friends encouraging me over the last 5 or 6 years, or even longer, to consider reading books and writing by people who did not believe, just to expand my understanding of other people. One of my friends was an atheist, but she didn't really call herself an atheist. Her family background was Hindu, but she did not believe in God. However I heard of this book, I think it intrigued me that he was an ex-Evangelical preacher and songwriter. It completely stunned me that someone could claim that they had left and become an atheist.

I read that book. As I read it, he went through the arguments, stages in faith, various small crises as he was going through faith. I identified so much with them, because I'd heard all of the same arguments and questions and answers. I call them "Sunday school answers."

By the end of it, I remember putting it down and sitting there quietly and saying out loud, "Everything I have ever believed is a lie." It was crushing and dark. It had systematically destroyed every argument that I had to support my faith. I did not know what to do. I didn't tell anybody that I read that book. I didn't tell my husband. It was a depressing Christmas vacation.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Krawczyk: [Laughing] It was about celebrating the birth of Jesus and I was thinking, "All of it might be wrong." It was really, very stressful. I don't remember how long after, but not long after I thought, "Well, this is one person's experience. I need to do some research.

I have to figure out if this is actually true or just one person?" So, I got online. Fortunately, we did have the internet at that point. I found a blogger named Rachel Held Evans who had written a book called *Evolving in Monkey Town*. She had grown up in an environment similar to mine in terms of the teaching that she'd received. She is pretty liberal. She had a blog that had all sorts of people and had things like "Ask A Lutheran," "Ask A Jehovah's Witness," "Ask A Mormon," and so on. I do not know if she did those particular groups, but at one point, she had "Ask An Atheist." I thought that was interesting. It was the first time I realized it was okay to ask questions. Other people asked questions and I was not the only one asking questions about what I believed.

It was shocking to see the variety and depth of what people in the world believed. I had been exposed to other religions from friends – Buddhism and Hinduism – but vaguely. This was the first time I realized how many different types of Christians there are and beliefs.

Dan's book started me on a path of reading and trying to understand, and learning, and asking questions a looking outside my own head for the first time ever. That was seven years ago or so. But I still believed for probably another four years.

Jacobsen: What is a positive of religion to you?

Krawczyk: Community. That is the one thing I remember from my childhood – always having people around who would care about you. It was like a big extended family. People you would probably get along with. If someone said they were a Christian, you knew they are probably very moral and good people [Laughing]. Those seemed like positives to me. Now I realize it's a little more complex than that. But definitely community. Belief gave me a sense of strength. With God, I felt I always had a friend, I always had someone to talk to, I had someone to help me through hard times. I had someone to help me be a better person. I found a lot of strength in that for many years.

Jacobsen: Within what is called the atheist movement now, of course, it is a number of sub-movements. Some of which do not even talk to each other.

Krawczyk: [Laughing] That's true.

Jacobsen: What are points of critique if you were taking a neutral outsider's view that the movements, plural, should take into account to become more effective? Also, what should be the next step for them?

Krawczyk: I like to think of it as the atheist community rather than a movement. I know there are various movements within it. Some of them really seem to be at odds. A critique from the outside – I have come from the outside very recently – it has only been about ten months since I discovered that there was an atheist movement or an atheist community.

So coming from the outside – it looks like we eat our own [Laughing]. There seems to be such a drive to make everybody the same. That reminds me of religion, sometimes. We are trying to be consistent in our aims, what we do, what we should do, what we should work towards, how we should do it, how we should think about different things.

But the only thing we necessarily have in common with another atheist is not believing in a God. Aside from that, you know nothing about someone else until you ask them. What are your values, what are your interests, what are your aims, your goals. My friend Armin Navabi, of Atheist Republic and I have talked about this before and I believe we agree pretty well in this area. There is room for everybody. There is room for all sorts of different aims within the atheist community or movement. I would like to encourage – and I'm working toward this – is not to build bridges that stand over time between different groups, but maybe build temporary bridges like those little military bridges that you put in when the river washes them out.

Jacobsen: Engineers build bridges. That is true.

Krawczyk: [Laughing] But build relationships, that allow people – who may disagree within the atheist community, that may disagree strongly on approaches or how to do something, or what we should be working for – that would allow us to work together to solve common problems, make common goals.

From the outside, there seems to be a lot of bickering and fighting. I don't think it appeals to a lot of people, even to some of us within it. I would like us to band together when necessary and do our own thing when not necessary. Does that make sense?

Jacobsen: Were you truly afraid of being seen as an "evil atheist, an apostate, a blasphemer, someone without morals"?

Krawczyk: Yes, I absolutely was. I am not sure I ever heard the term atheist when I was growing up. But I knew the one thing that could send you to Hell, was to turn your back on and deny the existence of God. Even when I realized I didn't believe in God anymore, I realized that my friends and my family and anyone else who believed that, would think that I was doing the most horrible thing and that I was an awful person for it.

So, that is where the blasphemy comes in. As far as having no morals, my mom said, recently, that she never taught me this. She never taught me that people who weren't believers had no morals. A lot of Christians believe that every person has the capacity to be good, but that is a gift from God. But a lot of others, including myself, believed that if you had not accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour, if you didn't have God in your life, that you had no ability to be moral morals and you had no moral compass. Your morals come from the Bible and indwelling of the Holy Spirit and being born again.

The idea that I would tell my family and my friends that I didn't believe and didn't have this. They would think that I was potentially an evil person. I would say that the most common question I have gotten since I publicly began telling people that I am an atheist is "Well, where do your moral come from?"

Sometimes people are curious and really asking but cannot comprehend how it can be possible. And you can sense that other people are saying it as "I've gotcha here! You are really not moral. You only think you are." I was afraid. I was definitely afraid. The other biggest aspect that kept me from telling people at first is that I didn't want to make my family sad. One of the things about being a Christian is that you believe that once you are saved and you're connected with God and your sins are forgiven, that once you die, you will go to heaven all of your family will be there. Everybody you love. All of the other believers will be there.

To tell my family that I do not believe, to them, is me committing blasphemy, which means I will be in Hell. That's a really big amount of pain to put on someone else. That kept me from talking about it for a long time.

Jacobsen: How should people come out? When should they be quiet and strategic?

Krawczyk: That is a tough question because there are so many situations people can be in and so many types of religions and so many family situations, family dynamics, social dynamics, and so on. I do not think there is a single answer to that question.

I'll start with when you should you be quieter, and more cautious – if you are coming out of Islam. I have developed quite a few friendships with ex-Muslims. Some of my friends have been physically threatened with death or actually injured for leaving Islam because the social penalty, in many places especially in Muslim-majority countries, can be death. There are 13 countries where you can receive the death penalty for being an apostate, which is renouncing Islam. You can imagine that there are places where even if it is not illegal that you can have vigilante "justice" in a way, where people can be in real danger. That is not as common in the US, or Canada, or the UK, but it definitely happens and more in the UK. That is an extreme situation, where you have to be very cautious. I wouldn't recommend it unless you have safe place to go, and protection and your own financial resources.

If you are in a place like I am – I'm in Southern California, pretty liberal place. I have lots of friends and support. It's not unsafe for me to come out. I don't know. It is a hard question. You have to be ready to be yourself and be able to defend your decision to not be quiet about it.

One of my family members asked me, "If you knew this was going to hurt your family. Why didn't you just keep it a secret?" I thought, "Why should I?" I asked, "Why should I keep this a secret when it is so important and affects the way I think about most things? Why should I have to hide this?"

If you are ready to deal with some flack in order to be yourself, that is when you should come out. That's why you come out. The more people who come out and are open and honest about being secular, being atheist, and ot having a belief in God, the easier it is for everybody else.

Right now, there is a perception that we are bad people. Really, there are a lot more of us than people think. A lot of us are uncomfortable; some people don't want to bother talking about it. Others don't think it's important to talk about. Others are just fearful of consequences, like I was. A little under two and half years, I was afraid of losing friends. I was afraid of losing business. You are immediately afraid of being tarred as an amoral person right off the bat – you can't possibly be good person. That is a big burden to carry.

Jacobsen: Does this speak to a tacit theocratic tendency in America?

Krawczyk: I think so. [Laughing] I'm not even sure it's tacit.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Krawczyk: It's very common. Religious people are better than non-religious people in the common thinking, at least among believers – even of various faiths. I often think it would have been easier on family and friends if I had switched faiths rather than left completely because then I would still believe in God.

Now, I have crossed that line. It's much harder for people to accept. We hear about America being a Christian nation – the U.S. being a Christian nation – and thinking our laws should reflect Christianity. So, there is a tendency for some people to want the U.S. to be a theocracy, for sure.

Jacobsen: You began to be known as your real self online. Was this scary?

Krawczyk: It was terrifying. It was only ten months ago. I became an atheist three years ago, but aside from telling a few people as I met them – as I met new friends I tested the waters by telling people. I did not post anything online that indicated I wasn't a believer.

Maybe, things that made me look like a much more liberal Christian than I had ever been before. In the end of October 2016, my husband and I attended CSICon. It was for the Center for Skeptical Inquiry, which is a branch of the Center for Inquiry. It was a conference for scientific skepticism. There is a high crossover between that community and the atheist community.

When we walked in, there was a photo booth for an organization called Openly Secular. Their aim is to promote people being open about being secular, non-religious, or atheist so that it becomes normalized, to reduce discrimination.

I took a deep breath and I dragged my husband over and we took a picture of ourselves in that frame and then one just of myself. I posted it on Instagram before lost my nerve. I was terrified. That was the first time I was ever going to say anything online that said I was not a believer. I

was posted it and I kept checking it and I didn't get a bunch of nasty comments. I got a bunch of likes. That was a big relief.

A couple of weeks later, it was *Openly Secular Day*. I changed that to my profile picture. I was shaking like a leaf to put that as my profile picture, on Facebook, to have my hundreds of friends and family members see that I was saying that I was openly secular.

It was absolutely terrifying. But I started getting likes. I saw a number of friends I already had were also secular. It was amazing. But, it was scary. I also started getting messages from people I hadn't talked to in years, and some family members, asking me to consider Pascal's Wager and sharing Bible verses that I have known very well my whole life.

They were worried about me and wanting to bring me back. It opened me up to a lot of criticism. It was very scary.

Jacobsen: Dr. Dawkins encouraged you to write a book about your transition and experiences. What was the result?

Krawczyk: I met Richard at that same conference – CSICon 2016. We started talking after I introduced myself and he was intrigued by the fact that I had been a young Earth creationist – that I had absolutely despised him and had been taught to despise him. Not by my parents. I don't remember anything from them, but through various apologetics and defending your faith classes that I'd been too.

For most of my life, since I'd heard of him, he was an awful, evil figure. He was just a horrible man. An arrogant, horrible person who was trying to destroy everything I believed in, so by the time I actually read his book, *The God Delusion…* [Laughing]

Jacobsen: [Laughing] We have all experienced that bullying of either being told that some famous person who doesn't believe is as such, or if they don't target the famous person, they target you.

Krawczyk: Exactly. So, I had thought he was a horrible, horrible person. But I'd actually booked tickets to that conference to thank him for writing *The God Delusion*. Because when I read that, about 4 years after I read Dan Barker's book, I got about two thirds of the way through that and realized that I was an atheist. I had already left those other beliefs behind and had gotten to the point where pretty much everything he said totally made sense. I had still, just prior to that, thought he was an arrogant jerk. [Laughing]. My husband reminds me of that now. My husband had said, "Why don't you read something he wrote rather than basing your opinions on stuff you've heard over the years? Just read something." So, I picked *The God Delusion* and that changed my life. Suddenly it gave me a name. I knew what I was. I knew what category I fell into and I wasn't the only one.

We kept in touch after the conference. I was in the process of telling family members that I was an atheist. He wanted to know how that went. We were corresponding and I was letting him know how it went with each person. At one point, a cousin on my husband's side completely cut me off on Facebook. He said he absolutely could not be friends, or in touch with me at all. He wasn't going to interact with me, or my family anymore, because he couldn't respect anyone who didn't believe in God. I was just devastated. I knew this was a possible risk, but I had known him for 18 years. I thought, "How can someone's opinion change so suddenly when they know me. They know who I am?" I was really upset. I wrote to Richard and told him what happened. I got a response back, which I sadly, can't find anymore, but basically said he was

filled with fury about how religion can poison families. Then, shortly after, I got a message that said that I needed to write a book. I thought, "No. I'm not writing a book" But my husband said, "Richard Dawkins just suggested that you write a book. I think you should look into this." [laughing]

I talked to Richard about it. He encouraged me to write my own story – it was unusual to come out of being a young Earth creationist and rather fundamentalist – and to tell the stories of other people. What has come out of that so far, is that I'm working on a book. The working title is *Losing Your Life to Save It,* and the idea is based on a Bible verse. That people have to sometimes lose everything that they care about in their lives – even risking their lives – to just be themselves, to be who you are and open about it, and to just *be.*

Richard said from the start that he would write the forward to the book and wanted to help by advising me. That is where it is now. I am gathering stories and will soon be putting out a survey to gather many more. I have at least 1,300 people waiting to fill out my next survey to talk about their experiences in various types of relationships and what life has been like, living as an atheist in the US and UK specifically. That is where we are at the moment. I'm writing a book!

Jacobsen: You have been involved with the publicizing and latter-planning for the LogiCal-LA conference, which is for the support of scientific skepticism. What is it? Any highlights that you would like to point out about it?

Krawczyk: Yes, it's a new conference. It started last year in January. Bruce Gleason of the Orange County Freethought Alliance is the organizer. He runs the conference. Last year, we had a nice group. We had Sean Carroll, the physicist, as the keynote speaker. We had a lot of different great scientists from around the country and local in California. We are trying to support critical thinking, science education, and rational thought.

Los Angeles is a popular area where people live and visit, but we don't really have anything that happens right there in that area. We are trying to gather some great minds and people who are interested in science and learning and thinking. We are trying to promote rational thought and critical thinking in the country. We really think it is lacking at this point and could use a boost.

Jacobsen: What are your next steps after the organizing and book?

Krawczyk: The book will probably take another year or two. I would like to continue helping with LogiCal-LA. I want to learn… I attended the *International Conference for Freedom of Expression*. Maryam Namazie's conference in London – in July. I have been learning about the plight of ex-Muslims around the world. I've studied Arabic on and off for about 12 years and I have a BA in Arabic Language and Culture. I am particularly interested in people leaving Islam. I am interested in Arabic cultures and have a lot of Muslim friends.

I'm not sure exactly where I want to go, but I want to support secularism and the separation of church and state in this country. I want to help in any way that I can in normalizing atheism to the point where no one has to be afraid I like I was. No one had to be afraid to come out and say what they believe. I want people to understand, whether religious or non-religious, that families don't have to be torn apart because of differences in belief.

We all can get along. We can all *be*. I'm not sure as to what the efforts will be, they are all going to be in support of those ideals. A lot of the work for the next couple of years will be going into this book. Like I said before, I'm in a position where I'm unlikely to have any real problem being out – out loud and proud about being an atheist. But a lot of people in the world are not in that

situation I really want people to know that there is discrimination and it is very hard for people, even in the United States, Canada, and the UK, and it shouldn't be. It shouldn't have to be this way.

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

Tim Klapproth on the Jehovah's Witnesses

March 12, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was like with the Jehovah's Witnesses in early life?

Tim Klapproth: being a third generation witness I knew nothing else so it's hard to express. The school was tough. I was bullied throughout and was fearful of 'worldly' kids. Christmas and birthdays were awful and I was always promised that we would have present days to 'make up for it' but this only happened twice. I felt that I was missing out on something that had zero scriptural foundation. The pressure from the family to study, preach and grow spiritually was intense and this led me to lead a double life as I became a teenager. I was insular, intense, and secretive. I married the first girl who smiled at me and was divorced by 30 with three children.

Jacobsen: What seems like some of the pivotal moments in that early development regarding the Jehovah's Witnesses?

Klapproth: The decision to be baptized when I was 15. I did not have any comprehension of what a dedication is and that it means losing my whole social circle if I 'lose faith'. My ability to make decisions that were measured and backed by reason was not formed until my thirties.

I also was shaken by the way my congregation friends were treated by their own parents when we were often found breaking the rules. My father as a city overseer and a great and sought-after speaker was very strict with me.

Whereas all my friends' fathers just shrugged and said boys will be boys. This strict attitude extended as far as requiring me to read the lyrics and almost present my case, should I want to buy an album or CD. My dad rejected most of my choices.

I was also expected to leave school and pioneer. I 'went along' with all these things. The power over me was incredible in that it was so controlling yet I was not aware of it. A silent pressure, steering me towards a goal that I'd not wished for myself.

Jacobsen: What were the main parts of the JW faith that made you think, "I cannot believe this. It is illogical, without evidence, and beyond doubt false as a faith"?

Klapproth: The creation account. However, until my late twenties, I was proud of my counter argument against evolution. I'd done my research (within the constraints of Watchtower publications of course) and felt very confident on this topic.

When I later heard Prof Richard Dawkins rail against the mid-quote of the Watchtower and subsequently the ACTUAL explanation of the theory (and what the word theory meant…) a light was flicked on in my brain and in many ways, I had all I needed to leave the cult.

It was based on lies, spread by many well-meaning people and lead mainly by power hungry small minded weak men.

Jacobsen: What are common signs that one has psychologically and emotionally left the faith?

Klapproth: It's a huge step. You risk losing everyone you've known. To take that step is not done lightly however in my case, once I had cut ties; I felt freer than I can express.

In my case, I studied Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett, and Harris which reaffirmed that God is a man-made concept and that religion is man's way of exerting power over the flock. The psychological effect on me was palpable.

Although I did go off the rails a little, trying all the things I'd missed earlier in life, I was happier than I'd ever been. However, when I turned forty things started to change. I became fixated on my past and with disproving to my parents that their faith was based on nonsense.

This was only curbed when I had to counsel in 2017. Since that time though my father has died and I feel that I didn't finish our conversation.

Jacobsen: What are some peculiar experiences of those once deeply within the Jehovah's Witnesses who have left them – stories only ex-JWs know?

Klapproth: I'm probably not the only person to share the ridiculous process of 'only men can lead'. I was leading all of the daily meetings for field service at fifteen, ahead of a whole team of experienced women who had been handling the meetings alone for years.

I had no clue how to lead, how to work the map effectively or how to pray and inspire. I also am surprised to see that friends of mine I grew up with and lead a double life like me are still in the religion.

In many cases they acted and behaved far worse than I. We drank, swore, tried to pick up girls (never successful in my case) and sneaked into nightclubs and concerts that we'd never be allowed to attend.

Threw wild parties, misbehaved and ridiculed the society and elders. Then I hear that they're now an elder. They didn't have and unless they have had a road to Damascus experience, still don't have a spiritual bone in their body!

Finally, the silly process of 'counting time'. I spent almost two years (of my 12 years) pioneering without knocking on a single door. I worked along with my best friend and we just mimed the door knock.

A total and utter waste of our time. I habitually lie about the time is spent in the ministry. Missing my time target by a country mile each year. One of the triggers that prompted me to ask what I was doing with my life was this very fact.

I was in my late twenties, married to a violent woman who made me miserable (she was a victim of child abuse that was covered up by her parents and 'left to Jehovah…' this leads her to be extremely violent and a man hater) I was poor due to part-time work and wasting my life.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Klapproth: I left the JW's without being shunned by my family. The circuit overseer I met with said that he could see I did not identify or claim to be a JW and that my only spiritual influence was that of my family.

Retaining my relationship with them might mean that I would be tempted back and so he let me fade. That said, I did lose all my friends and I'm excluded from family weddings etc., but I have retained a relationship of sorts since 2000.

I'm struggling with my conscience now though. I want to challenge my family about the two witness rule regarding child abuse. Not that I want them to leave as such but they live their family.

They are at the heart of the congregation and would be horrified to think what is actually happening. I'd like them to be able to hear the actual truth and then challenge the organization from within.

JW's are mostly not bad people. They simply follow the lead set and do not think critically.

Jacobsen: Also, your email signature is the following:

"To do is to be" – Nietzsche

"To be is to do" – Kant

"Do be do be do" – Sinatra

Why?

Klapproth: It's just a funny quote. It's not good to take things too seriously…

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

Another Call from the World Sikh Organization

March 12, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The World Sikh Organization (WSO) of Canada continues its activism with the ongoing smearing of the Sikh community at large.

Note, this does not amount to Sikhophobia. Rather, it comes to anti-Sikh bigotry, individuals with religious beliefs not religion.

There have hundreds of articles in the media over three weeks, or more, tarring an entire community as radicals with rising extremism.

Some have stood to protect their image. The WSO has worked hard to keep a positive image in spite of the accusations against the Canadian Sikh community.

The Sikh community of Canada, much of it, according to the WSO, argues against the human rights violations in India, but protest this in a peaceful manner.

As the WSO said in an email that I received, “We are proud Canadians who believe in the rule of law, freedom of expressions, and upholding freedom of religion.”

Sikhs, fellow Canadians, need a strong, supportive voice in the light of the controversial motion, which does not need too much detailing as it has been in the news.

The motion if advanced in a firm way would greatly harm the image of Sikhs potentially leading to increased hate crimes against individual Sikhs, as happens with those following the Islamic and Jewish faiths in Canada, as shown in high numbers of anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic hate crimes in this country.

Sikhs have been reaching out to their local representatives. We can reach out too.

Adeyemi Ademowo Johnson on Freethought in Nigeria

March 13, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: As an associate professor and affiliate faculty in multiple departments, what is the situation for free thought in Nigeria?

Adeyemi Ademowo Johnson: Freethought is still unpopular in Nigeria; although there are so many youngsters who doubt their beliefs, they have not muster sufficient courage to openly express their admiration for freethought and desire to treat religion with caution.

Jacobsen: Do you have more hope for the younger generations?

Johnson: Yes! I definitely believe that the younger generation will realize that it is foolish to kill in the name of any faith or any God and that all we have are one another as humans.

Jacobsen: While teaching and designing programs for the sociology department at Afe Babalola University, do you incorporate aspects of critical thinking into the curricula?

Johnson: Yes! The University where I teach, Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti, prioritizes entrepreneurial skills development; this makes it imperative for many of the students to offer courses in critical thinking and creative thinking. I, for instance, developed and teach a course: Sociology of Creativity and Innovation. Critical Thinking is an integral part of the course. There are other courses that encourage critical thinking to satisfy its outlines.

Jacobsen: What do you consider the more pertinent topics in sociological discussion within Nigerian society?

Johnson: There are two of them: religion and active citizenship. In religion, indoctrination of the young ones, Boko Haram recruitment of children/women as suicide bombers and the brazen display of wealth by Pentecostal pastors are issues that have dominated academic discourses. The importance of citizens in democratic governance and their attitudes towards tackling corruption are other issues. These are issues at the heart of sociological discourses from diverse angles.

Jacobsen: Does religion have sway over the political environment of the country?

Johnson: Religion and religious leaders have a place in our political landscape. Aspirants lay claims to being ordained or 'called' by God to contest for elections to get favours; they also attend big Pentecostal revivals and crusades to show their loyalty to and believe in religion. Humanists are rarely taken serious and sometimes demonized when they should interest in politics or to contest.

Jacobsen: As you work for the Humanist Association for Peace and Social Tolerance Advancement (HAPSTA) , what are your tasks and responsibilities?

Johnson: Humanist Association for Peace and Social Tolerance Advancement (HAPSTA) is the first Humanist association to be registered formally by the Nigerian Corporate Affairs Commission. I am one of the driving forces that worked relentlessly for this as the President. I later became the Projects Director in charge of HAPSTA life changing projects like 'Humanist Against WitchKilling in Africa', Stigmatized Children Rights Project (SCRIP), Omuo Humanist Against WitchKilling and Stigmatization', Humanist Anti-Indoctrination Project (HApI) and Youth Leadership and Tolerance Training Project. I work to manage and raise funds for these

projects which have been funded in the past by HAMU, Norway; Swedish Humanist Aid, Africa Unite Against Child Abuse (AFRUCA, UK). I also coordinate the international links for the organisation. As a member of HAPSTA Board of Trustees, I represent it at fora and work with others to coordinate its activities.

Jacobsen: How does HAPSTA advance the humanist movement in Nigeria?

Johnson: Yes! Through our activities targeted at fulfilling our objectives. Our objectives as an organisation include:

*spreading the ideals of humanism, peace culture, social tolerance and peace education
* fighting against superstition and superstitious beliefs that violate dignity of the human person, indoctrination that promote hate and violence, and policies capable of promoting disunity and social intolerance
* advocating and campaigning for Humanity's freedom from being persecuted for their opinions, beliefs, sexual orientation and values, to prevent disenchantment that may result in violent conflict.
* promoting the development of ethical, peaceful and social tolerance conscious youths, through the promotion of peace education

Apart from representing and supporting our members and networks, HAPSTA also support human cause through the following projects:

1. SCRIP – Stigmatized Children Rights Project (which campaign against child-witch labeling and killing in many states across Nigeria
2. ARK-C: Anti-Ritual Killing Campaign (which works to dissuade people from thinking that human parts, including those of Albinos, hunchback, etc can be used for charms, money-making, among others)
3. CAJUJ: Campaign Against Jungle Justice (a very common phenomenon in Nigeria and other parts of the world, Jungle Justice is against the tenets of human rights and many innocent people have lost their lives through this miscarriage of justice)
4. SEMSUP: Sexual Minorities Support Project (which support the LGBTI community in Nigeria and around Africa)
5. HASTEP: Humanist and Social Tolerance Education Project
6. SCHCEP: Street Children Care and Empowerment Programme

Jacobsen: Who is a personal hero or exemplary for you regarding the humanist movement?

Johnson: Levi Fragell!

Jacobsen: How can individuals within the country or in neighboring nations of the African Diaspora help out with the humanist and irreligious movement in Nigeria?

Johnson: Support and participate in our activities.

Jacobsen: How can anyone else help regarding donations, remote skills assistance, advertisement and exposure, and so on?

Johnson: Let me start by appreciating the Norwegian Humanist Association and the Swedish Humanists, they have really supported financially and human capital development in the past years. Other well-established groups can get in touch with us for supports: funding of our 'Anti-Indoctrination' Campaign handbills; annual social tolerance leadership training for youths,

invitation to attend humanist programmes; support for website hosting, etc. We would really appreciate supports that would strengthens the group more.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts?

Johnson: Having been a humanist for about 18years; a university teacher for over a decade and worked with a lots of children and women stigmatized as witches, I am convinced that the world needs humanism and critical thinking. Hence, I would be happy to work with any Humanist Foundation and initiatives that will promote its humanist ideals in Africa and other continents.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Yemi.

Diana Bucur on Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses

March 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was like like with the Jehovah's Witnesses in early life?

Diana Bucur: I was born into the Jehovah's Witnesses so I didn't really know any different. My parents made it sound as if I had a much better life compared to the other children. However I didn't feel comfortable, I could never understand why I couldn't celebrate birthdays and I wasn't always comfortable around other children my age.

Jacobsen: What seems like some of the pivotal moments in that early development regarding the Jehovah's Witnesses?

Bucur: In my mind, I used to question many things but I was inside the community, I couldn't really talk to anyone about my concerns and I was comfortable within the community so I didn't examine my faith thoroughly. I remember once I read some articles online, about JWs, written by ExJws. I told my father what I read and it made me think but he said I should never read things like that as it's forbidden.

Jacobsen: How did you begin to question your personal faith in the Jehovah's Witnesses?

Bucur: I used to have questions as I was growing older but the turning point was when I researched articles about the JWs Russian trials. The information on JWs website (JW.org) was very biased and different compared to what the other newspapers were saying. That is when I thought we are not presented with the true facts. Afterwards I spoke to my Aunt about what I read and how different jw.org presents the facts and her answer was: well surely the other newspapers are lying. That was a significant point when I started to realise how mind controlled we were.

Jacobsen: What are common signs that one has psychologically and emotionally left the faith?

Bucur: I believe it starts with a feeling of Anger, discovering that one's been lied and manipulated for so long. Then it is the da disappointment felt when people that you believe are friends and family abandon you suddenly, even if they don't know why they do it. It's enough for someone to tell them not to speak to you, they won't try and look for explanations. That is when you realise that even your parents love has been conditional. There is obviously a loneliness that is very painful.

Jacobsen: What are some peculiar experiences of those once deeply within the Jehovah's Witnesses who have left them – stories only ex-JWs know?

Bucur: I got in touch with some friends who left the religion few years before me, and got to find out their real story. When they left, the JWs in my local congregation invented so many lies about them (that they burnt the literature in a ritual, that they are actually gay etc). They picture the ones that chose to leave as Mentally ill people, wicked, people they only try to hurt you. And it's only when you leave and get to speak to them that you realise they are loving and caring.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Bucur: My main regret is that my husband is still a JW and he refuses to look at the organisation in an objective manner. My marriage has been happy but the problem created by this religion created a huge strain on our marriage.

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

TWIN with Kevin and Benedict on Their Show

March 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Kevin and Benedict** are colleagues. We have written and worked together. They have a podcast called **This Week in News with Kevin and Benedict**. I like them. Here's their story. Kevin grew up in Sacramento California, where he conquered his enemies and saved the city from annihilation multiple times. He currently attends UC Berkeley as a Political Science major. He also worked as a heavy equipment mechanic for 5 years before college. He enjoys cigars, hockey (Go Sharks), politics, and saltwater fish tanks. Benedict is a Brit living in the US. He studied Spanish and Portuguese at Oxford University before moving on to a career in political punditry and journalism.*

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You two are friends. You run a podcast called TWIN or This Week in News with Kevin and Benedict. What are the things that you two talk about that may be of interest to potential listeners?

Benedict: We try to look at the news. There is a lot of mass hysteria about the news. If you want to get the news, you can get that. We like to talk about the news in a way that makes us feel better. If we do not laugh, we will cry.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Benedict: We will try to rationalize and laugh about them because the world is hopeless and on fire.

Kevin: *[Laughing] We are basically a political show. We come at it from our perspective, which is two atheist humanists. Obviously, we have complete editorial control over our content.*

Benedict: I have complete control.

Kevin: *That is true. It is almost impossible to not talk about the Trump Administration. It is hard to escape the black hole gravitational pull of Trump and the administration. We have t actively look for stories to talk about besides that.*

We look at religious overreach into our culture. If we lived in a Trump-free America, we would be able to focus more on the "fun stories" like church-state separation issues. These days, we try to make sense in this nuclear-armed rogue state on your Southern border.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] How does this graduate training in Spanish and Portuguese at Oxford University help with understanding some of the news items of the day? As a friend, I have never heard you speak Portuguese.

Kevin: *Give him a chance, he will go at it.*

Benedict: [Laughing] I think more than the languages themselves. It is an appreciation of cultural differences that help me with that. Having spent time in four different countries now, I feel that I can come at things from a different angle now.

I can have an empathy for people with cultural differences. That is more useful to me than the languages themselves. It is not often that we talk about the news from Spain and Portugal in

particular because there is too much news that happens in our own country, which we get wrapped up in.

Travelling broadens the mind, I hope that has done that for me.

Jacobsen: How has your education at UC Berkeley helped your work in the podcast? It is the third-ranking university in the world, I hear.

Benedict: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: You went to the University of Oxford.

Benedict: It is the #1 university in the world.

Kevin: Go fuck yourself.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] The premier institution in the world. From the United Kingdom premier educational institution in the world perspective, also, Kevin, a highly reputable institution in North America at UC Berkeley in the United States.

These are different cultural experiences, but high-quality educational experiences. This must influence the perspectives that you bring to the podcast.

Kevin: *Yes.*

Benedict: We are really smart [Laughing].

Kevin: *[Laughing]*.

Jacobsen: This is true.

Kevin: *I have direct training in political science. Obviously, I have direct training on these sorts of things that we talk about on the show. I think there is something that we haven't explicitly talked about. But Benedict and I, in the back of our minds, we are very cognizant of that.*

We are the epitome of two elitist coastal liberals.

Benedict: It is part of our brand [Laughing].

Kevin: *[Laughing] It is part of our brand. We don't play down that we are that. But we try to recognize that when we talk about topics because most people don't have the background that we have. We try to – or at least I do; Benedict, I don't know about him. He is just an elitist snob.*

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Kevin: *We try and recognize that everyone has had the benefit of all of this training and education when we are talking about this issue. We try to explain this as plainly as possible and with analogies that are more easy to digest.*

Benedict: Beyond that, not everyone has the time to think about these things, how lucky are we to be able to think about these things and not worry about where the next meal is going to be coming from?

Jacobsen: Do you notice an undercurrent that may have actually bolstered and is still a bulwark for the Trump Administration of a resentment for the "Hollywood elites" or the "Liberal Establishment"?

Kevin: *Oh, definitely.*

Benedict: It is a faux one because they voted for a reality TV president. It is just like if Hollywood disagrees with you, which it does a lot of the time. *Fox News*loves having conservative actors on. They love it!

Kevin: *There is this not so hidden disdain for college and education. Not hidden at all! In their movie, on their radio, if you go over to* Right Wing Watch, *right-wing Evangelicals criticizing the education system in the United States because they believe it creates liberalism.*

Education doesn't make you a liberal.

Benedict: It helps.

Kevin: *It helps. The educational process helps you realize the things that you were taught as a far-right fundamentalist aren't true.*

Jacobsen: Reality leans liberal.

Kevin: *Yes.*

Jacobsen: That leads to a question. What are the things – if we are taking the metaphor of Left-Right as the spectrum – those on the traditional Left get wrong? Within the context of a comedy-political podcast, what things deserve ridicule, humor, and incisive analysis?

Kevin: *There are a lot of things that we on the Left do that are goofy and silly. We are prone to our own types of woo. There are a lot of people on the Left who are the natural green mommy who say, "I want to be all natural."*

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Kevin: *There are anti-nuclear people on our side. There is a huge difference between the Left and the Right. Our wackos on the Left are far less dangerous than the ones on the Right.*

Benedict: The thing is, our wackos don't run things when they get into power; theirs do. For me, I would go further than Kevin. The things like the technocratic worship on the Left. I think there is a lot of pandering to the centre-right that we still do on the Left.

Jacobsen: Do you mean the technological utopianism?

Benedict: Yes, the way people see Obama, Macron, and Trudeau to an extent run things. That technology will solve all of the problems.

Kevin: *Relying heavily on experts is a big feature of technocratic thought.*

Benedict: I feel like you are mocking me with that.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Kevin: *The reliance on experts is not a bad thing. It is overreliance. It is assuming that your expert has the answer to all problems is the problem with technocrat philosophy.*

Benedict: I think you are right, Scott, with the technological utopianism. It is "if we just did this, then all of the problems would be solved." There is a short-sightedness. What problems will that create?

Kevin: *It is a big problem caused by the demographics behind the Left. It is this short-sightedness. The Left has trouble getting people to go out to vote. You have people who aren't*

enthusiastic about an election. Literally, that is all it takes. It was 77,000 votes in the right places would have put Hillary Clinton in the White House.

You did not have enough people excited about the election. There are more people on the Left than the Right. There are more people who lean Left that aren't registered than Republicans. Republicans are old white folks who show up, who vote.

Jacobsen: What do you consider the big split between the news items we see on the conservative and the liberal sides, the Democratic or the Republican sides, or the Left and the Right sides?

Benedict: You can look at the news and predict what the *Fox News* top stories are going to be. I do not think that you should be able to do that. You can predict the angle they will take. You can do that to an extent with the *Huffington Post*, but they know their audience 100% and know what will sell with them.

Kevin: *The whole Liberal Media, or the Left-leaning media, the flat-out unbiased media, there is no way that there is no bias in media. Sources like the* Washington Post *and* The New York Times. *People got pissed at them for publishing a bunch of op-eds from Trump supporters a couple of weeks ago.*

People who go out of their way to get the other side of the story. The reason why we often see stories that are uncovered by the conservative media or have such spin that it is so incredible. You see a headline and think, "Wow, this is a whacked out twist on the story." The reason is there is so much more.

On the Left, you have almost every newspaper in America. The big cable news networks other than Fox News. *You have most radio,* NPR, *and that stuff. It is a matter of choosing what to cover. Whereas, the mainstream media covers every story that they can. They do not omit stories.*

The Right has the option of omitting stories because they know they are the only sources that the conservatives will go to and so they can shape the stories the way they want to.

Jacobsen: The end.

Interview with Dina Holford on Being an Ex-Jehovah's Witness

March 15, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you grow up with religion? Was it central or peripheral to your life?

Dina Holford: My mother was baptized as one of Jehovah's witnesses whilst heavily pregnant with me. She had been a regular recreational drug taker until she had a knock at the door and started a bible study.

My dad, however, although having studied with Jehovah's witnesses on/off, was more inclined to Wicca and was still taking drugs after I was born before quitting when I was around the age of 7.

My father was initially opposed to my mother raising me as a witness, even having taken her to court over the blood issue, however gradually softened. I went to meetings on/off during my childhood before completely stopping before my teens.

I then underwent a moment of wanting spirituality and decided to have a bible study at the age of 15. I became an active member of the congregation and was baptized just weeks after my 17th birthday.

I would say, from the age of 15, this particular religion was my entire life. I was so absorbed in it, that I now realize my family was pushed out because it had taken over. It was the number one thing in my life.

Jacobsen: When did you first begin to have small doubts about the Jehovah's Witnesses?

Holford: I always had some niggle in the back of my mind, but I always pushed it aside and pretended it wasn't there. Occasionally, I would come across what was deemed "apostate" words online, and naturally, I thought, why would there be so much hatred for a religion which was meant to be "the truth"?

Curiosity led me to read some of it, mainly relating to shunning, and you then try not to question why such kind loving people would treat people like they are dead.

Jacobsen: How did you begin to have strong doubts and even misgivings with the Jehovah's Witnesses?

Holford: the two big things that led to my serious doubts were when my mother was disfellowshipped, and then when I had begun pioneering. My mother was disfellowshipped when I was about 18.

She was an alcoholic, and the elders had met with her a few times, but after she was spotted out drinking and having a sneaky cigarette, they called for a judicial meeting. Instead of offering her any support, suggesting ways to get help, or even offering to go with her, they told her she was being disfellowshipped.

I remember the day clearly as she came home crying badly. At that moment, I hadn't realized how serious it was. But then the elders came to speak with me (at that time, I was no longer living at home).

They told me that unless there was an emergency situation such as my dad having been rushed to hospital with something life-threatening, I would not be able to have any form of contact with her at all.

At the time, I couldn't understand it. I was feeling very hurt, and they were pushing the thought into my head that my mother was a bad person who didn't love "Jehovah" and was on "Satans side". I became angry and would slam down the phone, not answer the door, or visit my family.

Then one day, my father spoke with me and told me that if I cut my mother off, my family would no longer have any sort of relationship with me. That is when I began to realize what I was doing to my own mother. I felt like suddenly I was thinking for myself.

My bubble burst and I began to realize that shunning isn't loving and that I had caused more hurt and pain in a few months, than showing love and support which my mother needed. I then resumed my relationship with her secretly. Around this time, I was also pioneering.

This is also where I began to have major doubts. I could see pioneers being put on pedestals and there was this hierarchy I couldn't understand. I remember a brother calling pioneers and above, "the elite". It was as though you were better than those you were meant to be equal to.

Behind the scenes, there was so much pressure to be preaching, and to be the best. If you had more bible studies, you were better than the rest…it was this sort of thinking. Getting time in, though was one of the worst pressures.

I fell ill the year before I left, whilst still pioneering, and there was an immense pressure to get the hours in. Realising that I couldn't do it and was severely depressed and in pain, I had a visit from the elders who decided to take me off pioneering (preaching for 70 hours a month).

I reluctantly agreed because of my health. Once this was announced, it was like they had announced I had leprosy. No one looked at me the same again. I wondered where the love was, and where my support was.

Jacobsen: What do those who leave gain and lose at the same time within the few years after leaving the JWs?

Holford: Unexpectedly for me, I fell in love with someone who wasn't one of Jehovah's witnesses and was accused of fornication and was disfellowshipped. I lost my home, I lost my friends, I lost what I thought was everything.

Being one of Jehovah's witnesses puts you in some sort of untouchable bubble which is your entire life. You are cut off from the outside world. I didn't know how to work, how to live, how to be happy…It was like being a baby all over again in a world which you had been brought up to believe was very scary and evil.

All of a sudden, you are treated like you have died, and you have to grovel for forgiveness. Then a group of men has to decide whether you are repentant enough! I couldn't go back. Starting anew made me feel free.

I found love, I gained life skills and found work, rented my first house, had children…Being away from this religion has brought my family together, and made a massive difference to my mental health especially.

Although I still suffer from depression, I am happier than I ever have been. I am under no pressure from any human to please God in the way they dictate or to live up to any HUMAN standards. I have complete control over my own life, and finally feel like I am living and not just surviving.

Jacobsen: If you have any advice for those individuals who are thinking of leaving the religion, what would it be for them? How can they leave safely? Why should be concerned about it? Why should they be happy about it?

Holford: My advice would be to really really think about the basic teachings of this religion. The biggest principle they claim to live by is love. Does shunning really bring people back out of love for God, or out of fear and through guilt tripping? Is shunning really such a loving act?

And is there really enough internal support as they claim? If you have any doubts, then don't ignore them. You have every right to happiness as the next person. It is definitely not going to be easy, and perhaps the easiest way is to slowly fade as many do, but do not deny yourself the chance to be free from pressure and negativity and man's ideas of how you should live your life and how worthy you are to be a worshipper of God.

Do not allow your life to be dictated for you by a group of men. Plan ahead, and definitely find support groups…there are many online for ex-witnesses. They are a haven for people who have been through this before and who are still going through the heartache caused by these people.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Holford: 2 years on, I realize leaving was the best thing that happened to me. I am free. Never deny yourself happiness, never live a lie.

We are only here for a tiny spec of time, and we should enjoy the time we are here. We don't know what may happen tomorrow, we may not even wake up. So why waste time? Be happy be free.

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

Justine Nelson on the Pipeline Issues

March 15, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Justine Nelson is a collaborator and friend on volunteer projects, especially writing (here and here) over more than a year or two now. Collaborations started after a smudging ceremony. Nelson is the Coordinator for the PIPE UP Network, works with a variety of non-profits, and an M.Ed. student studying Education for Sustainability. Here we talk about some updates on pipeline issues.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's jump straight to the point of the chat today, what are the big concerns and issues for locals, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, regarding pipelines in the Lower Mainland?

Justine Nelson: Climate change, Indigenous justice, and rights over their territories, oil spills, increased tanker traffic, expansion of the tar sands.

The list of concerns is long but ultimately the expansion of the Trans Mountain Pipeline, and as a result of the tar sands, is not in line with the sustainable, just transition to a fossil-free future we envision.

Jacobsen: Regarding the main pipeline of concern, the Kinder Morgan Pipeline, what is its status of construction and progress? How are the current group activists working together?

Nelson: Kinder Morgan is not allowed to start construction of the Trans Mountain expansion on public lands until it meets all the requirements set out by the NEB, which it has not yet done.

At this point the CEO has said they hope to start construction in 2020, we know that is not going to happen. It has, unfortunately, gotten permission from the NEB to bypass Burnaby bylaws and begin the expansion of its tank farm up on Burnaby Mountain.

There is a big resistance to this, and various groups have been challenging the construction. Camp cloud has been up there for months disrupting work, with a group called the Justin Trudeau Brigade.

Last Saturday, March 10, saw the biggest mobilization against Kinder Morgan yet, with up to 10 thousand people coming out to support the Tsleil-wautuths building of a watch house, which is currently being occupied at all times on Burnaby Mountain.

They are exerting their rights to protect the land and water. Groups across the lower mainland, including PIPE UP, are coming together in various capacities to support this work.

Jacobsen: In the case of a spill, which seems relevant right into the present with the Kinder Morgan and other pipelines, what tends to happen to the environment, e.g., the water, the land, the plant and animal life, and the human communities?

Nelson: Historically we have seen that Kinder Morgan is not responsive to spills. In 2012 when there was a spill at the Sumas tank farm in Abbotsford, it took 6 hours to get a Kinder Morgan operator on the scene.

Local schools had to be evacuated because the fumes from the spill were being inhaled by students, some of whom had to make a trip to the emergency room. This stuff is toxic!

If a spill happens in water Diluted Bitumen is known to sink, making clean up essentially impossible.

One of the most frustrating, and darkly humorous, parts of the spill conversation, is that Kinder Morgan owns a majority stake in at least one oil clean up company. Meaning they make money when oil spills happen.

Jacobsen: We have three arguments, at least: moral duties based on compassion, Indigenous rights (UNDRIP), and economic.

Even if someone is not swayed, at least not in full, by moral duties to fellow human beings' wellbeing with the risks associated with an oil pipeline spill, and even if someone rejects, at least in part, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, what are the short-term, at this point, *and* long-term economic benefits to rejection of coal, oil, and gas in favour of alternative energy sources?

Nelson: Well, I am certainly not the expert on the economic side. My motivation in this is definitely aligned with Indigenous rights and protecting the earth for future generations.

Projects like Kinder Morgan threaten many employment opportunities in tourism, food production, fisheries, etc. The minimal, and it is minimal, number of jobs created through this project can be found elsewhere if we put more effort into moving towards a clean energy future.

Even Bill Nye pointed out to Trudeau in an interview the other day that it political will that is missing from the transition, not a plan of how to transition. We could do it, the petrostate just doesn't want to.

With Climate change happening now, the impacts will only continue to get worse, our economy will suffer because of this, and if we don't start transitioning to a clean energy, resilient community-oriented society, then that impact will only be more exasperated.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Nelson: I think the only thing I would add is that if you feel called to act, now is the time. Go up to Burnaby mountain, support the Tsleil-waututh and other grassroots people organizing and resisting Kinder Morgan's blatant disregard for the lack of consent for their bitumen shipping pipeline expansion.

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

Professor Matt Sheedy on Theories of Secularism and Atheism

March 20, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: As a lecturer at the University of Manitoba and a visiting assistant professor of Canadian Studies at the Universität Bonn**, what tasks and responsibilities come along with the positions? What are your favorite courses to teach at the University of Manitoba?**

Dr. Matt Sheedy: Having recently completed my PhD in the study of religion, I am currently on the market in search of the elusive tenure track job. I teach part time at the University of Manitoba in the Department of Religion, and have a one-year contract (likely to be renewed for a second year) in Bonn, Germany in the department of North American Studies. My favourite courses to teach at the UofM have been science and religion, and religion and media. Relatedly, I've taught and will be teaching classes on media representations of Islam, and Indigenous traditions in North America at the University of Bonn, which has been great since non-tenured scholars rarely get to craft their own courses from scratch.

Jacobsen: You have an expertise in theories of secularism and religion. What are the main bases of these fields? What are the main theories of secularism and religion?

Sheedy: That's a great question, though a very meaty one … let's see if I can pull off an "elevator" version here. In the last couple of decades there has been a lot of scholarly work tracing histories and genealogies of the category religion (i.e., definitions and classifications) and how it has been applied in different times and places, especially in relation to non-Christian groups. Although critical analysis of gods, customs, and rituals date back as far as ancient Greece with thinkers like Lucretius, the scientific study of religion only became institutionalized in the late 19th century in places like Germany, the Netherlands, and especially at Oxford University under the leadership of F. Max Mueller. Crucially, these comparative studies were distinguished from theology (e.g., they did not privilege religious beliefs or supernatural claims) in their methods of analysis. This move toward the social sciences was an important step in the critical study of religions, though it wasn't until after the Second World War that such departments began to emerge in North America. And so while there is a lot of influential work that we could point to that helped to promote thinking critically about religion—from pioneers like David Hume, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche in philosophy, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim in sociology, Sigmund Freud in psychology, and, of course, Charles Darwin in evolutionary biology—the academic study of religion is a relatively young field that is still confused with theology, much to the humour/chagrin of me and my colleagues.

Turning to the question of secularism: there is a growing awareness that much of the comparative work on religions that was done in the 19th and 20th centuries privileged a Protestant Christian perspective by which all societies and cultures were compared. This perspective often included the idea 'religion' contained some combination of the following criteria: that it ought to be believed-in on the basis of faith, privately held and not publically displayed, voluntarily chosen and not imposed by state authorities, and managed under (secular) law. In addition, this perspective privileged written scriptures, such as the Qur'an or Bhagavad Gita, over oral

traditions. One of the main points of emphasis of more recent studies on religion and secularism has been to draw attention to the fact that many societies did not contain any (or most) of these criteria, and thus were often classified by European scholars as less advanced on a social evolutionary model of historical development (e.g., as primitive). In addition, the individual perspectives and forms of knowledge (i.e., epistemologies) of those being studied were not well understood and, as a consequence, were rarely taken into consideration. Scholars like David Chidester, Talal Asad, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, and Saba Mahood have all drawn connections in their work between European colonialism and the forceful imposition of a Protestant worldview, which is commonly understood to have been the primary basis for Western forms of secularism (esp. in the work of Max Weber). One take away from these studies is that religion should always be thought about in relation to other social forces such as secularism, nationalism, and the power dynamics between competing groups that influence and shape one another in endless combinations. Considering these relational dynamics is why I'll sometimes put 'religion' in scare quotes, to indicate that we're never just talking about gods, beliefs, rituals, and so on, in isolation from myriad other factors at play. Paying attention to how competing conceptions of religion, secularism, nationalism, culture, and so forth, relate to each other in different times and places is crucial if we're going to *historicize* and *contextualize* these complex ideas rather than simply assume and assert what they mean, once and for all—which is what so many politicians, pundits, and religious leaders do, and is what, imho, good scholarship aims to interrogate and critique.

Jacobsen: What explains the recent popularity and rise in atheism in Western culture? How is this represented in the discourse around it?

Sheedy: Common wisdom surrounding the recent rise in atheism in (Euro-) Western culture is linked to popular responses to 9/11 as represented by so-called 'new atheist' authors like Sam Harris (*The End of Faith* 2004), Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion* 2006), and Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great*2007), among others. A more comprehensive genealogy might also look at the impact of Sigmund Freud, the Frankfurt School, and Jean-Paul Sartre throughout the twentieth century, all of whom were influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, along with Bertrand Russell (among many others) in the tradition of Anglo-American philosophy. These scholars and schools of thought provide a theoretical backbone for much contemporary atheist thought. To this list I'd also add Emma Goldman and Ayn Rand as key figures linking atheism with anarchist and libertarian schools of thought respectively. Less commonly acknowledged, but no less influential, would be strands of feminist, queer, and post-colonial theory, including Indigenous and Black liberation movements, that have drawn connections between patriarchal, hetero-normative, and colonial domination with Christianity in particular. These theories and movements have been used to both reform Christianity via theologies of liberation, or have rejected it altogether, thus contributing practical and theoretical depth to critiques of 'religion' as a form of domination and control. Asking why these movements have not been strongly connected to popular atheism is an important question, and one that I'll touch upon in due course.

One could also add to the list the schools of thought that were inspired by German sociologist Max Weber and his theory of secularization, which held that increasing secularization in Euro-Western societies, such as an observable decrease in church attendance and religious affiliation, were a model for how all societies would eventually develop as they underwent 'modernization'—that is, as they followed a secular, liberal, capitalist trajectory. With the

collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, however, scholars have been seriously reconsidering these models and, beginning in the late 1990s, many have turned to theories of 'post-secularism' as a way to think about the perseverance of religious identities in nominally secular societies.

More significant then theories, perhaps, would be to look at flash point events such as the Scopes "Monkey" Trail of 1925, concerning the teaching of evolution, the Abington *School District vs. Schempp US Supreme Court* decision banning Bible reading in public schools in 1963, or the successful cloning of Dolly the sheep in 1996. Like 9/11, these events sparked intense public debate that drew-in the general public in ways that scholarship never could. Thomas Dixon's *A Very Short Introduction to Science and Religion* (2008) provides a decent overview of some of these public debates, including the role that theories of evolution, legalized abortion, and LGBTQ struggles have played in causing some people to renounce religious affiliation in support of these ideas, issues, and identities. Likewise, the work of Peter Harrison, especially his recent book *The Territories of Science and Religion* (2015), is a great resource for those interested in these questions.

Returning to the post-9/11 era, I would suggest that the popularity of the 'new atheists' in combination with the rise of social media has helped to spur the growth of atheist ideas and, more importantly, atheist, secularist, and humanist organizations (including atheist churches and the academic study of secularity and non-religion, esp. in the UK) that have both popularized and legitimized these ideas and identities in ways that were unthinkable in earlier generations. The popularity of Bernie Sanders is emblematic of this shift in consciousness, where his secular (Jewish) identity and advocacy for democratic socialism did not prevent him from nearly beating Hilary Clinton as the Democratic nominee for president. The positive reception of someone like Sanders could not have happened in decades past, especially as the link between socialism and "godless communism" was so dominant throughout much of the twentieth century, which created strong associations between atheism and Soviet-style totalitarianism (esp. in the US), and thus contributed to caricatures of atheism (e.g., as immoral, as the enemy of freedom, etc.). Younger generations of today have grown up in a world where these connections no longer hold much sway, which is one of the reasons why atheism has lost some of its stigma, at least in most Euro-Western countries. There are many other variables to consider that I can't go into here, especially when we look at the rise of the category 'Nones' in recent census data, along with various 'new age' movements and emerging forms of secular 'spirituality' (even Sam Harris is getting in on the action with his 2014 book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion).*

As with the term 'religion' or 'religious,' however, a lot depends here on how we define 'atheist' (i.e., what counts and what is disqualifying?) beyond the most obvious criteria. For example, do some practitioners of yoga or Buddhist style meditation count as atheist or agnostic if their point of reference is devoid of supernatural claims, but still centred around concepts like prana, chi, compassion, and the like? What are the differences between Albert Camus's existentialist atheism and that of Richard Dawkins (to say nothing of feminist or Black atheisms), what types of politics do they align with, and what theories of the mind, body, society, and culture guide their thinking?

Lastly (and more on this in the next question), rising controversies surrounding freedom of speech and identity politics have also caused a rift in recent years, where popular atheists like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali have come under increasing criticism for their over-emphasis on rationalist thought and secular liberalism, along with their dismissal of

so-called cultural or identity politics (e.g., feminism and critiques of colonialism and Islamophobia), causing some to shy away from this particular brand of atheism that has not, to date, been replaced by an equally visible movement that calls itself by the same name. For a brief period it appeared that the "Faitheist" idea that Chris Stedman helped to popularize back in 2012, which de-emphasized the link between religion, rationalism, and belief and put emphasis on "shared values" between humanism and religious ideas instead might create a significant sectarian split in atheist ranks, but this has not born out to date.

Jacobsen: What is the rhetoric of Islamophobia in North America? How does this play out in practical terms?

Sheedy: I've become increasingly interested in analyzing the rhetoric of Islamophobia in recent years since it brings together so many of my research interests and is a key component, imo, for understanding certain formations of atheism in our current moment. It is fairly well known that the so-called 'new atheists' were spurred to write their best-selling books because of the 9/11 attacks. While ostensibly criticizing all 'religion,' Islam came in for special treatment by these authors, to say nothing of the scores of politicians and pundits (from Geert Wilders and Marine La Pen in The Netherlands and France, Peter King and Donald Trump in the US, to Fox News and what some have called the "Islamophobia Industry" [see Nathan Lean's 2012 book of the same name], represented by Daniel Pipes and Pamela Geller) who've made a living out of promoting fear of Islam. While the term "Islamophobia' came into common usage back in 1997 after the British government sponsored a commission on the topic, known as the Runneymede Trust Report, it is only in last decade or so that it has become part of mainstream political debate. Popular atheists like Sam Harris, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Bill Maher have all been called Islamophobic for things that they've written and said (e.g., in Harris's *The End of Faith*, Hirsi Ali's *Nomad,* and on *Real Time* with Bill Maher), and have responded to these charges in interviews and in print (e.g., Harris's *Islam and the Future of Religious Tolerance: A Dialogue* with Maajid Nawaz [2015], and Hirsi Ali's *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* [2015]).

What interests me most in these debates is how they are typically framed in relation to different theoretical camps or schools of thought. One side tends to measure various cultures/religions by their seeming ability/inability to embrace the values of reason, rationality, and Western-style secular liberalism, which tends to follow some variation of the Protestant model that I outlined above. On the other side are those that prioritize a cultural studies perspective—including studies of gender, sexuality, racism, and colonialism—and tend to foreground these particular issues when questions of Islam arise (e.g., it's never just about doctrines and beliefs). While I don't think for a moment that these are mutually exclusive camps, or that it's even useful to frame these debates in this way, I do find it important to think about the ways in which complex, fluid ideas like Islamophobia become caricatured in relation to what we might call 'culture wars' rhetoric. In this sense, the meaning of 'Islamophobia' gets transformed once it is caught up in questions of 'free speech' (i.e., the blurry lines between critiquing religion vs. being racist and xenophobic), 'shared values,' the state of multiculturalism, and so forth. This type of analysis is what some scholars refer to as 'discourse' or the discursive study of language and meaning. As many popular atheists within the Euro-West are clearly in the first of these 'camps,' I am interested in analyzing the ways in which their responses to the charge of Islamophobia have re-shaped atheist/humanist/secularist identities and, more broadly, the general public's

perception/reception of these new variations (or memes, if you will) that continue to evolve before our eyes.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Sheedy: Thanks very much for this opportunity to talk about my work on this fascinating topic!

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

Abiodun Sanusi on Being a Freethinker in Nigeria

March 23, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are 23. How did you come to be a freethinker in a religious family, in a familial setting of 6?

Abiodun Sanusi: Yes, I became a freethinker through rigorous vigorous reading and thinking. Although I was very active in the Anglican church I attended with my family. Up to the stage that, I became an altar boy (an acolyte) and everyone in the hood including my family was happily expecting me to get into the seminary immediately.

I got out of the high school or the university when they discovered I chose to go to the university after high school, in fact, the Anglican church we attended sponsored my tertiary education by providing 70% of my school fee.

Jacobsen: As you became an atheist in your first year of high school, how did you go about making the transition from religious to non-religious?

Sanusi: Like I said earlier, I became an atheist through thinking, reading, debating, and doing a lot of research. I only made my transition known to friends and family through logical explanations and scientific and philosophical methods, which I always implore during conversations and debates and in my everyday activities by rejecting dogmas both local and foreign and by asking for proofs for everything including the Bible and Quran and even African religious creeds.

Jacobsen: You live in Lagos and study in Ogun state. Why did you pick geography and regional planning for tertiary education studies?

Sanusi: Yes. I picked geography and regional planning for so many reasons:

1. I wanted to become an astronaut and visit space to know if all NASA says about space and the universe was true.

2. I wanted to be the first African or black to visit space (I still look up to that though).

3. I opted for geography because I cannot afford the fee to study astronomy and there is no institution in Nigeria where I could study astronomy even if I could afford it except in the US or Russia and I cannot afford that.

4. I want to develop my environment through environmental science as I look forward to venturing into mainstream politics after school.

Jacobsen: As you are against oppression in any form, how do you fight this some activist work in Nigeria?

Sanusi: The first time I stood individually against oppression was during my final year in high school when I stood up to a teacher who was a notorious bully and I came out victorious although with a little price of cutting the grass.

But I was glad I saved the whole 12 (SS3) classes from being flogged severely with the cain and going through severe punishment for days or a week.

Now in the university, I have always stood against oppression since my first year and I sometimes pay for it with my grades (score reductions). Even now, we're standing up to the school over the issue of stop and search at the school gate, which involves only the students who board the public shuttle.

As those who go in with their cars are never stopped nor searched at the gate, including the staff, a comrade was illegally arrested by the police 2 days ago, but was released yesterday after students went to the police station to plead as we were threatened with expulsion if we ever dare stand up to the school management against oppression.

There is so much I cannot say her,e but I am yet to be affiliated to any human rights organization as I'm yet to find a vibrant one (I'll be glad if I could, especially an internationally recognized one).

Jacobsen: How can the international community support the atheist community in Nigeria?

Sanusi: The international community can help atheists and the atheist community in Nigeria by helping to sponsor human rights and atheistic campaigns and providing legal backings for freedom of thoughts, sex, gender, and every other thing, which should be personal and doesn't affect anyone in any sane manner.

The homosexuals especially should be helped by helping activists worldwide including local ones to stand up for gay rights in Nigeria and Africa, and to sponsor and support youths as most of us can't come out as an atheist because of rejection, especially financially and death threats in places like northern Nigeria.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Sanusi: I would be very glad if the international community could help promote atheism and human right through media campaigns like billboards and television programmes and radio programmes.

I will voluntarily gladly volunteer to host television programmes in favor of atheism and human rights including gay rights.

Thanks.

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

Skeptic Meditations Founder on the Reliance on External Authority

March 23, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott is the Founder of Skeptic Meditations. He speaks from experience in entering and leaving an ashram. Here we talk about the reliance on external authority.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: With regards to the tactics to keep members in a cult-like organization, what seem like the more prominent examples?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: There's many tactics that cult-like groups, like Self-Realization Fellowship Monastic Order, use to trap followers. First, is the unlivable ideal of renunciation. It's a trap because its irreconcilable. No human can ever be perfect, though followers idealize stories of their founder, like SRF's Paramahansa Yogananda.

"I killed Yogananda long ago. No one dwells in this body now but God." proclaimed Paramahansa Yogananda.

Meditation techniques are often prescribed to followers of Eastern enlightenment. Why? Meditation done right is presumed to still thought, which is a way to kill the ego, to become a Yogananda or God-like being. It's a psychological trap for followers

Jacobsen: What runs through the mind of a believer to keep them bound to the cult or cult-like organization?

Scott: People trapped in cult-like organizations are in a double bind. There get trapped inside the no-win kind of communication designed to keep followers obeying the authority figure.

Cult-like organizations implicitly or explicitly communicate to their followers such as:

"You are asleep or ignorant. Meditation is the path to awakening or knowledge of God. You are asleep or ignorant, so keep meditating.

You are ego/self-centered. Meditation is the path to ego destruction/self-transcendence. If you are not yet egoless or selfless, keep meditating.

You are racked with desires. Meditation is the path to fulfillment of all desires, therefore becoming desireless. If you are not yet desireless, keep meditating."

In each of these examples, the cult-like group keeps you psychologically trapped in the double bind. If you are meditating and trying to follow the given techniques for enlightenment but do not get results (i.e., do not still your thoughts or become enlightened), the group says that it's your fault.

Your ego got in the way and that you just to keep trying to do better. The followers are often filled with doubts about whether they will ever be good enough to "make it", to attain the highest states of enlightenment.

Jacobsen: How is the inculcation of self-doubt and reliance on an external authority part and parcel of the maintenance of the follower mentality in a cult?

Scott: Mental or psychological control is easy when people doubt themselves.

Cult-like groups and gurus use many methods to to instill self-mistrust in followers. They patronize followers (treat them with kindness while betraying superiority). Or, they assume superiority (know what's best for others).

Or, they use any method that will instill fear, guilt, or shame. Cult-like groups belittles reason, analytical thinking, and personal experience.

They emphasize the dangers of ego, lower self, self-interest. As I noted above cult-like groups often provides methods such as meditation to overcome self or ego. The group often emphasizes service to guru or authority versus taking care of one's self-interests, such as family

In cult-like groups, if followers question any abuse they are told that it is spiritual "training" and it is beyond understanding in a rational way. "God works in mysterious ways". And of course, they assume the leader of the group is attuned or at-one with God.

Once inside the SRF ashrams the environment was very closed. Everything the monks did had to be approved by your counselor or by the ashram superiors. Or, whatever was offered in the ashrams was pre-approved and monks were expected to accept it as coming from Guru, from God.

In this setup the SRF leaders and monastic superiors could do no wrong. Many members endured physical and psychological abuses in the name of "training". That is, for the spiritual benefit of the members to breakdown their self-centered ego-consciousness.

Clearly, all abuses–physical or psychological–could be justifed as "training". The sad part was that for the first few years I believed the abuses were for my own good. Of course, eventually–after many years of allowing abuses–I finally say through the control and manipulation, resisted it and eventually was able to leave the ashram

Jacobsen: Even if there aren't formal methodologies on some levels for the individual follower, how does the follower make excuses for the abuse and bad behavior of some of the leaders of some cults and cult-like organizations?

Scott: On my website I've posted the many formal rules and vows of the SRF Order, which I belonged. In addition, the SRF Lessons–which are available to the public when they become SRF members–contain 100s of SRF "official" rules and methods regarding vegetarian diet, sexual abstinence, and a variety of esoteric meditation techniques.

There's something called the "sunk-cost" fallacy. Where we invest so much time and energy and possibly money into something that even if its a failure we can't cut our losses and give it up. Investing emotionally also plays a huge role in why followers have a difficult time escaping the traps of abuse in cult-like organizations.

Jacobsen: What is the general marketing that cults or cult-like organizations present to the outside world, i.e. the warning signs and signifiers of a potentially harmful organization?

Scott: With the Eastern, Hindu- and Buddhist-inspired, groups they often use meditation techniques as a way to gain followers. Meditation is the gateway. Meditation is scientized.

That is it is promoted as a practical and scientific method. Meditation practice is supposed to bring the faithful practitioner peace, material success and happiness, and ultimate enlightenment.

Cult-like ideologies also promote that they have all the answers. People who are most vulnerable are those who are going through a challenging life transition. That's why you often find young, college-age disciples who join cults.

Or, people who are suffering and seek a way to end that suffering, often by escaping into an idealized model of the world as "spiritual training" where suffering is given ultimate meaning.

Also, these groups and leaders of cults claim to have divine dispensations. That is the group has a mandate from God to bring the lost to the Truth. Of course, only this cult group has the answers. Groups like Scientology often charge exorbitant fees to "clear" themselves of evil thetans through a method they call auditing.

I recommend the documentary Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief. I believe many of the behaviors and tactics used by Scientology are also used by other cult-like groups. Just in varying degrees, not in kind.

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

Scott: Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to share my thoughts and experiences about what I believe is an important topic.

Bishop George Kuhn on the Catholic Universalist Church of the Philippines

March 24, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become a Catholic Universalist?

Bishop George Kuhn: Became a Universalist in my early teens having heard a sermon by a Roman Catholic priest I admired a lot. I questioned him about it and he made it clear that eventually all would "go to heaven." Using the terminology I would understand and what was common (still is). I do not know the full demographics of the community.

Jacobsen: What are they?

Kuhn: Right now we have only one active parish, and that's the Chapel of St. Mary Magdelene in Talakag, Bukidnon, Mindanao. Those folks are all Filipinos, of all ages. We have a fellowship in Parkersburg, West Virginia, USA, which ministers primarily to the LGBTGQ community, although they do a fair amount of social justice work for other causes, too.

Jacobsen: How did you begin training as a religious leader and subsequently begin moving up the ranks of the church?

Kuhn: I studied to become an Interfaith Minister at One Spirit Interfaith Seminary in New York City. After being ordained as a minister, I did independent study with Bishop Mark Sullivan in New York with the goal of being ordained to the priesthood. That happened November 1, 2008. After several years as a priest, Bishop Mark suggested that I be elevated to become a bishop. That happened on July 20, 2013. As part of my ministry, Bishop Mark and I founded the Catholic Universalist Church at that same ceremony on July 20, 2013. My idea was to reintroduce the concept to Universal Salvation to the Philippines in order to heal some of the religious injury inflicted at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as some of the more fundamentalist Christian denominations.

Jacobsen: What is love to you?

Kuhn: Love has many different meaning. In the religious context, we speak of the "agape" love, or as some call it "big love." John the Evangelist, in his first epistle, famously writes: "God is love." And from that Divine Source we have everything that is, was and will be, as well as non-things that are timeless, as is the Divine Source.

Jacobsen: What are life and death you?

Kuhn: We are spiritual beings with eternal existence on that level. There is no spiritual death, and since our primary nature is spiritual, we are eternal beings. For reasons unknown to almost all of us, we inhabit a physical body that exists in time and will eventually cease to exist. The death of that body is undeniable. But our spirit continues. How much of what we experience as humans also continues is question I cannot answer definitively. There has always been much speculation; my personal opinion is that human experience is not lost when the body dies but is retained in the spiritual realm. Maybe it is for review; maybe just because the Divine Source retains everything.

Jacobsen: What are your perspectives on the possibility of an afterlife?

Kuhn: I kind of answered that one in the previous question. I definitely feel that there is spiritual life after bodily death, and I also believe we can reincarnate and "take another ride" on Planet Earth, or maybe another world, if we care to. Or maybe we might need to come back into material form to complete a task left undone.

Jacobsen: How do you help the community build and make the transitions from new life to the finality of the body with physical death?

Kuhn: There's no escaping the mortality of the body. I don't hold classes on how to transition. It's going to happen and it is very often sudden with no conscious preparations. These are things more appropriately discussed with individuals, and each individual would have his/her own needs and questions.

Jacobsen: How do the central ethical precepts of the Catholic Universalist Church of the Philippines translate into individual lives and familial and community activities?

Kuhn: We are a community that gathers to show our gratitude to the Universal Source, the Godhead, the Ground of Being. (Personally, I try to avoid the use of the word "God" as much as possible. That term has some pretty hefty baggage attached depending on who is in on the conversation. I am absolutely not a theist, and the "God word" strongly implies that understanding. So I personally avoid it when possible. So in our communities, we try to change people's perceptions about "God" from the "old man with the beard sitting on a cloud taking notes on everybody" do the Source of the eternal, infinite love shown to creation and from that love we have our very existence. And our worship services emphasis that love and our gratitude for it. Of course, Roman Catholics have been under pressure from the public because of the scandals around sexual abuse of children, young people, by some of the religious authorities in the Roman Catholic Church.

Jacobsen: How do you think they should have dealt with the situation?

Kuhn: The Roman Catholic hierarchy should have been totally upfront and transparent from the beginning. Instead, they almost without exception did the opposite and protected the criminals from civil justice.

Jacobsen: What have been real successes and honest failures of the Catholic Universalist Church of the Philippines?

Kuhn: The real success has been the flourishing of the Parish in Bukindon and the fellowship in Parkersburg. It is nearly 100% due to the efforts of Rev. Joseph Rholdee Lagumbay in Bukidnon and Rev. Steve Peck in Parkersburg. We "inherited" an existing parish in New York City from another church that could no longer provide a priest. The congregation was shrinking, and nothing we tried seemed to help. We simply could not get people through the door. In New York City there is a lot of competition for people's attention 24/7 and we, as well as most other churches, have found that organized religion is not a high priority. So having to disband that parish, at the request of the laity on the parish council, was our first real failure.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Kuhn: I appreciate the opportunity to introduce your readers to the Catholic Universalist Church. I hope I have given some insight into what we are about. We are an offshoot of the Liberal Catholic Church, Theosophy, and Gnosticism, so our theological leanings are very liberal

and progressive. We have a very basic website: www.CatholicUniversalistChurch.org, and the Philippines has an active Facebook Page at Catholic Universalist Church of the Philippines, as well as Catholic Universalist Church of Asia Pacific.

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

Kuhn: Thank you for inviting me to talk about our community.

Suzanna Mason on the Anglican Faith, Politics, and Natural Philosophy

March 26, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Anglican Faith

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is the modern Anglican faith? What does it mean to you?

Suzanna Mason: The origins of Anglicanism start with a Catholic named Henry VIII, who was the King of England. He was famous for having lots and lots of wives. He managed to have lots and lots of wives because he grew furious at the Pope for not allowing him to have a divorce, so he set up his own church.

This was Catholic in origin. Galileo annoyed the Catholic Church. It did not stop him being a Catholic; same with Henry VIII. Ironically, it got started with a divorce. It is now a Protestant faith, but it is also Catholic in nature sometimes.

The Anglican Church is where we get the phrase "broad church", e.g. "you have a broad church." It means that we have people who are more Catholic than the Pope and people who are more Protestant than the Puritans.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Mason: It is an enormously diverse church. I remember hearing that the average Anglican is a single mother in sub-Saharan Africa because there is a big Anglican community in Africa. All across the world, this church, so many different people and opinions.

I grew up in an Anglican church. Then the churches that I have been a part of while I moved around. I tipped toes in some charismatic ones. They [Anglican churches] are welcoming, friendly, lovely places, where it is pretty much written into the laws of religion that there will be tea and biscuits after every service or a pub if a late-night service.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Mason: It is often a welcoming place. There is lots of music and prayer. Lots of different activities, whether helping in the local community or the local church. I have done creative groups and weekends away from a very young age.

Jacobsen: Now, sometimes, religions can become mixed up with politics. How much does Anglicanism mix up with politics in the UK?

Mason: The Anglican Church is the established church in the United Kingdom. It is Anglican services that were involved in the coronation of the Queen. We will have to see whether they will be involved in the next coronation that we get, when that happens.

But we have the House of Lords in Parliament that involves members of the church. Although, not being into politics as much myself, I am not sure if it is entirely Anglican bishops or it might be, or if it may be the representation of other faiths as well.

But the Anglican Church is the established church. When people think Christian in the UK, they will think Anglicans, Anglican robes and speech, and Anglican churches, though it is by no

means the only denomination. There are still Catholic cathedrals in certain cities. I believe that in order to be called a city [in the UK] that you have to have a cathedral. That is the technicality for making a city a city. Something like that.

Most cathedrals are Anglican. There are a few Catholic ones as well. The history has been "Now, we're Catholic. Now, we're Anglican [Or, Protestant more broadly..] Now, we're Catholic…" [Laughing]. There is this sort of thing.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is the head of the church in the UK. You might get statements or news about scandals, or different organizations doing different things. For a while, there was a lot in the media about different groups arguing about advertising their beliefs, generally.

Everyone has gotten involved with that. In terms of politics, it is quite interesting. There is the sort of stereotype in the US. If you want to be a politician, you have to declare your faith and make it known that you are a believer.

In the UK [Laughing], if you known to be a believer, then you are seen as weird. Unless, you are Muslim. Then it is fine [Laughing]. In the UK, religion can be seen as a something that would rather be seen and not heard.

We have an interesting relationship with politics and religion. The Queen is really well liked by a lot of people and is an open Christian and is open about the role Christianity has played in her life. It [opinion on religion] seems to depend for a lot of people on what happened, who is talking, and what the situation is.

Yes, religion is still in politics, but I'm not sure how much Christianity is involved a lot of the time.

Jacobsen: When it comes to the articles of faith, what do you consider some of the more pertinent to daily life?

Mason: It is an interesting question. The Anglican tradition has 39 articles of faith, which are in a prayer book. For a long time, the 1662 prayer book was used in churches. Now, we have a more modern one. It lists out the key beliefs that hold up Christianity.

But, of course, that is a strong tradition in the Anglican faith, but we have to look to the Bible itself and go back to the key texts. For me, I think there is a lot of important things [pertinent to daily life]. I think there is a tendency of Christians and atheists alike to reduce the Bible to soundbites.

You get atheists saying, "Look at those Christians quoting the Bible, now, let me tell you about this one quote Christopher Hitchens said one time" [Laughing]. That sums it up. It is hard to sum up an entire library of knowledge.

In terms of importance for daily life, it is really important to be honest, to try and speak the truth as much as possible, but also to not speak harshly. There are a lot of things in the Bible about not letting your tongue be a sword, or that your tongue is a sword because you can speak the truth and do a lot of damage if you are not careful.

I think as well that there is a lot in the Bible about having your thoughts on the right things. There are a lot of things about not letting yourself being consumed with worry or thinking bad things about other people.

It is spending your mental energy on the wrong things, on conflicts, or remembering the old prayer "give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." You cannot waste your time worrying about things that are done and out of your control.

For daily life, there is so much. Speaking the truth, walk in the light, don't get in fights [Laughing] if you can help it. There are lots, especially in the Proverbs. There are idioms for daily life and for how to behave.

Jacobsen: What does the Christian faith emphasize?

Mason: It is all about, basically, "If you are smart, you will listen to people who know than you. Do not go back to making the same mistakes." It is quite interesting as well because wisdom is more than intelligence in the Christian religion.

It is something above intelligence. We sort of recognize that in the secular world. You certainly get these phrases like "intelligence is knowing a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad." It is applying the knowledge cleverly.

Wisdom is a person. It is a real force in Christianity. It is not an abstract concept. Wisdom is about almost following the correct path through life, for getting yourself back on the right path. It is sort of about, in that sense, avoiding sin because sin, and this is something that has been mentioned by other people:"Sin" comes from an archery term, which I am not going to try and pronounce. It comes from an archery term, which means to fail to hit the bullseye, to fail to hit your mark – being less than you could be.

Wisdom is about knowing the path you need to take to do the things to make sure that you don't feel regret or that you miss your mark or that you feel less. Actually, in Proverbs, it said Wisdom was there in the beginning of the creation of the world.

I like a verse, which says, "I Wisdom dwell with Prudence and seek out witty inventions" [Laughing]. It is an interesting phrase. It is interesting in terms of human behavior. We as a species like seeking out our witty inventions.

There is a thing [in that verse] about wisdom being linked with prudence and self-control. They call it "temperance" in the King James version. It is being wise with yourself and with your knowledge. As Christians, we should seek out knowledge. The Vatican has an Astronomy department, which studies space.

In my church, we have a layperson who is the Chair of the Education Committee of the Royal Society, who is becoming the Chair of Natural Philosophy at the University of York. Natural Philosophy is the original term for "science."

The wisdom or love of nature, finding more out about nature. I come from a family of academic Christians [Laughing]. It is all perfectly natural to me.

Jacobsen: What do you think about the original distinction between natural philosophy and moral philosophy, as you noted the original term "science" came from "natural philosopher" or "natural philosophers" or "scientists," in other words, the people of science are natural philosophers, so become applied philosophers.

Some have argued that science is not philosophy or that science does not need philosophy, which is not, by definition, or its historical use correct. It is a branch of philosophy, which

is applied philosophy. Its functional utility comes from the great wonders we get from it, but I think that obscures that fact that it is a branch of philosophy.

In particular, the functional descriptions of the natural world. What do you make of this heavy emphasis on science or natural philosophy now? How do you square that with metaphysical understandings of the world through traditional Abrahamic religions such as Christianity and its theology?

Mason: I think there is quite a lot to unpack with that question [Laughing].

On Science and Philosophy

You can go down the rabbit hole of applicability. All science is applied maths. That sort of thing. You have to be careful with that. Science and philosophy talk to one another.

But, in general, there is interdisciplinary work because it is important to get different views on things. In terms of the education side, it is important science does not lie inside an ivory tower or a bubble and just talks to itself.

If you want to change the world, you have to tell people about your results and disseminate your findings. If you only talk to scientists and only talk like a scientist, then, frankly, it is very dull for everyone who is not a scientist and is not a good way of going about things.

There is a man named Randy Olson who was a biologist of some sort. He left science and went into Hollywood. He wrote many books and gave Ted talks about the problem of scientists not even knowing how to talk to scientists.

During my undergraduate or bachelor's degree, I did a course that was about the philosophy of the environment and learned about things like the Tragedy of the Commons and the ethics of food aid. For example, people do not starve anywhere in the world because there is not enough food.

They starve because there is not enough access to food. The government could not buy it. Or with the Potato Famine, the food was being grown in Ireland but being sent to the British. That was the single most important course that I did.

It is something that I want to learn more about. So, I that think part of the trick in talking science, in my own country at least, you learn a subject and get trained in a subject, but in places like America you do courses in different things.

You have to do all sorts of credits and do all sorts of different things. You get quite a broad education at their universities. I did Biology and learned about Biology. That was all that I learned. When you don't have an interdisciplinary approach to things, one discipline does not know the methodologies and quirks of another discipline.

I have no idea how a philosophy paper is written. I imagine it is different than a science paper. What we now call science started as Natural Philosophy, but we have science also diverging from philosophy; it is applied philosophy, but *very*applied philosophy in such the way that it has drifted quite far from the original.

It does not mean there are no similarities or history. Chemistry started with Alchemy. It is important to know how they thought and how we took things from there and to know what history there is. You cannot do Chemistry with Alchemy anymore.

There is an interesting thing there. It is very important. I work in Ecology. Of course, it has a lot of work on conservation. When you are trying to conserve species, there are so many ethical and moral and political and historical and cultural aspects that matter to that process.

It is very important for it to be a communication between the sciences and humanity, and philosophy. There are lots of places where science and philosophy rub up against one another. We have these now famous arguments: people like Sam Harris who argue that science can tell us what moral values should be.

In those kinds of cases, science and philosophy are actually treading on each other's toes. Those sorts of case studies will be interesting.

On Science and Religion

If you believe the world was created, and you also certainly in the Christian tradition where Creation or the world is a gift from God for humanity by and large, why wouldn't you want to learn more about it? It is pretty amazing. It is there to found more out about.

There is a huge Christian tradition about the wonder of nature. It comes down to natural human curiosity as well. I find it confusing and also very sad when people are not curious about the world and the universe and everything in it.

Part of science studies is because I was exposed to that sort of question and curiosity at a young age like nature documentaries – simple things like this. I would be watching bird migration. My mum would say, "How do they know? How do they know where to go?"

It is that sort of questioning. You hang around young children to teach them things. They are full of those questions. There is a lot of that going. In the Christian tradition, it is a part of it. There is this big sort of celebration of nature and the wonder.

Lots of Christian poets have used nature as a topic to talk about. I would like to see a survey of all Christian scientists and see what disciplines they ended up in. I have seen many in Biology and Ecology, but there are many Christians in Physics as well.

It does seem to attract a lot of people, not only the universe and the cosmology, but also the other aspects of Biology and Physics as well. I think certainly history-wise it is always hard to unpack religion and culture because in many cases the religion was the culture.

In my country, there was a strong culture of being interested in nature and naturalism. We had Charles Darwin, but lots and lots and lots of people. There is a famous children's author named Beatrix Potter. There is a film coming out about Peter Rabbit – her character.

She was an amateur naturalist. She had a paper submitted to the Linnean Society, by a male friend because as a woman, she couldn't attend proceedings: 'On the Germination of the Spores of the Agaricineae'. It was common for people to collect fossils and paint birds, and paint animals. If you look at her books, all of the artwork was hers because she would paint everything she saw in nature in watercolors.

It was very common for your small village English vicar to be preaching one day and bird watching the next day. It was in the culture. In terms of putting the two together, especially in Anglicanism, I think it was like 60 years or something.

It was not long for the Anglican Church to accept evolution as a fact. The idea of being a Christian and a scientist has never been an issue in Britain. It is never an issue. I meet lots of

scientists who are atheists. But in England, we have such an attitude of do whatever you want and do not bother me with it.

Personal beliefs are not a big issue. Then having grown up in a family of Christians, especially in my parents' case with social science as their area and dealing with medical and scientific data. It has never been an issue. Now, I am in a situation, where I am in a family where three people have PhDs. One person started and quit. One person might do a PhD by publication.

Another is getting a PhD. Everyone has dipped their toes in PhD waters [Laughing]. That might make me quite unusual [Laughing]. I can appreciate. People talk about compartmentalizing and the Non-Overlapping Magisteria. All of these sorts of things.

I was probably about in my early 20s when I first heard the concept of a conflict between science and religion. I just thought, "What conflict?" That isn't to say there isn't any conflict. Obviously, there are people who believe in literal truths of some of the events in the Bible.

The thing is there are contradictory events in the Bible, so they do not select those. So, they are selectively literal. They do not want to believe [certain scientific results] and want to restrict the teaching of science because it is in favour of what they believe.

It is not the beliefs, but the actions those lead to that are the problem. I think it is "How does anyone juggle anything in their life?" You've got your job, your family, your friends, your activities, your things. For me, science is not my life.

It is my job. It is a job that I think is very important and I am very passionate about it. Religion is my life. People sort of say, "How do you bash these two things together?" It is that science is something that I bring into my religion because my religion is my life.

I enjoy teaching people. Science is very important, but it is an activity. I hate the word 'enterprise' (which is used to define science). Science has the scientific method. Then there is the 'enterprise' of people doing all sorts of activities to drive this engine of science forward.

Science is a very nice catch-all term. But there are a lot of things going on in science. The same thing goes for religion sometimes [Laughing] as well. I do not think it is as clear cut as "I have object A, which is science, and object B, which religion, and I have to fit them together."

In a way, it is more complex, but it also more simple at the same time. It is different things. People do different things that other people think are conflicting all of the time.

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

In Conversation with Professor Robert Jensen on Patriarchy, Pornography, and Radical Feminism

March 26, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Robert Jensen is a Professor at the University of Texas at Austin. He specializes in media, law, and politics. Here we talk about his background and views, especially around patriarchy, pornography, and radical feminism.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family background regarding geography, culture, language, and religion or lack thereof?

Robert Jensen: I grew up in North Dakota, born in a small town in North Dakota, spent most of my childhood in Fargo, North Dakota, which is the big city. All of 60,000 people when I was a kid. Both parents are white. I attended and was confirmed in a middle of the road Presbyterian church.

Although, religion was not a big part of my household. It was more of a social obligation than a theological enterprise. As soon as my parents stopped compelling me to go to church, I pretty much stopped going.

Jacobsen: Without being compelled to go to church, within that community, 60,000 people, was that a common reason for going, the parental push to attend whatever particular service was being held at the time? Is that a common experience?

Jensen: I think it was common in the church I attended. I am sure it was not necessarily the norm everywhere. Fargo was a fairly small city in the West. We are talking about the early '60s and 1970s. There were more Evangelical churches.

There were traditional Roman Catholic churches. It was much a Christian enterprise. It was a small Jewish community, at least one, maybe two synagogues. I do not remember. But in the world I grew up in, there was little religious fervor.

On the part of young people that were part of my social set, there were other social sets. There is an Evangelical tradition in high school/college age kids, Campus Crusade for Christ things.

I am sure they existed, but they weren't part of my direct, immediate circle.

Jacobsen: Once you left the church community and entered undergraduate training, what became the main interest in things like ethics and politics and law?

Jensen: I graduated from college in 1981. I spent my 20s working in mainstream newspaper journalism. So, I was a working journalist and the way mainstream journalism in the US works is you do not have much time or space to develop a political philosophy.

You're chasing the story of the day. You're engaged in coverage of social issues, politics, economics, all the time. But at least for me, and I think it is not an unusual experience for younger journalists, there is no overall political philosophy that you tend to think about.

In that sense, you accept the existing range of political ideologies that are in the mainstream, which is basically, hard, right-wing reactionary conservatism to a mushy liberalism, in the mainstream in the US.

In other words, the politics defined by the two major parties. I did not start thinking about these things in a deeper way until I went back to graduate school when I was 30-years-old. I was exposed to different ways of thinking, including more radical critiques of mainstream society.

Through feminism critiques of white supremacy, critiques of capitalism, critiques of US imperialism, and a deep ecological critique, I started developing all of that, those ideas, halfway through my life at the age of 30. I am about to turn 60.

The last 30 years, I have been engaged in that. None of that ever came up when I was growing up. None of it came up in some sense in undergraduate education. I do not think that the existing school system in the United States challenges people to think deeply about these things.

Jacobsen: You published a book in 2017 entitled *The End of Patriarchy: Radical Feminism for Men***. What best defines radical feminism? What makes the emphasis on men in that particular text important as a note in the canon, so to speak, of feminist literature?**

Jensen: So 30 years ago, my first entry into political activism and philosophy, ethics, law, and political philosophy was through feminism, specifically the feminist critique of the pornography industry. That is a set of ideas often associated with what we call radical feminism in the US.

Now, any term like radical is going to be understood differently by different people. When I use the term, I am going back to what is typically called second wave feminism in the United States. The movement that grew up in the 1960s and '70s, coming out of the general ferment.

Of the 1960s, radical feminism looked at the foundational structure of patriarchy in contemporary societies, institutionalized male dominance rooted in men's attempts to control or claim ownership over women's bodies.

Which means primarily reproductive power and sexuality, radical feminism shares some ideas with other brands of feminism, but it tends to focus a lot on the way that men control women through reproductive means as well as through sexual exploitation.

So, the radical feminist perspective is most often known for its critique of what I call the sexual exploitation industries—pornography, prostitution, stripping. The way men routinely buy and sell women's bodies for sexual pleasure in a patriarchal society.

So, radical feminism is a way of thinking about oppressive and rigid gender norms in a society rooted in patriarchy and men's attempts to control and claim ownership over women. It tends to highlight in the contemporary era the way that plays out in the sexual exploitation industries.

Beyond that, for me, radical feminism is also a way of thinking about power more generally. What radical feminism did for me 30 years ago was pointing out, that we live in a deeply hierarchical society where there is the assumption of domination and subordination.

That is, the assumption that the world is going to be structured on some group of people being dominant and some other group being subordinate is routinely accepted. What radical feminism did for me is to help me focus on the profound immorality of hierarchies, hierarchies in human societies.

So for me, radical feminism is a way of looking at the world. It is a way of looking at gender in patriarchy and it is a way of looking at specifically contemporary practices of pornography and prostitution and providing a critique of why those patriarchal practices are inconsistent with a stable, decent, and human community.

Jacobsen: The majority of users, if I am not mistaken, of pornography are men, by a vast margin.

Jensen: Correct.

Jacobsen: What are the typical appeals, in terms of types of pornography for men? How does it differentiate from the super minority of women who use pornography?

Jensen: So first of all, pornography requires a definition from the perspective of the radical feminist critique I work from. Pornography is not an attempt to represent in language or in visual media: sexuality.

It is a particular presentation of sexuality within that domination-subordination dynamic of patriarchy. We look specifically at the contemporary pornography industry, which is the product of the last half-century.

There have been pornographic material before that, but the incredible explosion of the amount of graphic, sexually explicit material in contemporary culture is a post-World War II phenomenon.

The radical feminist critique focuses on that contemporary reality. As you pointed out, the vast majority of consumers are male and therefore the industry tailors its products for men. Specifically, for men in patriarchy, where there are other hierarchies in existence, it does it to generate profit.

As a result, the images tend to reflect the male sexual imagination in patriarchy, which is a fusion of sexuality with power, so the images are routinely of men in dominant positions over women, images of men obtaining sexual pleasure through the subordination of women.

Women routinely embracing their own subordination. Now, that's a broad statement about a pattern. There are literally, of course, millions of pornographic images in the world, so there will be considerable variation.

But the radical feminist critique tries to look at patterns and observes that at the core of contemporary pornography is eroticizing or sexualizing that domination-subordination dynamic. The fundamental dynamic is male over female.

But pornography also sexualizes other forms of inequality. For instance, pornography is the most, without a doubt, overtly racist media genre in the world today. In pornography, you see crude, grotesque racial stereotypes employed.

It is another way of sexualizing hierarchy and inequality. Now, as I said, that's an observation about general patterns. But there is variation. There are also women who use pornography. Some women use pornography that's produced essentially for that male clientele.

There are smaller genres of pornography in which the producers claim to be trying to create women-centered porn. There is a lot of variation. The focus of our critique and the movement is on the overwhelming majority of those images.

Constructed for men and reflecting a male sexual imagination as its constructed in patriarchy. Now, it is important to point out. We are not arguing that is the way all men think or the only way men can think. We are talking about a way male sexuality is constructed in patriarchal societies.

The movement implicitly is arguing for a different conception of gender, sex, and power.

Jacobsen: What are some responses that those on the other side, or with one of the other countervailing positions, what are some of the responses they might present? How would you respond to those critiques?

Because I am not as familiar with the literature as much as you are.

Jensen: There are defenses and celebrations of pornography, of course. Some come from mostly liberal perspectives. But some even come from other wings of the feminist movement. I think they sort out into two or three main kinds of responses these days.

One is that there are people including feminists who will say, "The radical critique of pornography is accurate. It is consistently a form of sexualizing domination. But there can be no collective response to it out of a fear of sexual repression."

So, that would be a traditional liberal response. That we must preserve individual choice at all cost and while much pornography is sexist, racist, and rooted in hierarchies. We have to live with it.

Another perspective would celebrate pornography as a place for sexual liberation. I do not know how to define that position because I find it quite odd that you can take a genre of pornography that is so overtly, relentlessly misogynistic and racist.

Imagine, that it is a place for positive, progressive sexual liberation, but people do make that argument. I think that's rooted in another basic liberal perspective, which is that you cannot make judgments about sexuality.

I think it is a misguided perspective. A more recent phenomenon is a perspective that says, "Okay, a lot of the porn industry produces material that is politically and morally objectionable. That is, it undermines any hope of women's freedom in the world."

"But we want to keep open space for what is sometimes called Feminist Pornography. The idea that if women were put in charge, they would create different kinds of images." In fact, as I said, there is a lot of variation in the production of pornography.

The segment of the market that one could meaningfully call feminist or progressive is tiny. The vast majority of images reflect the patriarchal nature of contemporary culture. People do try to defend or even celebrate pornography.

I have been paying attention to this issue for 30 years and I have read a whole lot of defenses of pornography, and I must say, I have never found one that's terribly compelling. I think that reasonable people can disagree about policy perspectives.

That is, what should the law say about pornography? I think that's a difficult question. I do not think there is any easy answer to it, and people certainly, depending on their political philosophies can disagree.

But the basic analysis of the porn industry and the patriarchal nature of it seems to me not only to continue to support the feminist radical perspective, but even more so. One of the interesting things about radical feminism is that the critique it offered in the 1970s of pornography.

Of that era, you're not old enough to remember this.

Jacobsen: Ha, that's true.

Jensen: But the pornography of that era was by contemporary standards quite tame. But the radical feminist critique, which saw that the domination-subordination dynamic at the heart of pornography of that era has only been proved correct by time.

Where the expansion of the porn industry and the incredible demand for it in the culture has meant that the trajectory of the industry has been, as you would, predicted from the radical feminist critique, a deepening of that domination-subordination dynamic.

An expansion not only in the amount of it, but in the intensity of the misogyny and racism of it. So, the irony is that the radical feminist critique, I think, over roughly 40 years has been developing.

It has been proved correct. Yet, the radical feminist perspective is in some sense more marginalized than ever. But I still after 30 years see no reason to abandon the radical feminist critique.

The opposite, it seems more compelling than ever.

Jacobsen: Every moment and discipline have their bright lights and their seminal works, whether papers, essays, or books. What individuals made bigger impacts than others in the 30 years you've been in the field?

What essays, articles, or texts have made a similar impact as those individuals?

Jensen: So, every idea in politics comes from a collective effort in some sense. But the person who is most clearly identified with the feminist critique of pornography is Andrea Dworkin.

Andrea wrote a crucial book that came out in 1979 called *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. Which laid out the feminist analysis, that I have been summarizing and from which I continue to work.

She wrote another book, a collection of essays and speeches that were published in 1985, might've been '84, but I am sure it is '85: called *Letters from a War Zone*. That I consider in some sense her best work.

But those two books did a lot to define the radical feminist critique of pornography. The other person most associated with this, a feminist legal scholar named Catherine McKinnon, who's also known for her early work on sexual harassment law.

Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin came together in 1983 to propose a new approach to the law around pornography, arguing that the traditional obscenity law that's part of criminal law should be replaced by a civil rights framework.

There was a lot of political activity around that in the 1980s. So, that what's generally called the feminist civil rights perspective on pornography is associated with those two women, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon.

Dworkin died, gosh, more than a decade ago now. Catherine McKinnon is still living and still working. After that, I think the person in the book most important was written by a friend of mine, named Gail Dines.

That book is called *Porn Land*. The subtitle is something close to how pornography hijacked our sexuality, or how the pornography industry—I am not in my office so I do not have the book in front of me. That was published in 2010.

And Gail is undoubtedly the leading feminist critic of pornography today. She is British born, but lives in the United States. *Porn Land* was an important book that not only updated some of the trends in pornography production and content, but also looked at the shifting nature of the pornography industry.

Gail, I think, is the leading expert on that, on the pornography industry and its methods of production and distribution, which, of course, change considerably on the internet. So, I think those three women are the key thinkers in the United States around this critique.

Jacobsen: Since radical feminism discipline is also a movement, what would you evaluate as a positive trend in the next 5 years? What would you evaluate as a negative trend in the next 5 years for the movement?

Jensen: Let's start with the positive.

So, as I said, there are other feminist perspectives on pornography and those other perspectives, which I'll call generally liberal and post-modern, traditional liberal feminism, and this more recent development of a postmodern feminism in the last 20 years or so.

If you go into academic feminism into the typical women's studies department, you will find that liberal and postmodern feminists dominate and radical feminism is either absent or largely on the margins.

I think the positive is that the trajectory of the pornography industry producing ever more graphic, sexually explicit material that's increasingly cruel and degrading to women, increasingly overtly racist.

This concerns ordinary people. Young people often are concerned about growing up in a world where this is the standard sexual imagery. Parents are worried about how to educate kids about healthy sexuality when they are exposed to this material from preteen years onward.

The easy access to a computer too. So, even though the radical feminist critique I articulated is out of fashion in certain academic's spaces, when ordinary people hear that critique, they find it compelling because it answers questions they are asking in their own lives.

So, I have seen an increase in the last 5 to 10 years of interest in the radical feminist critique. I think precisely because it is such a compelling analysis. That's the positive. Those people are increasingly frightened by the direction the pornography industry has gone.

They are looking for answers. The negative is that we live still in an intensely patriarchal society in which feminism has made progress, for instance, reforming rape laws since the 1960s. But the #MeToo movement of the last 6 to 9 months has pointed out how ubiquitous male sexual violence is, whether it is sexual harassment or sexual violence itself.

So, we still face this overwhelmingly patriarchal society that turns out to be overwhelmingly resilient. While women's experiences of sexual intrusion are being talked about more and we are more concerned about it as a society, at least one would hope we are, the pornography industry goes forward unchecked.

I think that the #MeToo movement both creates space to point out connections between the way we imagine ourselves and represent ourselves in media and the way people are socialized to think about themselves.

So, it seems to me that the current climate reminds us of how brutal a patriarchal society is, but one can hope this opens up space for news of talking about it.

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

Jensen: No, my pleasure.

In Conversation with Professor Sarah Wilkins-LaFlamme on Secularism, Religion, and Atheism

March 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobson: Let's start as James Lipton says, to begin at the beginning.

Sarah Wilkins LaFlamme: Oh boy.

Jacobsen: What was a family background regarding major variables such as geography, culture, language, and religion if any?

LaFlamme: So, I'm originally from the Pontiac region of Quebec, which is about 45 minutes north of Gatineau. I lived there until about my mid 20's, so I did my bachelor's and master's degrees in sociology at university while still living at home.

Yes, so, my mom is a Brit. She immigrated in the '70s, early '70s, here to Canada. She met my dad in Toronto who's French Canadian and they both moved up to this old farm and, well, we children called it a commune.

They called it a cooperative. Basically, a bunch of friends bought this old farm and set up this alternative, back to the land, life style. It was tame compared to some of the other groups that are out there. But it was a much more rural experience out in the countryside than most people get these days.

In terms of religion, on my dad's side it's the classic French-Canadian Catholic heritage.

The grandparents were mostly practicing, went to church relatively often. Took us to church as well a bit when we were really young. We can talk about this. Something that I researched when I was looking at Catholicism in Quebec in my academic work.

This was the normal progression through the generations around the '60s and afterward. So, the grandparents were more or less actively religious. However, among my Boomer parents, my dad was what you can call fallen away. Still identifies as Catholic, still has some core Christian beliefs in God and the afterlife I think, but never really went to church. He did not have any real, practical contact with the institution of the Church itself. However, my mother tells it that my dad's parents, my grandparents, put pressure on my mom and dad to get us baptized.

So my brother and I were baptized Catholic. That was about the extent of our involvement, I think. My brother threatens to get married in a Catholic church occasionally.

But then he realizes how much work it'll be to be able to get everything in order to do it: we haven't had our first communion or been confirmed, so we'd have to go through this whole process. So, like, "Oh God no." [laugh]

We had little to no contact with religion in that sense, and were also influenced by my mom who was coming from a traditionally Anglican family, who was more the atheist of the family to start out with.

She oscillates, like a lot of nonbelievers, between atheism and agnosticism. Refers to some spiritual power in the sky once in a while, and at other times is adamantly non-religious. She does not like the institution of the Church at all.

My mom often negatively remembers the Church of England and its "people" as trying to control many aspects of family life.

She told stories of having the vicar come by Sunday when she was a kid and tell her mother she should be having more children, donating more money, etc. Similar stories that you get from the Quebec side about how the Catholic Church used to be pre-1960's.

So, that was my family background. I had what you would call an irreligious or non-religious upbringing. My brother and I were put in the more non-religious classes in school, so we did not have any religious teachings in school. We did not go to any religious services. So now, I identify as having no religion.

I am a non-believer. I have figured that out over the last decade or so. From what I understand, my story is pretty typical in that sense. While doing research with people who say they have no religion in Canada, like a colleague of mine out West Joel Thiessen does, who does a lot of interviews with these individuals, or when I do lots of statistical work with survey data, I've come to notice that the decline of religion across generations that I describe as my own story is pretty common among many individuals. And the turning point for properly becoming a nonbeliever is often in the early adult years. There is of course variation in people's exact biographical stories, but that decline of participating in and contact with organized religion across two or three generations seems to be a recurring theme.

I am also a trained sociologist. I have done all my university work in sociology.

What's nice about sociology, is that it is a very broad field. You can study anything really, anything that is social behavior. Anytime individuals get together, social structures are involved.

I am first and foremost a stats person. I like quantitative methods. I also twin that with an interest in sociology of religion. So, that is my main specialty, my substantive specialty, what I am an expert in, I guess, if you want.

That came about when I was in graduate school. There was a group in Ottawa who was working on Catholicism in Quebec, led by Dr. E.-Martin Meunier. This group drew my interest, because I had been told all throughout my life that Catholicism was more or less dead. And yet, this group showed me that there are still these interesting indicators, a lot of people who say they are still Catholic in Quebec even though they do not practice. This institution that is meant to be dead still has a certain influence politically and socially.

That piqued my interest. It did not come from being religious myself, it came from being told that religion was not important anymore but yet finding out that, "Oh no, when you gather real data, systematically, you do see certain impacts of religion."

I followed that through, followed that for the DPhil, and then when I got my job here at Waterloo. I was hired mainly for the stats side of things, so I can teach statistics. However, sociology of religion is my substantive area, what I write papers about, do conferences on.

Jacobsen: If you were to summarize the work, for instance, in the dissertation at the University of Oxford, what would you consider the main or bigger research question? What would you consider the main or bigger finding from that research question?

LaFlamme: Yes, I am especially interested in social differences between people who are religious or more actively religious and those who are not. So, that is my general interest.

I have applied that in several ways. I'll give you a few examples. In places where organized religion has been on the decline for many decades, if not centuries—so some European countries, Canada is starting to get there—I studied how there is a larger gap in moral attitudes, what people think is right and wrong, between the remaining core of people who are actively religious and the majority who are not. The actively religious are now a minority, but they are still there.

In these societies, there is a majority of individuals completely removed from all forms of organized religions, so in terms of their belonging, and they are not part of any church or religious group in terms of their practice. They do not have any formalized religious practice.

In contexts where you find these larger secular groups, they tend to be on average more liberal and much more left in terms of their attitudes towards same-sex marriage and abortion, compared to places where they form a smaller part of society.

However, members of remaining religious groups remain relatively conservative on average. So, you have this widening gap between the two. I was looking at this, I guess, polarization of a certain kind.

Another example of my work being, in Canada, that religious affiliation and level of religiosity are still important in who we vote for, at least at the federal level.

We hear a lot about politics and religion in the USA, but we do not hear about it so much in Canada. However, it is there. People who are more actively religious are much more likely to vote for the Conservative Party of Canada.

And those who are less religious, in English speaking Canada especially, they tend to vote NDP. Sometimes they will alternate, sometimes they will vote Liberal, but they tend to stick to the left of the spectrum.

That is an effect that is becoming stronger over time. So, in the early and mid 20th century, there used to be a big difference between Catholics and Protestants, who they would vote for. Catholics tended to vote more Liberal, Protestants more Conservative. That affiliation effect has all but disappeared since the 2000s. However, instead you've now got this gap between those who are more religious and those who are less religious.

So, that is what I am interested in: how who you are in terms of your religion impacts other aspects of your social life.

I also look at caregiving activities. I also have a working paper now on these moral attitudes, but with a greater focus on Canada. I could go on all day about my research and findings.

To summarize it all up, even though we live in a context that can be defined as more secular, as people who are now non-religious form a bigger part of society than they used to and religious institutions do not play the same social role that they used to; even in this context, individual's religiosity, religion or non-religion are still important. It is important in a lot of ways.

In terms of their interactions with others, people who are non-religious tend to hang out more with non-religious people for example. That influences their worldview, how they see the world. I have got a project on that coming up. Vice versa, religious people tend to hang out more with people who are actively religious.

It does not mean that there is always this huge divide between both groups. Members on each "side" do interact with one another on occasion. And there are also lots of people in the middle of the spectrum, somewhere in between being actively religious and an adamant atheist.

Sometimes, they do share the same views and behaviour. Sometimes not. That is what I investigate, what I'm interested in.

Jacobsen: When it comes to politics and religion, the poisonous topics to talk about at the dinner table.

LaFlamme: The ones we are not supposed to talk about.

Jacobsen: That is right. How much are attitudes in politics influenced by attitudes in religion? So, I do not mean what you have already stated in terms of voting patterns.

But I do mean in terms of the policy recommendations and the social attitudes that might follow from them.

LaFlamme: There is probably a much bigger impact than people are willing to admit in Canada or even know about. Probably not as drastic as in the United States.

There are faith-based lobby groups, and faith-based groups providing services in civil society that we often assume are being provided by the State, such as immigrant settlement for example. I don't think it's as bad as Marci McDonald makes it out to be in her book "The Armageddon Factor," but it is there.

At the individual level, religion and religiosity are important for some attitudes and behaviours, but not for everything either. Things like attitudes towards the economy, how the economy should be regulated, or attitudes towards the environment. Those are attitudes where religion has a bit of an impact, but does not come into play as much.

But on other things, anything to do with the social conservative movement, such as attitudes towards abortion, same-sex marriage, gender roles, there people's religion and non-religion come into play more.

To come back to vote choice, religion is still one of the major sociodemographic factors in voting. Province of residence is still the strongest sociodemographic effect at play: what province or region you live in still has the strongest impact on who you vote for. But religion often comes second only to province of residence. It is still more important than age, still more important than social class, still more important than gender. It is there, even if we don't hear a lot about it.

I met with a really interesting group at Cardus back in November in Ottawa, which is a more Christian-funded, faith-based think tank. We had a whole day of workshops on the perception of religion in Canada and the role faith plays in society.

And while I was there, I realized, "Oh wow, okay…These guys are here in Ottawa. They probably do not have as much impact as when the Harper government was in power, but they do have some political clout." And they are one of many such groups in Canada.

There is also, at the grassroots level, a lot of volunteer faith-based groups, groups that are helping, providing certain social services that the government is not providing, or not fully funding.

Here in southern Ontario for example, there are a lot of faith-based immigrant settlement groups who are volunteers, who help new arrivals settle, and make sure they've got housing, make sure they've got the right language skills, and so forth. A lot of the key players are volunteers from Christian organizations and churches.

That is the reality here in Canada. It is a fascinating reality.

Jacobsen: If we take a neutral perspective from that last statement, and we take the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms***, then we look at the campaigning of some religious groups. Some non-religious affiliated groups.**

Across the country. In other words, all territories and all provinces. What campaigns tend to be more affirming of the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms***? What ones tend to be non-affirming of the Canadian** *Charter of Rights and Freedoms***?**

LaFlamme: You ask an interesting question, because pretty much no group is going to admit that they are not affirming the Charter in this day and age. It is a series of values that is so taken for granted in our society that it is hard to criticize them. Even more so in English-speaking Canada. In Quebec, linguistic rights and the rights of the linguistic community have some weight to them, when compared with the rights of the individual in the Charter, but even in Quebec Charter rights are paramount; just in Quebec there seems to be more willingness to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of a more individual-based rights system that we are currently in. That we've been in since especially the '80s.

As for no group willing to admit that they go against the Charter, let me give you an example. The right to religious freedom can be interpreted and applied in a number of ways in Canada, especially when it comes to the role of the State and the visibility of religion in public spaces.

To ensure an individual's religious freedom, many Western states, including here in Canada and its provinces, will try and remain neutral regarding religion, and have a long history of doing so. However, different States have different definitions and approaches to this neutrality. Some, like in France, feel that this neutrality entails all forms of religion, especially visible forms, should be removed from anything that is public, including public spaces. However, others feel that this is a hindrance to religious freedom. In other contexts, like in many places in Canada, State neutrality is not defined as the State and public spaces being totally devoid of religion, but rather as giving equal footing or at least equal opportunity to all religious and non-religious groups.

Most in Canada will agree that our State should be neutral in terms of religion and non-religion, and that everyone's religious freedom and freedoms of speech and thought should be protected. However, the ways that this is put into place, what that practically ends up looking like on the ground, and even how these rights are defined exactly can vary between groups, regions and decades.

And that is probably where you're going to see divergences and disagreements. We had the case recently where the Liberal government said that they weren't going to fund programs organized by groups who did not share the Liberals' current pro-choice values on abortion. A form had to be signed or something. And a lot of faith-based groups and individuals who are providing services came out as uncomfortable about this; felt it infringed on some of their Charter freedoms.

On top of that, our system is one in which all freedoms in the Charter are more or less given equal weight. So even when you agree on how we should go about defining and protecting these rights, then there can be disagreements on which ones should be given priority if needed.

Jacobsen: Every society has certain tacit or implicit values, which for want of better terms, can be called sacred or non-negotiable. What ones are the sacred and nonnegotiable values in Canada? That both the secular and the religious can agree on together.

LaFlamme: That is interesting. I'll say a few things on that. The field of studying non-religion and secularity, the cutting edge of it now, at least in academia, is looking into what we are calling substantive secularity.

So, for the longest time when we were studying non-religion, we would study it by showing what it was not. So, it would be like, "Okay, so these people do not go to church, they do not belong to a religion."

At some point, we said, "Well, that's great, but what are they? What do these people share in terms of values, in terms of worldviews? There is something interesting there." Often, people who are religious, for whom religion has played a big role in their lives, do not fully understand that it is possible to live a meaningful life without having any traditional religious beliefs or practices. They tend to see the non-religious as vessels devoid of anything substantial, wandering the desert aimlessly, simply waiting to be filled.

Jacobsen: Seekers.

LaFlamme: Yes, seekers basically, right? And many who study religion, in the past and even today, are guilty of holding that fundamental assumption about non-religious people. An assumption that faith is fulfilling an essential human need, that it is an essential part of what humans are, and so non-religious individuals should be defined principally by what they are missing.

There are seekers out there, non-religious individuals looking for or to return to a faith group and beliefs. I do not want to say that that is completely wrong. However, a lot of people are non-religious, and are perfectly happy with that, have other things in life; find meaning in other ways. Religion does not even come into their brain. They lead their lives in different ways. Scholars and researchers are finally beginning to properly pick up on that, and are gaining more interest in it. Are there values shared by everyone, religious and non-religious alike, and what are these values? What are the values that differ between the religious and non-religious, and why?

More secular individuals and States are not simply devoid of moral attitudes and values traditionally associated with religious groups; they have their own alternative values and approaches to life, shared by many or most of them and that they think are superior. It's often easier to pinpoint those values that differ between the religious and non-religious, because they're often the ones we hear about, that cause flare ups. That example I gave earlier on of the Liberal government threatening to not fund programs run by groups that do not share pro-choice values is one such case.

Because when a way of thinking or a value is shared by almost everyone, we do not think about it a whole lot. It does not cause a problem; it does not cause debate. It's just taken for granted as that's the way the world is. In that sense, shared views and values are almost harder to observe and study from a social scientific standpoint.

We all live in a consumerist society that is more based around the individual now than when my grandparents were growing up for example. The Charter of human rights and freedoms is not contested by most groups now. It is accepted, celebrated, seen as right and just and taken for granted at times. That was not always the case. You see that among a lot of Canadians regardless of whether they are religious or not, there are some core fundamental things that I think most people share in our societies.

Like this, this striving for happiness, this importance of family and of certain responsibilities. Those are things that everyone shares. Ok, maybe not everyone, but most people share, across that religious/non-religious spectrum.

And then there are other things that cause tension, like certain attitudes towards certain moral behaviours. What is considered leading a good life? That can differ between people who are more actively religious and less religious.

Also their general worldview and understanding of how the world works and what led to the world we now live in. That can cause real tensions sometimes. But other times, people seem to be able to live peacefully with those differences just fine.

Canada is an interesting example because there are tensions. There are differences, but overall things are going well in Canada. There have been no civil wars nor mass genocides surrounding these issues in recent memory.

I am glad you asked that question because sometimes we are more interested in the differences, what drives us apart, but there are a lot of things that we share, and we seem to be able to do it relatively well in Canada.

There are issues, but nothing has caused a fundamental rift in society yet – and looking forward, probably won't, at least for the foreseeable future.

Jacobsen: Why do the non-religious lean politically and socially left? Why do the traditionally religious lean right?

LaFlamme: I do not have all the answers for you, but one factor I focus on has to do with contact with the religious institution early on in life, during childhood.

People who are actively religious as adults tend to have been actively religious as children: socialized religiously. That is a strong effect. I can show that with statistics. Again, I am talking in trends: there are some exceptions to the rule, but it's pretty rare for someone who attends religious services as an adult to have come from an irreligious background.

And during their formative childhood years, individuals who are in contact with religious groups and institutions are learning about issues, making up their minds about things and developing the way they see the world at least in part based on the teachings of these groups. Not all religious groups in Canada have more conservative doctrine, the United Church of Canada being a prominent counterexample to this, but most religious groups are going to be teaching more what we consider conservative attitudes towards things like same-sex marriage, abortion, gender roles, sexuality, etc. The more traditional family values, about what a normal family and what a normal individual within that is meant to look like. They are teaching those values at a young age. Then later on, as people grow up, those values tend to be reinforced when they stay connected to a religious group. By people within that congregation or group, their family, more often in that

congregation or group as well; their network of friends is usually at least in part of that group; Their congregation is in touch with like-minded individuals, and so forth.

The opposite is true for non-religious people. They tend to grow up in settings where the more conservative views of religious groups are not taught at all or as much; they go to more secular schools and universities where views that we consider more left of the spectrum are taught more and reinforced more, they surround themselves with like-minded friends who reinforce their views even more, and so forth.

As a sociologist, I consider that socialization process, especially during someone's formative years of childhood and early adulthood, as crucial in shaping what they think and how they act. I am not of the Dawkins school, for example, that seems to put all the weight on biological factors, to consider non-believers and their views as more "evolved" in terms of brain development and our species in general.

When you're a kid, you learn things from your environment, including your social environment. And those things are hard to unlearn and often remain with you. Current-day religious individuals often come from social environments where right-wing/conservative views are more the norm; non-religious individuals, often from social environments where left-wing/progressive views are more prevalent. You still have free will and are not completely determined by your social environment, but it does play a role, it does influence you.

It is not biological. It is not innate. It is something you learn. It is the social context that builds it. We happen to be living in an era when, for a lot of people, the social environment is not being influenced and constructed by leaders and members of religious groups as much as it once was. That doesn't mean that there aren't social milieus where this is still the case, Trinity Western University and other Canadian Christian universities being examples here. Those in these milieus share certain views of the world that at times are quite different from our own, to put it mildly. But overall, we're in a more secular social environment than was once the case.

Jacobsen: When it comes to those moral values stated at the earlier part of that response, examples of traditional family values, opposition to gay marriage, opposition to women's reproductive health, abortion rights, assisted dying, and so on, what, based on the research, do these groups or individuals report as their reasons for the opposition to those things or the affirmations of those values? In other words, what is the source of them, e.g. the community, the text, and so on?

LaFlamme: Good question. I work a lot with survey data where we ask what you think, but not why you think it. So, survey data classically asks what are your attitudes, not why do you have these attitudes? We don't manage to get into the "why" so much. That's where qualitative methods come into play in the social sciences.

One form of qualitative research is where you sit down with someone and then go into the depth of their reasoning and why it is that they hold these attitudes. I do not do this kind of research myself, but I do have colleagues and read from others who do.

You usually get a series of factors that individuals themselves identify. So, they will often identify these attitudes, such as being against abortion, being against assisted dying, and so forth as part of their core, fundamental belief of what they think is right, their value of life.

They define life as beginning at conception and that should go until the end of your days without you intervening, or a doctor intervening, in that process.

Some will link that to their beliefs in the transcendent. “God created this, and so it should be this way.” Others will not necessarily be able to think it through that well. Maybe, they haven’t thought about it as much and so will answer, “Well, because that is how it has always been”, or “That is what I believe.”

These are some of the reasons individuals identify themselves. Those are interesting. They are important. However, what I am interested in, especially as a quantitative sociologist who can look at people’s answers to different questions, is to see if there are links between their answers without them actually knowing about it.

Individuals might not associate their high levels of religiosity with their anti-abortion attitudes. But I can see that when I look at association patterns with statistical data. So, I can see that, “Hey, even though you’re giving different reasons for this, and those might still be valid and interesting, I can also see this other link that you tended to go to church a lot as a kid.”

And it is within many religious groups where they tend to teach these sorts of attitudes. So, yes, there are a variety of reasons. And yes, I am especially interested in the reasons we cannot see as much and what impact they then have on social interaction with others.

Jacobsen: Now, given the specialization in the sociology of religion, do any personality or individual differences of psychology with regards to personality play into any of the research for you? This is a quick primer question, yes or no.

LaFlamme: Yes.

Jacobsen: In other words, the big five and intelligence. Do these factor into it?

LaFlamme: The psychology of religion approach is more to look at these personal characteristics. Personality traits, to see how they link with religion. I am not big on that. I am not a huge fan of psychology in general to be honest.

Although there are some interesting findings, I do not want to put them down. However, as a sociologist, I am much more interested in the impact of what’s around you in terms of the social reality and environment around you. And how that has an influence on who you are and what you do; on your personality and your attitudes and social behaviour.

I do not know the literature so much specifically on the links between the big five personality types and religion, although I do know there is literature out there on it for anyone who’s interested.

I am a little bit more familiar with the psychology literature on the links between higher levels of intelligence and non-religion. I have seen some of it and have had some discussions with colleagues on it. I hear a lot about it from the New Atheist side of things. However, I’ll use it as an example to show you its differences from the sociological approach.

The first question that comes to mind when I hear about these findings is: what are you considering as intelligent? How do you define intelligence? How are you measuring it? Because some intelligence tests are more American or Western centric. They measure some interesting things about you, but especially measure how hooked into that culture you are.

Or are you talking about someone like me who is a university professor, considered more intelligent than someone who is not, even though my knowledge is specialized to a very specific subdiscipline and series of topics?

I do not like that. In the sense that I have trained, yes, I can think at a university level. I do science. But, I am hopeless when it comes to fixing something around the house. Whereas someone, some of my friends for example, who did not go to university are nevertheless manual "thinkers" and very smart about how things practically work. The manual side of things. What do you mean when you talk about intelligence? It puts the correlation between intelligence level and non-religion into perspective a bit.

Another example related to this: universities in Canada are quite secular on average. We do have some Christian universities, but for the most part, when you go to university, you usually do not talk about or even practice your religion so much. Even if you have a religion, university does not usually reinforce religion in any way. Some religious individuals even get told off or shunned by a lot of their peers.

I saw this a lot when I was in Oxford. One of my American friends was open about the fact that he believed in God. When he stated this, there would often be, like, 20 people who would exclaim "What do you mean?!" They'd try to debate him and convert him to atheism, which I thought was a bit drastic. But intelligence is often thought of in our society as linked to higher education, as coming from university training. And universities also happen to be more secular social environments on average. So what is really at play? Intelligence, or the characteristics of the social environment? It's often hard to distinguish the two with survey or experimental data.

You find more non-religious people in universities in Canada. However, if you go and look at examples of Christian universities, in Canada and the US, you also find intelligent people who are religious as well.

I am not saying psychologists are wrong. I just don't use their approach. I do not look at the personality traits of the individual, but I am especially interested in everything else that constructs that around them. Other people, interactions with other people. Interactions with social institutions and society. So, that is what I focus on.

Jacobsen: When it comes to religion and politics, you noted the top sociocultural predictive variables, in terms of what they will be. What are the two most predictive variables, or factors, that the whole field widely accepts as nonnegotiable. The data is so good.

Where the two variables predict if someone will be non-religious or religious?

LaFlamme: Great question, I've got an answer for you. I'll provide a little bit of context first though. This is something that is taken for granted in social sciences, but I want to make sure we are on the same page.

So, when we work with human behaviour, we are talking in terms of probabilities, not determinism. What's amazing about humans, is that they have free will. You'll find patterns, but any individual can deviate from those, an exception to the rule. Once they are aware of those patterns, they can also adjust their behavior accordingly.

For me, that's what's fascinating about studying humans and social behaviour; what you don't get when studying atoms or things, what you don't get so much of in the natural sciences.

That was the context. Now for my actual answers. First, if you are a man, you are much more likely to be non-religious in Canada and in most Western nations. Second, if you are younger, you are much more likely to be non-religious in Canada and in most Western nations.

There is a strong generational effect. That one you probably saw coming. That thing from earlier on about, we are in a context where religious socialization does not happen for a lot of people nowadays.

There is a weaker presence of religion in the social environment and that is having an impact on people of all ages. However, it is especially influential for people who are born and raised in this more recent context.

So, us Millennials versus say my grandparents or my great-grandparents. That is probably one of the strongest effects on non-religion in Canada.

You also see a gender effect across pretty much all Western nations regarding non-religion. That is one we are currently having more trouble explaining. Again, there are lots of women, I am an example, who are nonbelievers. However, on average, proportionally, there are a lot more men who are nonbelievers.

Men seem to like the label of atheist more as well. They will use it to describe themselves more often, compared with female nonbelievers. A lot of women may not believe in God, but they won't call themselves atheists. They might call themselves nonbelievers like I do, or use some other term, or just answer "meh." [laugh]

I rarely call myself an atheist; occasionally when I'm trying to make a point to an Evangelical colleague or something, but it's pretty rare. Whereas not all men, but a lot of men, who are nonbelievers will adopt that atheist label more often on average.

And in general men tend to be less involved in organized religion than women. You see that especially in contexts where religion is not as socially acceptable or celebrated as it used to be. Back in the day when it was prestigious to be in church and to be involved in a church, men tended to do it more, you didn't see the gender effect so much.

However, in a context where we're indifferent, or its less prestigious to be involved with a religious group, men tend to fall away quicker than women. The explanations for that are still being developed or trying to be figured out.

Again, I am not a fan of innate biological explanations. I do not think it is because women have this somehow biological difference that makes them more prone to religion. I think that is *crap*. However, I do think it is something about the way they are raised, or the roles expected of them that make them see religious involvement as more worthwhile and worth keeping a hold of, possibly creating stronger links to their family heritage for example.

The fact that women are still expected to be more involved in child rearing in North America and other Western societies may have something to do with it: is it something about what and how they want to pass something on to their children?

Do they see the network, the community, the ties in the congregation as something worthwhile, more than men do? Women tend to be more willing to invest more in these types of relationships. Researchers are in the process now of trying to figure it out.

Any good-quality survey data you take, if you ask a thousand people how religious they are for example, you'll always find that gender effect. In Canada, in the USA, in most European nations, and so that is an interesting one. That is an effect not everyone on the ground is aware of.

You probably might have noticed it though. Probably at a lot of your gatherings and activities with atheist groups and organizations, there might often be proportionally more men than women.

Jacobsen: I talked to some of the people that are in the leadership. They've noted there are more men than women.

LaFlamme: Yes, there is this anecdotal evidence, and then when you look at it systematically, with the systematic collection of good-quality data as we are meant to do in science, you also see it.

Whether or not that is going to last, as we move away from organized religion more and more, we'll see. Again, religion is not going to disappear altogether, but you do have a large group of people who are less religious now than was once the case. If that group continues to be composed of disproportionately more men than women, we'll have to see.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Professor Wilkins-LaFlamme.

LaFlamme: Cool! Well, thanks, Scott. We are always happy as academics to talk to you, because yay(!), someone's interested in what we are doing!

Jacobsen: [Laughing] That is funny.

For more information, please see below:

Peer-reviewed journal articles

Thiessen, Joel and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme. 2017. "Becoming a Religious None: Irreligious Socialization and Disaffiliation." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56(1): 64-82.

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Wilkins-Laflamme, Sarah. 2016. "Secularization and the Wider Gap in Values and Personal Religiosity between the Religious and Non-Religious." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55(4): 717-736.

Wilkins-Laflamme, Sarah. 2016. "The Remaining Core: A Fresh Look at Religiosity Trends in Great Britain." *British Journal of Sociology* 67(4): 632-654.

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2017. “The Religious Nones of North America and the Beginnings of a Book Project.” Peer-reviewed blog post for the *Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network’s Blog*. July 2017. http://blog.nsrn.net/

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2016. “The Remaining Core: A Fresh Look at Religiosity Trends in Great Britain.” Post for the *LSE British Politics and Policy Blog*. November 2016. http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/

2016. “The Religious Nones of British Columbia.” Authored article for the *2016-2017 CSRS newsletter*. September 2016. http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/csrs/assets/docs/newsletters_annual-reports/2016-csrs-newsletter.pd

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Benjamin David on How His Abusive Childhood Motivated Him to get involved in Human Rights Activism

March 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Benjamin David is the Founder of* Conatus News *and a Writer, Designer, Photographer, Artist, and Marketer on various platforms. Here we talk about his life, struggles, progressive activism, and how to unify activists.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How was life for you growing up?

Benjamin David: Born into a very working class household, I grew up in several poverty-stricken areas in Bristol with my parents and two siblings. Even though my father had a very penurious job as a welder/fabricator, he was a very talented man, with a remarkably shrewd ability to repair or build anything he set his mind to.

By contrast, my mother was a housewife who, owing to longstanding mental illness, was continuously between jobs. Having parents whom I could best describe as disciplinarians, the environment my siblings and I grew up in was consistently threatening and teeming with abuse. My brother and I spent a lot of time either being smeared or maligned.

Moreover, we were physically abused, suffering horrific injuries forcing us on many occasions to run away and attempt to take our own lives. Understandably, I not only had a deeply noxious relationship with my family, but it precipitated a lengthy period of social withdrawal, with me spending considerable amounts of time in the throes of depression, anxiety and self-harm.

Losing all friends, I was forced to take recourse in school books, video games and sojourns in nature to find a sense of plenitude. In fact, the older I became the more introverted I was, which often resulted in me being vilified or spurned by my peers in high school.

Light would eventually prevail at the end of my tunnel, or so I thought, after my parents divorced after numerous warring months. I decided to move in with my recently remarried father, seeking non-belligerence, where I stayed for two years.

Given that my father's wife was a relative of my mother and a longstanding Jehovah's witness, before the wedding he covertly undertook lengthy bible study sessions and "got to know" Jesus and Jehovah prior to announcing the engagement to the rest of the family.

Moving in with my father soon after the announcement, I was implicated in the wrongdoings orchestrated by my father, and I was subsequently rejected and disowned by my mother, an imposition my siblings had no choice but to comply with.

Notwithstanding the desertion, I endeavoured to please my Dad, with the hope of making my first friend as an adolescent, even attending the weekly meetings of the Jehovah's Witnesses at the Kingdom Hall.

Having found neither intellectual nor emotional fulfilment, I renounced my religiosity, meaning that I was labelled an "unrepentant wrongdoer" and shunned by everyone in the household.

I was eventually starved of food, causing me to develop a chronic health condition that would inflict me for over 11 years, and I was asked to leave the house. At the time of being homeless, living in the city of Bath at the time, I was merely 17.

Jacobsen: Did religion and politics play a large role during your childhood?

David: As I have already mentioned, religion was certainly a part of my later early life. The disclosure of superstitious beliefs, by contrast, were certainly ubiquitous during my early years, which undeniably aroused my interest in atheism during my late teens to early 20s.

My mother was a dogmatic believer in ghosts and angels, often speaking fervently on how ghosts are all around us, even in our house. Seeing psychics cleanse the house of spectres was a somewhat common phenomenon.

Having experienced first-hand the ruinous effects of being disfellowshipped by my own family for leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, and still consternated by the question whether God exists or not, I embarked upon a lengthy analysis of theism, watching lots of documentaries, reading a myriad number of books and getting involved in philosophy.

Eventually, I would be prevailed upon by atheism, and I undertook a lengthy involvement with humanism with the intent of helping those who had, like me, been victimised by religion.

Concerning politics, my parents held deeply entrenched fascist and populist views, which were at odds with my own egalitarian views.

My mother was once a supporter of the Labour Party in the mid to late 90s, but mass immigration and the perceived Islamization of Britain lead her to increasingly spout far-right garble. Derogatory remarks about minority groups were commonly made, which only precipitated a feeling shared by me and my siblings that the world was a deeply perilous place.

The political opinions of my parents most certainly galvanized my own political ponderings during my later adolescence, finding a sense of harmony with many of the left-wing political positions propagated from leading thinkers in philosophy during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Despite the repugnant nature of the positions held by my parents, I wanted to learn, critically, why they came to the political conclusions they did, and in so doing understand the flaws underpinning their convictions.

In many ways, and to my frustration, there is a sense of collective guilt that I find myself harbouring for the positions propagated by my parents, and I am sure this feeling has played a role, albeit a marginal role, in why I have been ardently involved in the world of activism.

Jacobsen: You founded ***Conatus News*****; a human-rights oriented, progressive platform for activists, writers, and social commentators. What inspired the title of the publication?**

David: The title was inspired by the philosopher Spinoza, who used the term 'conatus' to describe the force in every animate creature toward the preservation of its existence. One of the recurring issues floating around activist circles is being heard.

The majority of those with whom I worked, such as the ex-religious, have a drive in them to be heard, to have their human rights and the rights of others preserved. It was only fitting that I picked a name symbolic of the very people the platform would eventually serve.

Jacobsen: Your involvement in Conatus News culminated in the 'Defending Progressivism' conference in London featuring some of the biggest names in activism either in attendance or sitting on the panel with you. Given that many of these activists disagree with each other, how did you manage to bring such figures together?

David: I firmly believe that an activist movement will always fail if it is unable to forge a unity of purpose or togetherness. At the Defending Progressivism conference in 2017, there were some big characters who fundamentally disagreed with each other on some pretty pressing issues, such as AC Grayling and Claire Fox.

However, ideals of equality, individual liberty, freethought and compassion are ideals that most people, no matter their differences on certain topical issues such as Brexit, respect and thump for. Through giving centre stage to this centre ground, people are more amenable to engaging and respecting those who they once-perceived as political adversaries.

It's always an inspiriting sight when two people come together to work something out. Just like music, with a single note only going so far, humans are collectively far more effective in their cause, emerging as a resonance.

Jacobsen: Who have been inspirations in terms of the progressive movement in the United Kingdom, and in fact the world, for you?

David: The first would have to be Eugene Debs, who popularized ideas about civil liberties, workers' rights, peace and justice, and government regulation of big business. The philosopher John Dewey was another, whose ideas about "experiential learning" emboldened several generations of educators.

He was also a champion of teachers' unions and academic freedom, and he also spoke out and mobilised against efforts to rescind free speech, and he helped establish NAACP as well as being an ardent supporter of women's suffrage.

Another is Charles Bradlaugh, a Victorian politician, who founded the UK's National Secular Society over 150 years ago. Being the first atheist MP, Bradlaugh paved the way for the separation of religion and public life in Britain.

Jacobsen: Now, you have other professional endeavors. What are they? Why do you pursue this course?

David: Presently, I have been working with an array of smart, gifted and passionate thinkers in the development of a new project, which we hope to launch in the coming months. Whilst I cannot divulge a lot of information at this point, I can say that it really will be the first of its kind once launched, and I am confident that it will pave the way for advances in the grassroots circles to which I belong as well as educating and empowering the public.

Conatus News was a sizeable project that I had launched, and the various successes and failures along the way has been a huge learning curve. After stepping down from Conatus News back in December 2017, mainly owing to ill health and a need to take a break from activism, I thought that I could enjoy the peace, given that Conatus News had been a colossally stressful full-time project. However, a few weeks in I experienced a hankering for activism, and brainstorming ideas quickly ensued.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion? What are your hopes looking forward for the progressive movement in 2018/19?

David: The term "progressivism" gets a bad rap, with many from the more reactionary and postmodernist side of the Left coming to be synonymous with the term. This is particularly evident in more moderate Left and centrist activist platforms very similar to Conatus News.

As a philosophy, progressivism is based on the Idea of Progress, which is the view that people can become better in terms of quality of life (social progress) through economic development (modernization), and the application of science and technology (scientific progress).

The assumption is that the process will happen once people apply their reason and skills, for it is not divinely foreordained. Why I do not call postmodernists "progressive" is that they expunge a key constituent of both modernity and progressivism – reason. Postmodernism stresses the irrational while being overly suspicious of the rational.

For those who are more laudatory of the term, there is a tendency to see progressivism as synonymous with, or certainly very similar to, the term "liberal". This is unfortunate. There are fundamental differences between the two, such as core economic issues.

Traditional "liberals" in our current parlance are those who focus on using taxpayer money to improve society. By contrast, a progressive believes in using government power to make large institutions play by a set of progressive rules.

Furthermore, progressives are aware of social and economic problems and try to define and address the systemic rules, laws and traditions that enable and empower the problems in the first place. Importantly, progressives share a general belief in the interconnections of individuals and the view that "when you hurt, I hurt".

One of the biggest hopes that I have for the progressive movement in 2018/19 is that ideas of progress become synonymous with the term 'progressivism', and the dirty connotation is extirpated from it.

Unfortunately, the loudest voices remonstrating against those who try to shut down university debates or apply different moral standards depending on the so-called "power" of a social group are either conservatives or libertarians, represented by such magazines as Sp!ked and commentators like Douglas Murray and Ben Shapiro.

Whilst there are always important partnerships to be had with our conservative and libertarian friends when working to redress specific issues we all agree on, it is important the progressive identity is not obscured by them.

Eric Hobsbawm put it stirringly when describing the unique identity of progressivism as characterised by "Public decisions aimed at collective social improvement from which all human lives should gain", which he deemed the basis of any progressive policy, and changing the chronic and bedimmed political mentality of "maximising economic growth and personal income" to maximising the human condition across the board.

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

Clovis Munezero on Fleeing Burundi, Being a Refugee, and Being a Nonbeliever

March 29, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are Burundian, but have fled, recently. Why?

Clovis Munezero: I am Burundian, but recently I have fled my country.

When I saw that my life was in danger, my friends were killed; my companions jailed, some of my family disappeared and others imprisoned; I have reason to flee my country. I have left my country because it was going through a political crisis and trouble that took a lot of human lives and property damage.

Everything starts on 26 April 2015 when the current president of the Republic of Burundi declares for the 3rd Term, which is unconstitutional. We revolted by demonstrating in streets to defend the Constitution. Some three weeks during demonstrations, a military group attempted a coup that eventually failed.

We had already lost several human lives during the demonstration, which lasted some two months was followed by persecution of any person who demonstrated against the will of this illegal term. Several people have left the country for fear of being killed and others have been imprisoned, others killed.

My turn came on 17 November 2015 when people without uniforms came for me at home after having kidnapped the day before my uncle with whom we lived together. That day I left home and it took me almost two weeks to cross the border of Rwanda-Burundi. I had to change from house to house of friends.

On 28 November, our family member took me in his car up to the border of Rwanda and I crossed. There I stayed with my friend for three days who fled before. Then, I took the road to Nairobi. I reached there after two days on 2 December 2015. I started all over again. A refugee's life begins.

Jacobsen: What is your own family religious background?

Munezero: My family religious background is Christianity. I was grown up in that family but my parents did not attend the same churches and it was almost never discussed matters of faith. They taught us the 10 commandments of the bible and some verses of the bible based on the good and the bad. What makes us grow with this experience of diversity?

We're 4 siblings and none does not share the same church with each other and never did us any harm to the family.

Jacobsen: How did you lose faith?

Munezero: How did I lose my Faith; I grew up in the scout family movement with a lot of diversity. Leaders taught us that it is a lay movement: we had nonbelievers, Muslims, and Christians. Growing up in that diversity pushed me in to do some research to find out the event that shaped the world.

I started reading some stories, especially about the Second World War, Vietnam War, Genocide in Rwanda, and what happened in the region as well as colonialism and that the people of the church were involved.

Faith is lost in this way. I replaced it by reason. The belief, I replaced it with science.

Jacobsen: What was the treatment by the community based on your loss of religious faith?

Munezero: The treatment by the community based on my loss of religious faith.

When people noticed that I was no longer part of their belief, above all the people close to the family judged me as part of Satanism, dangerous, but they saw how I was living my life with love, tolerance. I always had a position to defend. I started being tolerated as much as I can so long that I am proud of my orientation.

I to have always influenced the community, I always let my life to talk about me and be up of on my choice. I never had fear of the community for my choice because my family was not against me nor agree with my choice .and I did choose reason and science. Those are my "faith."

Jacobsen: What is your advice for those who have lost faith and who may experience mistreatment for it?

Munezero: My advice for those who have lost their faith and can be abused.

Every person has the right to choose which way to follow and he/she has to have a reason for every choice. For those people must know well and defend this reason which pushed him/her to make such a decision of "losing faith":

Knowing the entourage for not putting you in danger as a "suspect person."

Knowing if there are people who understand you and who share with you the way of living.

Finding people with whom you share your especially daily information and orientation of thinking.

Seeking to build links with other people by your lifestyle and do not seek to explain everything to everyone.

When it is threatened and unable to defend yourself, leave the place.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Munezero: My thoughts or feelings is that; people that already part of the humanistic community, let us act on the responsibility of making our prosperous societies, charitable and trying to make peace on this land and make it a home to all.

Let us live peacefully through our daily lives, teach and influence the world with love and humanism. We are humans, try to be humanists. Thank you, sir, have a good time.

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

More on the Meaning of Backlash Movements with Faisal Saeed Al Mutar

March 29, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Faisal Saeed Al Mutar** founded the Global Secular Humanist Movement and Ideas Beyond Borders. He is an Iraqi refugee, satirist, and human rights activist. He is also a columnist for Free Inquiry. Here, we continue to talk about the meaning of backlash movements.*

Jacobsen: So, before, we talked about some issues regarding backlash movements. We don't want misunderstandings: "backlash" meaning physical violence or destruction of property in the midst of protest rather than peaceful non-violent protests regardless of the issue.

What are some other concerns you may have since the last session we had about some of these "backlash" movements?

Faisal Al Mutar: Thank you for interviewing me. The concern that I have is a continuous one regarding the fact that many movements are rising up right now.

The one we talked about last time about the rise of the Far-Right. It's happening now that there is less belief in democracy in achieving things and moving more towards an authoritarian rule.

We can hear it in statements by multiple countries around the world with Turkey being one. With China, now, they have a leader who is a "President for life." In Kenya, which was in a sense a promising democracy, is now sliding towards authoritarianism.

Even countries that have prided itself on being supposedly a beacon for democracy and free speech, like the state of Israel, it is also declining according to Freedom House. That their freedom of the press is declining.

So that's very worrying. There's a decline of democracy around the world and the decline of the belief of the values that "built Western Enlightenment." Like the freedom of speech and right to vote and others, that's something that really worries us quite a lot.

Jacobsen: What about some responses that one might state that the current "backlash movements," as you have called them, are more minor issues, where the number of protests, de-platformings, and restrictions on free speech is actually minor if you take into account all 2,600 universities in the United States alone?

So in other words, it's a matter of numbers. That it's a fraction of a percent where these kinds of de-platformings and dis-invitations are happening. So, in other words: it's not pervasive; therefore, it's not a major concern. Do you have a response?

Al Mutar: Obviously, if somebody plays a numbers game, somebody can make the argument for school shootings or mass shootings compared to the US population. The US population is somewhere around 315 million people, but just because the percentage is low doesn't mean the concept itself is illegitimate.

That just because some students or some people feel uncomfortable that a speaker is coming to campus that, therefore, this justifies a dis-invitation. Even if it's a small number, which I'm glad

to hear, it's still a slippery slope that other groups might follow or other places might follow the same trend.

Not just dis-invited, I was nominated to speak and the group rejected that nomination on the fact that some students might feel uncomfortable with my presence. The good news is there was another group that stepped in and said, "We will invite him."

But the concept that for a speaker to come to the campus and all the students at the campus have to be "comfortable" at the campus is worrying. Regardless if it's happening on the large scale or small scale, the value itself is dangerous.

It can open a slippery slope for other things to follow the same direction.

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

Fleeing Burundi and Finding Humanism with Aloys Habonimana

March 31, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are Burundian, but have fled, recently. Why?

Aloys Habonimana: In 2015, Burundi is fallen and in a political crisis, when the president wanted to stay in power illegally; the opposition parties and civil organizations were against that.

I as a person who started to understand the importance of living free with dignity, and prosperity as human being, together with others, we went to the demonstration to protest against that bad decision of the president.

I was in the party called MSD (Movement of Solidarity and Democracy). Most of the members of my party were killed by the members of ruling party (Imbonerakure Youth of Ruling Party). Others from groups are in prison. Others were persecuted until they are living with disabilities all their life by police and the intelligence agencies.

I left my country when I was looked for by Imbonerakure. I am sure if they caught me I would be persecuted and even killed because my position was to mobilize the young people for new changes.

I was looked for by Immoderacies for two accusations:

To participate in the demonstration

To be in the opposition party (MSD)

I left my country without finishing my studies. It touches my heart.

Jacobsen: What is your own family religious background?

Habonimana: I participated in many churches. I was born when my mother was an Adventist and my father had no religion. Then at the age of 7, I was Anglican. In 2000, my father and mother decided to return to the Catholic religion.

I was baptized in the Catholic religion. In 2004, I left the Catholic religion for the Pentecostal Church. After 2 years, I left this religion because of things I did not understand. I found another religion called Jehovah's Witnesses for 7 years.

Afterward, I entered the Unitarian Universalists. My family is in Christianity.

I have so many backgrounds in different religions.

Jacobsen: How did you lose faith?

Habonimana: I was a true Catholic, even as I thought of being a parish Catholic, but afterward I saw that there are lies behind it. I had many questions about Jesus and mother Mary, but no Parish or Pastor answered me.

In the Protestant religion, I have seen that pastors are enriching themselves to the detriment of their faithful. I have noticed that pastors and ministers are hiding many things from their faithful.

Here I can quote:

Not tell them the reality of life.

Play with emotions of their faithful.

Prohibit the use of scientific reason.

Promote the religious discrimination.

Put their faithful in exaggerated fear.

In me extend family, we lost many people because of their religion which preached them, is not allowed by God to go to the hospital when they are sick.

To prohibit their children not go to school instead of encouraging their children for the best future.

According to those things, when I was in those religions, my faith was lost; and now, I believe in human beings, which means that the human being has a power for creating a good thing and changing things.

That is why I want to work in humanitarian services for changing the lives of many people who are victims of their faith.

Jacobsen: What was the treatment by the community based on your loss of religious faith?

Habonimana: My native region is totally Christian. It is very difficult for me, even for my family. My family treated me as a bad child. I was even accused of being Satanist. None of my family and my friends understand me.

I was insulted in front of people. I remember that when I was in high school I was persecuted because I refused to go to Catholic church. I was in isolation. However, now because of my generosity, the kindness I show to the people; they start to understand me.

Jacobsen: What is your advice for those who have lost faith and who may experience mistreatment for it?

Habonimana: I advise them to be honest with themselves. It is not a fault to have different beliefs. It is in our duties. I can advise them to get in contact with other groups or associations of humanists who can help them to know their rights and their duties.

They have to be careful in their village because people can traumatize them, even kill them because of their beliefs. That is why it is better to be in an association known by the government and known by international organizations like IHEYO, for example.

Jacobsen: Any concluding thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Habonimana: As a refugee, I am in a country where there are many people who do not understand me; it is hard to feel comfortable. Sometimes, I get discouraged. Normally, a humanist life is a good life when you are free and do not have the fear of insecurity because it gives freedom to think and do things according to the belief.

That is why we need your assistance morally and materially. It is awful to sleep when you want to work, to stay closed when you want to be free. Humanism taught me a great thing; I want to change the mind of people who believe that God will give them all things.

There are people who pray every day to seek food instead of working and to study how they can overcome their problems. I want to do that by a nonprofit organization. I have this inspiration because of the value of humanism.

I want to encourage my friends who are in the bad situation to be associated with other associations and contribute to change this world where there are so many lies.

I take this occasion to thank all associations of humanist and all movements for the work they are doing for supporting and promoting humanism in this world.

I am very hopeful together we can change the world.

Best wishes,

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

Andrew Copson on the History of Humanism

April 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I wanted to talk about humanism: the hows and whys, the theoretical and practical, and so on. You are highly qualified to comment on it. So, I asked. You agreed.

So here we are, to begin, what is humanism properly defined in its most general sense?

Andrew Copson: In English since the mid-nineteenth century, when it first appeared as a word, 'humanism' has had two main meanings.

One is to refer to the cultural milieu of Renaissance europe (which we now more often call 'Renaissance humanism'); the second is to refer to a non-religious approach to questions of value, meaning, and truth which emphasises the role of humanity in these areas of life rather than the role of any deity.

This 'humanism' is the one which has inspired the setting up of humanist organisations and the development, by humanist thinkers and activists, of the more fully worked out approach to life or worldview that we refer to with the word today.

Jacobsen: As you are based in the U.K., and you have leadership roles within the U.K. for humanism, how do you mobilize British humanists outside of a faith-based framework? My hunch is that the inspiring action in people is different in a system not based on faith.

Copson: I don't know if it's that different. Humanists, like anyone else, are motivated to action by their beliefs. Certainly humanist organisations and leaders don't have the god-backed power to instruct their fellow believers to do this or that, but then that doesn't work out terribly well for religious leaders either.

I think that leadership in a humanist context is about being clear in public forums about our values and beliefs and the living out and modelling them in practice too. If people agree with your reasoning and warm to your manner, they will consider doing as you suggest.

Jacobsen: Who do you consider the founder of humanistic values – an individual and society?

Copson: Throughout recorded history and around the world there have been humanists and this is not surprising as humanist beliefs and values can be arrived at anywhere by anyone with reason and empathy. There have probably always been such people.

The first people who expressed at least some humanist views that we know about and who left their thoughts for us in writing are people like Mengzi in China 2,300 years ago, followers of the Charvaka school in India 2,500 years ago, and thinkers of the Greek and Roman world of 2,500 to 1800 years ago.

None of the societies in which these views were expressed could be described as humanist – they were diverse societies in which there were many schools of thought – but they were certainly more humanistic than, for example, the Christian states of medieval Europe.

It was in part the rediscovery and reception of these humanistic thinkers that kickstarted the humanistic trends that have transformed the world and made it modern.

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

Copson: There is no doubt that the most obvious English speaking framer of humanism in the specific sense of a defined worldview rather than a general social and intellectual trend is one of my predecessors as Chief Executive of Humanists UK – Harold Blackham.

In the early twentieth century he enlisted great thinkers and reformers to give form to this 'humanism' both in the UK and internationally as the first Secretary General of the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

He was joined in this internationally by the Dutch thinker and activist Jaap van Praag, who I would also want to name in any humanist hall of founders.

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

Copson: The biggest threats to humanists have always been those of culture, tradition, and religion or ideology.

All of these forces, especially when allied to political or state power, restrict the scope for freethinking and the dynamic challenging of authority through our own reason, which is the hallmark of the humanist approach.

Racism, xenophobia, and nationalism, which all attempt to reduce the types of people entitled to our empathy and moral concern, are the second group of perennial threats to our lifestance.

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

Copson: Survey data don't seem to suggest that there are significant differences between older and younger humanists.

What they have in common is a preference for liberal and tolerant social policies. Younger people tend to be less reluctant to question and critique the beliefs of religious believers in their own cohort than older people were or are.

I think this is an extension of their greater commitment to tolerance but I also think it is something of a concern, as it is so important for every generation to be critically-minded to face the perennial threats that target human reason and empathy.

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

Copson: Older humanists in the UK tend to be surprised that there are still issues around religion and politics in UK society. They grew up in a context where religion was fading from the public agenda and now – largely due to immigration – it is back on that agenda.

So older people tend to be very concerned that the liberal social gains that their have seen secured in their lifetime – around liberal education, the human rights of children, the secularisation of social policy – may be reversed and that the lives of their children and grandchildren will be worsened by this.

If I had to pick one policy issue that concerns them, I think it would be assisted dying. Older people have to deal with a very particular situation that few older people in the history of our species have faced.

Modern medicine has preserved their lives and health beyond imagination, but the new problem this raises is how to bring a dignified end to individual human existence when worthwhile life is over.

Older humanists don't see why their freedom of choice and their human dignity should be compromised in the way that religious lobbies and opponents of choice have successfully kept it as being.

In Conversation with Dr. Stephen Law – Philosopher and Author

April 1, 2018

Dr. Stephen Law and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Since the audience for Canadian Atheist amount to the general public of the non-religious, this can frame some of the discussion. You spent decades in philosophical pursuits. We have been writing together on-and-off for over a year now, much more than that if I remember right (I will have to ask Professor Elizabeth Loftus about that one.).

To start, I want to converse on the nature of the non-religious and the skeptic movements – even the super-minority of self-identified zetetics – and the public representation of them. In the United Kingdom, the non-religious became a larger movement than Canada, especially America and many European countries as well.

What seems like the future of the non-religious in the laity of North America and Europe over the incoming decades?

Dr. Stephen Law: Well the 'nones' are on the rise across the West, certainly. In Iceland, the proportion of young people identifying as nones is now 0%. That's a pretty dramatic figure. However, those who are 'no religion' (nones) are not necessarily atheist, remember. However, atheism is also on the rise.

As religiousity declines, it will be harder and harder for e.g. The Church of England in the UK, to appear relevant or significant. It's the established Church here, of course. It runs very many schools, including a school my daughters attended (I had little choice). It has 26 bishops automatically seated in the House of Lords, where they can block legislation they don't like. Quite how this can continue to be justified when members fall to single digits is a good question..

Jacobsen: What seems to convince the laity, the general public, of non-religious viewpoints, in part or whole?

Law: Anecdotally, reason appears important. Those who become atheist, for example, often self-report that reason – subjecting their beliefs to critical scrutiny – played a critical role.

Mind you, that's self-reporting. US Christians self-report that they go to church regularly far more than they actually do (we know this because there are not enough pews physically to contain all those claiming to be there). So self-reporting is not always reliable. It may be that the explanation for a person's loss of religious belief is not what that person supposes.

Of course, that the real reason for rejection of religion/theism is something other than critical thinking is often maintained by the religious, of course, who insist the real reason people reject religion and embrace atheism is they want to engage in immorality, etc.

Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest people go into religion quite fast (about 3 months on average) whereas come out much more slowly (it usually takes years). I am particularly interested in the psychology involved going in each direction. C.S.Lewis famously wrote his The Screwtape Letters which explored the psychology of Christian/atheist belief from the standpoint of devils who are trying to lead us astray. I wrote The Tapescrew Letters to explore the psychology of religious/atheist belief from the standpoint of gurus trying to seduce new recruits. You can find my Letters from a Senior to a Junior Guru here:

http://stephenlaw.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/the-tapescrew-letters.html

Or listen to them here:

https://soundcloud.com/centerforinquiry/the-tapescrew-letters-letters-from-a-senior-to-a-junior-guru

The difficulty with trying to persuade folks their religious beliefs are wrong head one, as it were, is that they will likely have developed quite a range of immunising moves. Take Young Earth Creationism (YEC), for example. It's a ludicrous belief system. But try persuading an intelligent YEC-ist that they are mistaken and you will find they can tie you up in knots by employing a whole raft of strategies. Being a clued-up scientist is often of little use. Indeed, the scientific experts regularly fail badly in debates with YEC-ists.

A better strategy, I think, is to get those employing such immunising strategies to recognise that these strategies are very dodgy, by getting them to look at analogous cases. That's one the things I did with my book Believing Bullshit. It's also exactly the approach I take with my Evil God Challenge. Christians are very well prepared for the problem of evil – they have a whole range of theodicies to employ, plus skeptical theism. Come at them head on with the problem of evil and they'll tie you up in knots. But get them to compare an analogous belief defended (belief in an evil god) using the very same immunising tactics that they are employing, and suddenly they may get a glimpse of how ridiculous and irrational they're being. I produced a short video on the Evil God Challenge (suitable for kids and adults) here:

https://vimeo.com/186237056

The paper is here:

https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S0034412509990369

Jacobsen: What role do theologians perform for the religious public? Why don't the non-religious have this developed to a similar extent – in proportion to the non-religious lay public population (per capita, so to speak)?

Law: There have been attempts to provide similar roles in a secular context – e.g. The Sunday Assembly in the UK. I can see that having an opportunity to come together, engaging in some community bonding, think about bigger issues, mark the great rites of passage in the year and in life – these things are good things that religions have traditionally provided, even if along with a lot of toxic religious baggage. I can understand why some would like to see those good things offered in a secular context. Personally, I don't really need it, though. I enjoyed my visit to Oxford's Sunday Assembly, but feel no need to go back.

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

In Conversation with Amardeo Sarma – Former Chair, European Council of Skeptical Organisations

April 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Amardeo Sarma is the Former Chair of the European Council of Skeptical Organizations. He is a prominent and respected individual in the skeptical movement, who has a host of other associations and qualifications. Here we cover a wide range of topics in an exclusive interview.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sarma: Yeah it was different because most of them stayed religious. My brother had a similar path even though he's not so engaged in the skeptical movement as I am. He was one of the founders with me together, but he hasn't been active. He's been a skeptic even before me and he's also a non-believer or none or whatever you would call that.

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

Sarma: I am not an atheist in the sense that I do not go around preaching non-belief, I am an atheist in the sense that I do not believe in God or any superior being, which is not the same as positively stating that there is no God. It is up to the believers to prove their case that there is a God, not mine to prove that there isn't. Also, atheism not my motivation. Being a skeptic is, and that means promoting science and critical thinking, which is what I have been doing the last, over, 30 years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jacobsen: You mentioned ***Skeptiker*****.**

Sarma: Skeptiker, yes.

Jacobsen: The name answers itself.

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

Jacobsen: Not biased on the matter at all?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jacobsen: Maybe, it is the same comfort that some American megachurch pastors feel in that they will be criticized to the 'ends of the Earth' ha, ha, ha. Was not the flat earth theory a Christian thing?

To the end of the Earth, but the followers will still "forgive them" and allow them to restart a whole new church even. For instance, a case of someone who is taking advantage of hyper-masculine preaching by the name of Mark Driscoll in the United States.

He was one of the fastest growing churches. He got caught up in a scandal. He got shut down. It was called Mars Hill Church. He is now opening up another one. He was in Seattle and is now opening one up in Arizona, something called Trinity or something like that church. He's starting up all new and that's a common phenomenon.

Sarma: It is incredible that can happen, but it does. James Randi had a good term for it: the Rubber Duck Phenomenon. If you put it underwater, it pops up again.

Jacobsen: He's right about that. Europe was historically a "Christian" continent?

Sarma: Yes.

Jacobsen: However, things happened. The critical thought began to seep in. However, the two biggest sects of Christianity are Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. So, how are they in Germany? What is their stance on a lot of issues that would be relevant to a more modern, secular state? Are there issues or concerns?

Sarma: Yes. For example, marriage was so far constricted to heterosexuals and it opened up completely again to homosexuals as well. So, the marriage for all is one of the things that passed German parliament a few days ago. That's the thing that the Catholic Church would be against.

As far as issues such as same-sex marriage is concerned or abortion and any assisted suicide, they are completely against them. Those are the issues that they are against. Those are the not issues we deal with as skeptics but the humanists do so, and many skeptics, though not all, are also humanists.

The Eastern Orthodox Church isn't strong here in Germany. We are about half and half Catholic and Lutheran, Protestant Lutheran, and there have been some interesting investigations because we have a completely different system here. People are part of the church and they pay taxes, church taxes.

That is something that is different and there are a lot of people in the Church who do not believe in God or any superior being. So, that is the strange thing that came out of one of the investigations by a group called FOWID and they found out that about 20 percent of Protestants do not believe in God and 10 percent of Catholics do not.

So, apparently, they seem to reconcile their religion in some way with being a Catholic or Protestant and at the same time not believing in God. They are probably in the Church because of completely different reasons. They want to be there because it gives them some community.

I do not know if it is the same in the Americas, but here it is quite an interesting phenomenon. Not everybody who is a Protestant or a Catholic necessarily believes in God.

Jacobsen: James Randi is American-Canadian. He's one of the two. He may have had to give up his citizenship with Canada, but I still consider him Canadian. There is a minister in the United Church of Canada named minister Gretta Vosper.

To give you a bit of history, the UCC, they were the first Church in Canada to allow women ministers. So, they are the progressive Christian group. I look at them almost like a benchmark or litmus test for how far progressive values will be allowed within Christianity in the country.

LGBTQs are a thing there too. Vosper went from a theist to an atheist over a significant period of time and her congregation stayed for the most part and late 2016 she was under review for "suitability" to be a minister in the UCC by the higher-ups.

I assume most of the higher-ups are still men. So, it is an issue here with regards to non-belief and being a leader in the church. However, I do not know about being part of the congregation and not believing in some form of higher power. But I do know there are things put out by IHEU.

For instance, by Bob Churchill who puts out this enormous amount of work with the Freedom of Thought Report every year; and in Canada's one, we are doing okay but bad in some respects. One of them would be not taking God out of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* **or something like that.**

The "one nation under God" is something like this. There are some ways we are doing good in the culture. If we could talk about it, people can be openly atheist. At the same time, there are issues about leaders in some churches being atheists as well as within the constitution, small things.

Or in the anthem, that was recently an issue. But things are changing. My sense from what you're saying with Germany is it is further ahead. The freedom is further ahead.

Sarma: I do not know if anybody who is one of the leaders of any of the churches who openly confesses to not believing in God or in a higher power but this is definitely the case for a number of people in the congregation, in the general congregation of course.

That's where the poll was done. They asked for belief and non-belief and so on. But in the German constitution, there is still a reference to God for example and it does not exist in the some of the state constitutions and every now and then there is an attempt to either remove God or add God to the constitutions of some of the state constitutions.

That's been an ongoing issue and even though most of the German population would be, I mean this is a guess, they aren't so strongly in favour of having God as part of the constitution, with reference to God or in God we trust or whatever.

This is difficult to get through to parliament because the Churches and the state in Germany are close. I do not know exactly what the situation is in Canada but there is a mutual influence that goes both ways.

This makes it difficult to change. Anything that relates to the privileges of the church. To come back to something that you mentioned before, there is a lady here who has become the first Imam and has started her own thing.

Jacobsen: I read about this. I thought that was cool.

Sarma: But she was getting death threats and things like that. So, there are some interesting developments going on.

Jacobsen: So that leads to the things that are harder to get a metric on or get proof of, socio-cultural stuff. If there is prejudice in a constitution, it is a privilege of one faith or set of faiths over another faith or non-faith.

Sarma: Yes, exactly.

Jacobsen: You can mark it in the constitution. If it is socio-cultural, that's a lot harder to touch on. The history of our country, our first prime minister was Sir John A. Macdonald. Repeatedly, we have quotes of him calling the indigenous population "savages."

'We have to bring Christian civilization to them' and the Pope at the time put out a papal bull saying, 'Yeah, go on over and convert or kill.' They did some maneuvering with the language in later bulls, but some of the earlier ones were bad.

So there is a string of, Christian supremacism is a little too strong, but something like that in a modern form where there can be bullying of those who have a non-belief or humanists, skeptics, rationalists, atheists, agnostics, the non-religious in general by historically and presently the dominant faith.

So, being a leader of the skeptics' group there as well as being the treasurer in ECSO, what are the stories that you have heard or read of not quite second-class citizenship treatment in socio-cultural life but an as if?

Sarma: That, yes, some people do not like the way we approach the claims that are made by many proponents of these pseudosciences and so on. We do not generally get involved in belief issues directly, belief in God issues unless there are specific claims.

For example, in the case of the Shroud of Turin, or some of the other miracles that have been claimed again. We keep strictly to claims that can be tested, that can be investigated by the scientific methods. In fact, if you look at our organization we do have, there is a minority who are members of the church and they still do a good job as far as science is concerned.

As far as the skeptic's organization is concerned, our main target relates to promoting science and exposing pseudoscience and antiscience. We want to be pro-science, pro-critical thinking. Sometimes, I do find it must be hard for religious believers to reconcile their beliefs with their work in science. But that is their problem.

If you look at Martin Gardner, he was not an atheist either, but he was an extremely good skeptic. Some of these contradictions we have to live with.

Jacobsen: Perennial issues around acceptance of modern scientific ideas. Whether Darwin's theory of evolution, the Big Bang, or the standard scientific ideas, how is it in Germany?

Sarma: The basic ideas of evolution, for example, and the Big Bang theory as far as people know about them, some people do not know what that's about, but there is no strong opposition to either. The evolution of the Earth, the evolution of life and the humans, that's not seen as a problem. They are accepted by the official Protestant and Catholic Churches.

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