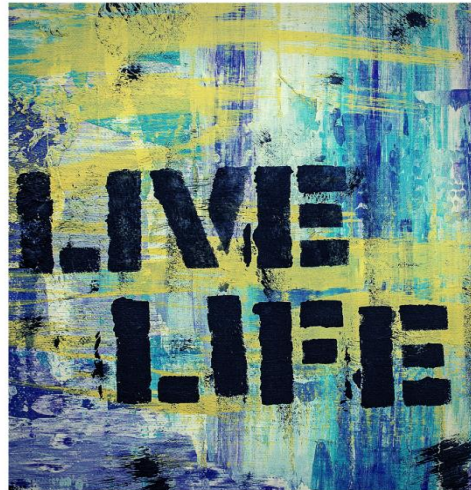
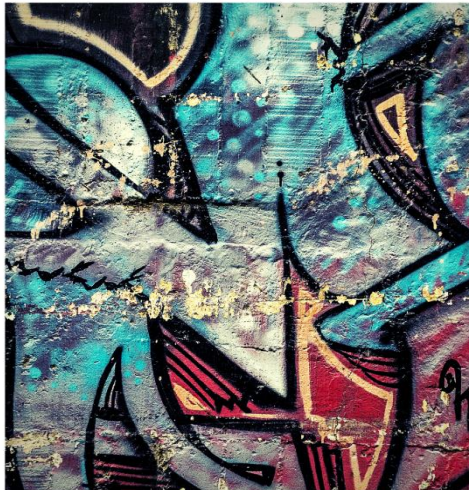
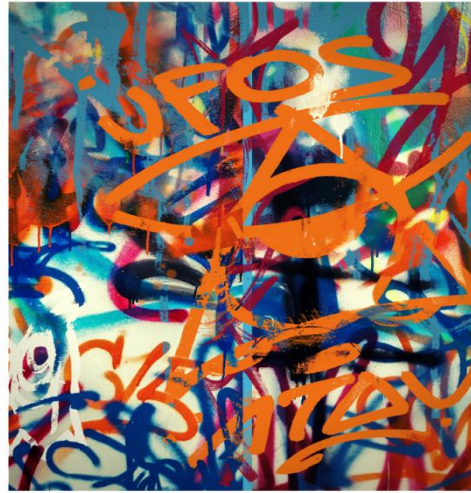


# HUMANIST VOICES

COLLECTION 1



SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

## IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

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

in-sightjournal.com

First published in parts by Humanist Voices (Young Humanists International, formerly International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation)

Not a member of In-Sight Publishing, 2017-2019

This edition published in 2019

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

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### *Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

No official catalogue record for this book.

Jacobsen, Scott Douglas, Author

Humanist Voices: Collection I/Scott Douglas Jacobsen

pages cm

Includes bibliographic references, footnotes, and reference style listing.

In-Sight Publishing, Langley, British Columbia, Canada

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

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Designed by Scott Douglas Jacobsen*

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## Acknowledgements

For the collaborations of some of the following and the interviews with others in the past couple of years, thank you for the opportunity to learn some techniques and stylistic aspects of writing from you, these include Anya Overmann, James Croft, Wade Kaardal, Julia Julstrom-Agoyo, Bamidele Adeneye, Marieke Prien, Bwambale M. Robert, Julia Julstrom-Agoyo, Yvan Dheur, Danielle Erika Hill, Ariel Pontes, Emily Newman, Stephanie Guttormson, Pamela Machado, George Ongere, Ray Zhong, Nabina Maharjan, Amjad Sattar, Leo Igwe, Houzan Mahmoud, and Chris Worfolk.. I feel happy and appreciative to contribute to *Humanist Voices*.

**Scott**

# **An Interview with Anya Overmann, Communications Officer of IHEYO**

**February 15, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

*\*This interview has been mildly edited for clarity and readability.\**

**Tell us about yourself—family background, culture, first language, and religious/humanist background.**

I was born and raised in St. Louis. My parents were raised Catholic. Independently, they decided Catholicism and Christianity were not for them. They didn't want to follow that any further. When they had kids, my brother and I, they realized that they did want us to have a religious education, but not necessarily in a Christian context.

We found the Ethical Society in St. Louis. We learned about the different religions and the core values of ethical humanism. That is what had me 'hooked'—the core values. I believed in them. I thought they were good principles. As I got older, I became more involved with it. I took on leadership roles at every stage. That's my background.

My parents are still members. They attend regularly. They have a role at the local ethical society. English is my first and only language. I can speak some Spanish, but that's from speaking Spanish in school.

**When did you find IHEYO?**

I found it a couple of years ago. FES, the Future of Ethical Societies, is the group that I was a part of. The connection to IHEYO grew from the national level of FES. At IHEYO, I applied to be the social media manager. Over time, that evolved into communications officer. Now, I am managing the social media and the blog. All outreach for humanists between the ages of 18 and 35.

**Any demographic(s) analyses of humanist youth?**

A lot of our humanist activity is in Europe. That's not that surprising.

**(Laugh)**

Right.

There's a lot of different organizations there. That's where the funding comes from. What I found with our social media is a large number of people from Pakistan, India, and Nepal are active in following our page and reading our content, I found that interesting.

**Anyone from Bangladesh?**

There are quite a few from that region, specifically. Western Asia and the Middle East are becoming more active. They are up and coming.

**So, what are some tasks and responsibilities that come along with being the social media person and communications manager?**

I try to keep our presence active. It can be difficult. It is a volunteer role. I do what I can with the time that I have each day. I try to make the content diverse. I don't want too much being posted

on specific region of the world too. I know I can get carried away by posting on what is going on here, in the US. There's a lot to be said now.

**(Laugh)**

There's a lot going on in the world. I want that represented on the page because we are an international organization. Also, I manage our blog, *Humanist Voices*. I look at the content submitted to us. We have the regional groups submit one piece per month. Then I edit them or somebody on the team edits them. We look over them, have them published, and try to distribute over social media. We're trying to get our newsletter back. We want to expand our presence online.

**Who are some humanist heroes in history for you?**

I always look to Felix Adler, who is the founder of the ethical societies here in the US. He came from Germany. He grew up Jewish. His father was a rabbi. He decided that he wasn't really feeling being Jewish.

**(Laugh)**

(Laugh)

He came up with his own thing, ethical humanism. which I find different from classical humanism. People tend to associate atheism and agnosticism with traditional humanism. Ethical humanism is more inclusive, in my opinion. It welcomes people of all backgrounds, religious or not. It focuses more on the principles that we stand for rather than the beliefs and how we got to those principles which I really admire in the motto: deed before creed. That's something that I believe in.

**Outside of Adler, and inclusive humanism—that is, whether religious or not, if you were to take one core argument for humanism, what would it be?**

It's that we have this one life that we know of and we have science to help us understand how life works. That is really the best that we have. I think that we can make the most out of life with this scientific approach and by appreciating this life. Also, the placement of humans first is the main thing that I stand behind. It is human rights as the main principle.

**It is like the Bill Nye line: 'I want to save the planet for me!'**

Yea, exactly!

(Laugh)

**(Laugh)**

It is silly that we prioritize profit. How can we prioritize profit when we don't have a home to live in later? If we kill the planet, how can we prioritize profit later? With the Dakota Access Pipeline, for example, it blows me away. People can be obtuse about the world and what it offers us. The prioritization of the transfer of oil over access to clean water blows me away.

**From an international vantage, what do you consider the most pressing concern for humanist youth?**

This rise in pushback against principles of the classically 'Left.' It is threatening to the principles held dear by us. It is the result of hatred from both sides. Hatred isn't doing any favors for us, as

humanists. I know many, especially young, atheists have this belief that their beliefs and values are superior to those who don't have those beliefs and values.

It is a grave mistake, I think, to have that attitude. It doesn't do us any favors. It makes people less inclined to support the movement. They think the movement is supported by an elitist organization, which creates more pushback. We're up against it. It creates a hateful divide. Some of us are complicit in it.

We need to reform the way that we think about ourselves and our values. We need to take a step back and ask, "What are we doing here?" We say, "We stand for all humans." But do we, if we act like we're superior to some humans? We need to do some self-reflection as humanists. We need to ask, "Are we trying to value *all* human beings?"

**Does that trend, which you're noticing among younger atheist humanists, of considering their own values superior to others lead to a certain type of self-exaltation that can exacerbate the trend seen in youth in general—possibly across time—of seeing their time as 'The Time?'**

Yes, it is hard not to think of it as that, when everything is coming to the climactic point with things as inevitable. Millennials have always prized themselves. That is not necessarily a bad thing. It has an innate value, but can have its disadvantages. One is thinking this time, this place, these values are the most important thing. If we don't communicate those values for people to stand behind and with us, then we will create a greater divide. It will get worse. The way we go about standing behind this change is in an inclusive way.

**You mentioned the pushback from the Left and the Right. Can you clarify the pushback from the Left, and the pushback from the Right?**

The pushback follows politics and social behaviour, which, I think, follows the laws of physics. For example, we had Obama as president for 8 years, which is a long time. A lot can happen in 8 years. We saw many not liking anything done by Obama because it was Obama. That is some of the pushback seen now.

The whole Donald Trump era is the pendulum swinging back towards the Right. The more swing that this pendulum has, then the more extremism that will result. With this pushback from the Right, and Donald Trump as president, we are seeing this pushback against the Left and the push of the Left against the pushback of the Right. It is getting tense.

There's a large, swinging pendulum. That's what I mean by the physics of politics and social behaviour. The more you push in one direction, then the more pushback you'll get in the other direction.

**What are some near-future initiatives for IHEYO, communications-wise?**

I want to push the outreach more as a resource for people concerned for our future. People are looking for guidance. They are looking for words of encouragement, which inspire hope. I hope IHEYO can jump on it, can provide it. I hope IHEYO can provide this need without furthering the divide.

**What are your hopes within your lifetime for the humanist movement?**

I would like to see the youth organization in a grand, sweeping effort. I think there's a lot of activity going on around the world. It is so off and away. So, it can be hard for others to notice. I



went to the youth section of the BHA. My vibe was the lack of awareness about other humanist organizations. They are unique, but they thought they were one-of-a-kind. I was surprised to hear it. There is a lot of humanist activity ongoing around the world. If people made more effort to connect around the world in a productive way, we could accomplish great things.

# **An Interview with James Croft, Leader of The Ethical Society of St. Louis**

**February 15, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

## **Was there a family background in humanism?**

I grew up in a nonreligious home, and although neither of my parents identified explicitly as humanists, humanist values were very much a part of how I was raised. Both my parents are extremely nonjudgmental and supportive of the fair and equal treatment of all people. They raised me to be open-minded, to love learning, to question authority, and to respect the humanity in everyone. We frequently enjoyed culture as a family, spending a lot of time in the theatre, art galleries, etc., and we traveled often. This instilled in me a love of world culture and a sense of cosmopolitanism which I believe to be central to the humanist worldview. They encouraged political participation and a sense of civic duty. In its own way, it was a very humanist upbringing.

## **What is your preferred definition of humanism?**

Humanism seeks to recognize and uphold the dignity of every person. It is a life-stance which asserts the ability of human beings to work together for the improvement of humanity, without the need for divine intervention. Humanists promote the values of reason, compassion, and hope: the ability of human beings to use our own intellect to make sense of the world; the equal dignity and worth of every person; and the ability of people to improve the world on our own.

## **How did you find and become involved with The Ethical Society of St. Louis?**

I began training as an Ethical Culture Leader (that's our word for the professional clergy who lead Ethical Societies) after visiting the New York Society for Ethical Culture while I was on the Humanist Institute's leadership training program. I was studying for my doctorate at the time, and travelling the USA giving presentations on humanism, and I wanted to find a way to make humanist leadership into a career. When I discovered there are humanist congregations which bring people together to deepen their understanding of and commitment to humanism, I knew that's what I wanted to do with my life. I began my training with the American Ethical Union, and part of the training includes an apprenticeship at an Ethical Society. I moved to St. Louis to complete that apprenticeship, and then was hired as their Leader with responsibility for outreach. I feel very lucky: I'm one of very few people who are clergy for a truly humanist congregation.

## **What are your tasks and responsibilities as the leader of The Ethical Society of St. Louis?**

I am one of two Leaders—the other is Kate Lovelady, who has been leading the Society for more than ten years now. I play many of the all the roles of a clergy person in a religious congregation: I provide pastoral care for members, speak on Sundays, organize events for the community, lead educational workshops and discussion groups. I have particular responsibility for outreach, meaning I represent the Society and humanism in general in public events. I speak on panels, make presentations about humanism, visit college campuses etc. I am the professional public face of our community.

**What are the main threats to the practice of humanism in St. Louis and the US at large now?**

I don't think there are major threats to the practice of humanism, in the sense that people can believe what they want and practice that as they wish. There are, however, major threats to the success of humanist values in the culture. The US (and many European nations) is facing a very powerful populist right wing movement currently which threatens to overwhelm political institutions and make the country more nationalistic, xenophobic, and closed-minded. Trump—and the political forces which swept him to the presidency—represents a grave threat to the humanist ideals of international cooperation, respect for science, equal treatment of people, and religious freedom. All across the wealthy west people's baser natures are reaching for the controls. People are afraid of their economic condition and tired of a political system which doesn't serve them, and are looking to strongmen who promise a return to national glory. The parallels with the pre-war era are extremely worrying. The humanist movement must work extremely hard to help people resist these trends.

**Who have been the most unexpected allies for ethical societies and the humanist movement in North America?**

My strongest allies have been liberal religious clergy who understand the importance of crafting and presenting a powerful moral vision of society. Although we disagree over theology, these clergy understand the humanist project as an essentially cultural one, and since we share many of the same values, we are often together at rallies and events trying to promote a hopeful vision of society. I've been amazed by how principled and hardworking many liberal clergy are: I count them among my closest allies.

# **An Interview with Wade Kaardal, Chairperson of the Asian Working Group for IHEYO**

**February 28, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

## **Was there a family background in humanism and skepticism?**

To be honest, no. My family, being ethnically Norwegian, has strong ties to the Lutheran church, going back generations. My great grandfather was a missionary in Africa. Of course, he was an older kind of missionary, meaning his mission was in part to better the physical situation of those around him. While I personally reject some of his ideas and the motivation for what he was doing, the value of being in service to others was carried forward by my relatives and I do feel that some of the values that I learned from those around me are not now in conflict with my current humanist values.

My family also placed a strong emphasis on education, which gave me a solid knowledge base. However, it took time for me to learn how to be a critical and skeptical thinker.

## **What is your preferred definition of humanism and skepticism?**

My preferred definition of skepticism is the one used on the Media Guide to Skepticism on the Doubtful News website “Skepticism is an approach to evaluating claims that emphasizes evidence and applies tools of science.” The organized Skeptical movement works to promote this approach in people’s lives and society as a whole. I know many people see skepticism as an intellectual exercise or an attempt to debunk wild claims, but really it is a great tool for individuals to save time and money, as well as maintaining their health, by avoiding scams and frauds.

Humanism is not easily defined. Some of the biggest organizations around the world have tried and have only been able to narrow it down to page long manifestos and declarations. If I were to try to give you an elevator pitch of humanism, it would be, humanism is a worldview that appreciates both individual differences and the right for individual development, and tries to create a society that will not limit your ability to flourish based upon those individual differences. Furthermore, humanism should be informed by evidence, but it should also make room for inspiration from other fields such as the arts. I am a secular humanist, but I don’t think one needs to be an atheist to be a humanist. Humanism is anti-dogma, not anti-religion, and if our values line up, I’m happy to work towards progress with anyone.

## **Are there many legitimate cases of proper skepticism turned into cynicism, or cynicism masquerading as skepticism?**

I believe there are some cases, and I imagine some of my fellow travelers are more cynical than skeptical. Skepticism is a process based on certain fundamental ideas. It is not a set of beliefs. Yet, for some this is the case. They hold certain ideas to be true, ghosts aren’t real for example, and will never change their minds on the matter. Cynicism is not far behind this kind of mindset.

If you are not willing to examine the evidence and revise your beliefs based on it, then you are not being skeptical. There are several examples of people who merely set out to debunk things and later gave up on the endeavor entirely. Skeptical investigator, Joe Nickel, has avoided this because

he is driven by curiosity to find out what is actually go on, not to merely prove that certain claims are false.

For myself, I am happiest when the skeptical process leads me to a nuanced position on a situation. It would be nice to have simple answers, but reality is not always kind to us in this regard. I think it is this enjoyment of nuance that keeps me from becoming a cynic.

### **How did you find and become involved with IHEYO?**

I first became involved with humanism and skepticism in Taiwan when I started two groups there. From that I got some notice in the region and connected with others who were doing similar things. Later, I found that another group, PATAS, was holding a conference in the Philippines so I decided to attend. It was there that I met some people from IHEYO. It was through the contacts I met there, as well as some others in Singapore, that I became involved with IHEYO directly. When the chairperson position opened up, I volunteered and having been facilitating the working group for a little over a year now.

Wherever you are, I suggest that you start a humanist or skeptical group, even if it is just at a local or community level. We need more advocates for good ideas, and a group is a great way to connect with like minded individuals. Who knows, it could be the first step to become an international leader in the humanist movement.

### **What are your tasks and responsibilities as the chairperson of the Asian Working Group for IHEYO?**

There are two main responsibilities that I have as chairperson. The first is to facilitate communication between groups in the region. Asia is a very big region with every sub-region and even country having problems of their own and issue the groups there would like to focus on. It would be a fool's errand and counterproductive of me or IHEYO to try and tell them what to do. Instead, I help the group stay in contact with each other and know what everyone is doing. In this way, they can share ideas and expertise and hopefully all the groups will benefit from each other's experience.

My other responsibility is to find ways for IHEYO and the working group to support the member organizations. Again, each group has its own needs. Using the resources I have available, be it contacts with organizations or individuals, volunteers, time, or money, I try to support the local groups to make what they are doing more effective. One thing we have done for example was organize translation efforts, so groups could have humanist materials in their native languages and are better equipped to engage with people in their counties.

In general, I view my position as being in service to those I lead. They know best what their organizations need. I want to do what I can to help make them better.

### **What are the main threats to the practice of humanism in the Asian region now?**

This is of course a large question and it's hard to point to all of Asia and say there is just one issue. If I were to try to point to one issue that many countries are facing, it would be a rise in authoritarianism and nationalism in Asia. Obviously, illiberal and totalitarian governments like China and North Korea, have been long standing presences in the region. Theocracies of many stripes also continue to limit the spread of humanistic values. Lastly, strong men and nationalists, like those currently in power in the Philippines and India, have chilled free speech and limited human flourishing in the region.

I do hope that humanists in continue to promote our values and fight hard against authoritarian dogmas as they are one of the greatest threats both human life and human progress in the Asia.

**Who have been the most unexpected allies for the humanist and skeptical movements in Asia?**

For me, on the ground in Taiwan, the LGBTQ rights movement has been our biggest and most unexpected ally. When the issue of marriage equality came up in Taiwan, many were surprised how quickly people organized against it. As it turned out, the main opposition was organized through Christian churches with help from abroad. In response, seemingly overnight, many anti-dogmatic religion groups sprouted up on social media translating videos and memes from the west. Not only has this increased, the overall dankness of our memes, it has also meant that we can reach more Taiwanese with our ideas, if only in sound bite form, and we can support a movement that many of us already agree with.

## 2030's Planet 50–50

March 1, 2017

**Anya Overmann and Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

March is Women's History Month and International Women's Day is March 8, 2017. It is a day where every "*person—women, men and non-binary people—can play a part in helping drive better outcomes for women.*" The other is a month devoted to the catalogue, display, and public representation of women's accomplishments in history. Why is this an important day for reflection? It is important because, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF), the overall gender gap based on the index called the Gender Gap Report published each year will not close until 2186.

That's a super long time. Even with that dire report, United Nations Women (UN Women) has themed this International Women's Day, which is less than a week away. The theme is "Women in the Changing World of Work: Planet 50–50 by 2030." Maybe, not the political, educational, or health outcome areas, but, rather, the world of work, which continues to be an area of major concern. Even if 2186 is the fate of eventual total equality, then the piece-by-piece fitting of the equality puzzle can start with the world of work. But there are difficulties for women here too. Hardships related to the ongoing revolutions before us.

Globalization and the digital revolution are changing the way we work, bringing big opportunities for all, but continue to present issues within the context of women's economic empowerment. According to the UN, the gender pay gap stands at 24 cents globally, with many of these gaps appearing in leadership and entrepreneurship roles. Not to mention, the glaring gender deficit in care and domestic work.

The UN is calling for all economic policies to be gender-responsive and address job creation, poverty reduction, and growth in a sustainable and inclusive manner. It's also pertinent, with the way human work is changing due to technology, for women to have better access to innovative technologies and practices that are good for mother nature and protect women against violence in the workplace.

International Women's Day and Women's History Month are important moments—a singular highlight day and an entire month—to reflect, celebrate, and declare the inherent equality of women based on human rights and women's rights. We've got a long road ahead. And if you do not feel like waiting for the year 2186 to come around in your lifetime, you can always travel to Iceland. It'll be just like time travel!

# Practice What You Preach: ‘The Global Gag’ as Moral Reflection

March 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Julia Julstrom-Agoyo

Of the perennial ethical precepts in the world, the Golden Rule stands ‘head and shoulders’ above the others in terms of durability and consistency across time and culture, respectively. Religious institutions, formal or informal, preach the ethic. Secular ethical frameworks advocate for it, too. Right into the present, it is presented as an ideal. Maybe, it is unattainable, but the ethics hold sway in religious and secular moral universes.

So the Golden Rule in the modern context remains consistent with the proclaimed ideal of the religious ethical worldviews and the international equivalent with human rights. Human rights are not equivalent to, but overlap significantly with, women’s rights: do as you would be done by. So if one was a woman, and required appropriate medical attention for reproductive health, and the technology was available and funded, then the moral act would be to provide the access to the medical services because another would want the same. This is consistent with ‘middle-of-the-road’ human rights organizations as well.

“...equitable access to safe abortion services is first and foremost a human right.” Human Rights Watch has affirmed, “Where abortion is safe and legal, no one is forced to have one. Where abortion is illegal and unsafe, women are forced to carry unwanted pregnancies to term or suffer serious health consequences and even death.” Research shows that many pregnant women, desperate in their situation and without access to safe abortion, will undergo dangerous procedures, risking harm unto themselves.

The Golden Rule should compel us to act in accordance with our better natures and provide the “equitable access to safe abortion” for women. Governments pressured by religious groups, whose leadership are made up primarily of men, like the Trump Administration, have posed a direct threat to this affirmation. Take, for instance, the Executive Order signed by U.S. President Donald Trump on his very first day in office, notably surrounded by a group of men.

The “Global Gag Rule” as it is commonly referred to prohibits NGOs from providing abortions or even providing information or services (counseling, referrals) about abortions if they want to receive funding from the U.S. for family planning. The U.S. has an undisputed powerful global influence, and with this executive order, countless women around the world will undoubtedly be negatively affected.

According to Forbes, “The U.S. hasn’t allowed use of federal funds for abortion since the 1973 Helms Amendment, [applied] internationally as well as domestically. In fact, gag rules that harm women are already widespread in the U.S. under the guise of ‘religious freedom.’”

“There is no evidence that the global gag rule reduces abortion, according to Wendy Turnbull, PAI [Unparalleled Leadership and Impact] senior advisor.” Forbes said, “Instead, loss of funding from this punitive regulation eliminates access to contraceptives for more than 225 million women globally, greatly increasing the need for abortion. It also increases pregnancy-related deaths by about 289,000. How is that ‘pro-life?’”



Exactly whose life is valued and to what extent? Why must the compassion for an unborn fetus ring louder than that for the child that is born into poverty and for the mother and the state who is forced to shoulder that burden?

# Humanism in Lagos

March 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Bamidele Adeneye

Humanism is universal creed, and deed. A life taught and lived in one breath, and step, for all people. Whether in the lonely, snowy white-capped North of Canada in North America or in Nigeria on the Gulf of Guinea in Africa, human beings live, eat, work, educate kids, raise families, and build communities around ideas.

Those ideas form the base for mutual solidarity, sympathy, and pursuit of cooperative endeavours.

*In Lagos, Nigeria, humanism is probably unknown to most Nigerian citizens—except, maybe, to members of the Humanist Assembly of Lagos and others like it. In that spirit, we think humanism has unique applications to Lagos. Here's how and why.*

Bamidele grew up in a society viewed from the perspective of two Abrahamic religions, namely Christianity and Islam. Many ascribe their actions and interactions to faith. Most Nigerians have religious upbringings. So Abrahamic religion is the main lens for perspective on the world in Nigeria. That is, most Nigerians see the world with religious-tinted glasses.

Lagos is a bustling city; it is sleepless. A busy urban area, where acts of kindness are rare. If they happen to a Nigerian, they are taken for granted because life is so on-the-go all of the time. Everyone is working in their daily, weekly, and monthly hustle in the bustle. How can you be humanistic when you are busy and trying to get ahead of others?

Take, for example, the daily routine for many Nigerians in Lagos trying to build their professional profile. The day starts early at 5am. There's no time to even say, "Hello, good morning. How are you?" These kind gestures are ignored. Unless, of course, you are reminded by the 'Word of God' when you read from the daily devotional. Even though, it does not say it explicitly.

You feel compelled to be kind to your neighbor, to empathize with others, to do the right thing, and so on. In essence, you are being a humanist effortlessly and without knowing it. Your moral values are purported to be derived from Christianity and Islam, both with promising rewards—for those who behave good, and threatening punishment, for those who behave bad.

This is a misconception. Humanism implies the good and bad stem from us. Humanism is an intricate part of our being, inherent in us as long as we are of sound and healthy mind. Happily, most of us are good most of the time.

*So, what is Humanism to the average Nigerian?* The International Humanist and Ethical Union states:

*Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance that affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. Humanism stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethics based on human and other natural values in a spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. Humanism is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.*

This aptly describes everyday acts people engage in readily, acts of kindness, of concern for others...UBUNTU!

In Lagos, there are countless instances of people helping accident victims and those in need, giving food and shelter to the hungry and the homeless, and lending a helping hand without regard for where the person being helped is from or what the person worships. These are all acts of humanism in Lagos. The city of hustle and bustle, and busy people taking their time to act with compassion, consideration, and kindness.

Similar to the anchor to normal human compassion and kindness religious texts and services can be for ordinary Nigerian citizens in Lagos, the Humanist Assembly in Lagos and other humanist organizations—and their teachings, values, and community—perform the same function without, by necessity, reference to the transcendent.

Except for the secular, who value freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, it does not necessarily have to come from the divine. It can come, simply, from Nigerians. Besides, in its own way, moment-to-moment compassion has its own transcendence.

# Can You Be a Humanist Without Being a Feminist?

March 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Anya Overmann

This question is one of the most controversial within the humanist and feminist community:

## Can you be a humanist without being a feminist?

Our short answer: No. If you are a humanist, then you are a feminist.

Humanism, broadly or expansively construed, is an ethical and philosophical worldview including religious and irreligious perspectives. Some definitions will exclude the religious because of assertion of the religious as only focused on the theistic and the supernatural.

For example, it could be seen, like in IHEU's official definition, as a democratic and ethical life stance that affirms the worth of every human being and advocates for building a more humane society without a need for religious systems, and instead based on ethics and reasoning through human capabilities.

We disagree. Religion is practices and values, and so is culture and heritage, too. Humanism in a general definitional context incorporates these considerations such as, say, humanistic Judaism. As well, humanism remains theoretical; that is, humanism remains ethical and philosophical in nature. Its practice implies other terminology too.

For example, the development of a more humane society based on reason and free inquiry—and equality in fundamental human rights among and between human beings—posits a tacit egalitarianism.

## What is egalitarianism, exactly?

Egalitarianism is a socio-political philosophy that advocates for the equality of all humans and equal entitlement to resources. Humanism as a theory incorporative of equality for all, implies egalitarianism—as it advocates for and works towards full equality for all. In this, humanism implies egalitarianism. But there's different forms of equality, e.g. ethnic, educational, gender, and so on.

Equal access to quality education. Equal treatment regardless of ethnicity. As well, of course, the equal treatment in legal and social life regardless of gender. Mainstream feminism accounts for gender equality. For instance, the right to vote incorporates the legal equality of women, and the advocacy for social equality between women and men.

Feminism is the advocacy for gender equality based on the belief that women do not have equal rights to men.

Thus if you are a feminist, then you are an egalitarian, and if you are an egalitarian, then you are for gender equality, and if you are for gender equality, then you are a feminist; therefore, if you are a humanist, then you are a feminist, but not vice versa.

One can be a believer in God and be a supernaturalist, but also engage in feminist activities and believe in gender equality. Hence, you can be a feminist and gender equalist without being a humanist by some definitions. As well, you can be for equal rights in all relevant respects or

egalitarian—so education, gender, ethnicity, and so on, and a believer in God and supernaturalism.

Hence, you can be an egalitarian—which implicates gender equality and feminism—and not a humanist by some definitions.

**So, can you be a humanist without being a feminist?**

We say no. If you are a humanist, then you *must* be a feminist. However, by our definitions, you *can* be a feminist without being a humanist.

# Interview with Marieke Prien-President of the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization (IHEYO)-

March 14, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

## **What is your familial and personal background?**

I was born and raised in Hannover, Germany. When I had finished high school, I spent a year in the Philippines for a volunteer service, then moved to Hamburg to study Cultural Anthropology and Educational Sciences. After getting this degree, I moved to Osnabrück and started studying Cognitive Science. Right now, I am in Oswego (New York) for a semester abroad.

I got involved in Hannover's local group of the youth wing of HVD (Humanistischer Verbands Deutschland, the German Humanist Association) when I was 13 or 14. Since then, I have held different positions in the local and national young humanist organisations and eventually got involved in the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization (IHEYO), where I was first elected Membership Officer and now President.

## **How did you become involved in humanism as a worldview?**

Pretty much all of my family members are humanists, so you could say my sister and I were raised this way, though I don't remember the term "humanism" being used. Our parents and grandparents taught us about this lifestyle not only with words, but by living and acting according to these values every day. We were encouraged to be sceptical and question things, to think for ourselves, to not prejudge people, to take responsibility for our actions, take care of the environment, and be independent.

Also, my parents love to travel and get to know people from different cultures, and I think my sister and I have definitely profited from that. It made us more open-minded towards new things and different ways of life.

## **When did humanism as an ethical hit home emotionally for you?**

Since I was raised with humanist values, there is no specific event or time that marks this. It was simply the worldview I had. You could probably say I found out about the term "humanism" and actively chose to identify as a humanist when I decided to join our local Humanist organisation and take part in their coming-of-age celebration. The next step was becoming a member and actively volunteering for the organization. By doing this, I dedicated myself to the cause, so to say.

## **What makes humanism more true to you than other worldviews, belief systems?**

I think about these things a lot. Ethics, religion, why do we act and feel the way we do? I try to stay objective about it and approach questions openly. And every time I come to the conclusion that humanism is the right way.

I found that the belief in gods does not withstand reason and never understood why people call religion the root of ethics, morals or values, and why they minimise the horrible things it has

caused and is causing. Why do you follow rules that only exist to oppress you? Why would you need religion to love thy neighbours?

Some people will argue that being nice to one another is not a necessity or is even “unnatural”, that not caring about others will not cause them any disadvantages. But this is where love and empathy come in, a wish to live in a peaceful and kind society, something that I believe everybody has somewhere inside them.

To me, humanism is the derivation of being a compassionate and reasonable person.

**You are the President of International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization (IHEYO). It was launched in 2004. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?**

As President, I am taking the bird’s eye view. I know what is going on in the organisation and coordinate and connect people and activities. There are also decisions to be made, but I always make sure to consult with other committee members first because I want to get to know other peoples’ thoughts and perspectives before deciding on something that will affect the organisation and the people involved.

**IHEYO works on a broad range of initiatives, and with multiple organisations, including women’s rights, education rights, abortion rights, LGBTIQ rights, human rights. What are some of the notable successes in each of these domains?**

Though some events and activities are directly planned by us, our job is more to be an umbrella organisation connecting our member organisations.

For example, in November 2015, we held the charity week “Better Tomorrow”. We came up with the concept and asked our members to contribute with projects they thought of and planned themselves.

There are conferences that are planned by IHEYO in cooperation with the respective local member organisations. We provide know-how and funds for the events. Many of our volunteers are active in both IHEYO and their local organisations so cooperation is made easy. Alone this year there were three conferences in addition to our annual General Assembly. These conferences were the African Humanist Youth Days (AFHD) in July in Nairobi (Kenya), the European Humanist Youth Days (EHYD) in July in Utrecht (Netherlands) and the Asian Humanist Conference in August in Taipei (Taiwan). During each conference, there are talks and workshops that are somewhat connected to humanism.

For example, during the EHYD we had a workshop on Effective Altruism, AHYD had panels about witch-hunts, and the Asian Conference featured a talk about secular values in traditional beliefs. Some talks/workshops are held by member organisations, others by people from outside of the organisations that were invited. This way the participants can gain knowledge and know-how while at the same time spreading their own knowledge and letting others profit from their experience. Also, events like that are the best opportunity to network and come up with new ideas. We are a growing community, with growing influence, thanks to this.

So it is hard to measure our impact in numbers or clearly defined achievements. We are more about providing the basis for our members’ work and incentives to individuals. A panel like the one at EHYD, with Bangladeshi bloggers who have been threatened and prosecuted because they openly criticised religion, leads to a change of mind in the audience that can eventually bring huge change.

**Any personal humanist heroes?**

This sounds cheesy, but my humanist heroes are the people that put their free time and their energy into IHEYO or other humanist organisations. There is always a lot to do and it is great seeing so many people work hard for this cause.

Especially work in an executive committee involves some boring and annoying tasks, particularly when handling bureaucratic stuff. Behind every meeting and every event, there is someone writing minutes, someone putting data into spreadsheets, someone handling the numbers and keeping an eye on the finances... I am very grateful for everybody who does this as it builds the base for successful projects.

**Any recommended authors?**

I have not had time to read a lot of books lately, but I read many blog articles and can definitely recommend that. There is something about articles written by non-professionals who just want to express their thoughts. Especially when you know the person or they provide background knowledge about themselves. It is so interesting to see their thought process and how they form their opinions. It helps understand why they have this opinion, even or especially if you don't agree with it. Also, many blogs allow to comment on articles and possibly discuss with the author, so in the end everyone can benefit.

**Thank you for your time, Marieke.**



# **‘The gods have not returned; they have never left us; they have not returned’**

**March 15, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

This morning, I reflected on belief in Canada over coffee. In particular, belief in the ‘other worldly’. Where, in John von Neumann’s (Poundstone, 2015) terms, propositions, as these describe the world, about material things or abstract objects, come in three states—yes, no, or maybe—based on the question, for instance, “Does X exist?” Yes, X exists; no, X does not exist; or, maybe, X might exist. Where the other worldly exists, does not exist, or might exist, most seem contained in the lattermost categorization.

So, “Does Apollo (or Cthulhu, or Ahura Mazda) exist?” The technical categorization remains: possible, or “maybe.” For all intents and purposes, most humanists will choose, “No.” The former as a technical, logical selection; the latter as a functional, utilitarian selection. Both work in context. In surveys of belief, Canadians, a little under half at 47%, believe in ghosts (Ipsos Reid, 2006).

If reduced to 30,000,000 for the total Canadian population, that means ~15,000,000 Canadians believe in ghosts, in the other worldly, in the supernatural. Many small towns will host ghost, haunted house, and cemetery tours with scant, or no, evidence for the claims. At the same time, the revenue from these tourist activities might prevent, whether passive or active, appropriate investigation into the evidentiary basis of the claims to the ghosts, the hauntings of the house, or the spirit-wanderings of the cemeteries. Some might think, “Why ruin business?” Indeed.

If the percentage of the Canadian population from the survey, and other surveys and other beliefs parallel this finding about ghosts, then many Canadians, in spite of functional living in numerous areas of life—work, school, paying taxes, raising kids, being neighbourly, and so on, live in a world of other worldliness, of the supernatural, of the magical-mystical. Many Canadians aren’t living in the natural world, in their minds’ eyes. They live in a world of magic.

Maybe, it feels cozier.

But what about the serious implications for the reality of death? To return to the libretto, the belief in ghosts seems, at first evaluation, in denial of death. Death as, not necessarily but “for all intents and purposes,” final. The dead are gone, and aren’t coming back—as most humanists would, likely, say, “...for all intents and purposes.” I am reminded of Ezra Pound (Stock, 2017). Who in his *Cantos*, when speaking of the “Gods,” stated:

“The Gods have not returned. ‘They have never left us.’

They have not returned.” (Pound, n.d.)

For all intents and purposes...’The dead have not returned. ‘They have never left us.’ They have not returned.’

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## **An Interview with Bwambale M. Robert—School Director, Kasese Humanist Primary School**

**March 18, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

How did you become involved in humanism? When was the moment, or series of moments, that eventually led into you becoming an open humanist?

In the early years of 2000 I became critical of religion, in the year 2000 when I started being skeptical about the natural world and things in it, was asking myself questions, asked religious people plus other people both in school and out of school and their answers to my queries did not satisfy me, so I became critical and curious of religion. Through my research online, I stumbled about humanists. Humanism/Atheism and Rationalism and since then I later joined organized humanism by creating in place a community based organization.

Was there a family background?

Yes, am from an Anglican back ground.

Is humanism demonized in Uganda, or an accepted minority philosophical and ethical worldview?

Humanism is demonized by religious zealots who want to paint a bad picture on humanism so that people can tag it and the majority remain believing that being religious is the only way to success, a great life which actually is not the case.

To some extend I think Humanism in Uganda is an accepted minority philosophical & ethical worldview.

You are the school director for Kasese Humanist Primary School. What tasks and responsibilities come with being the chairman for the Kasese Humanist Primary School?

My common tasks are:

Planning for the school

Identifying projects, lobbying for support and publicity of Kasese United Humanist Association & its associated schools.

Ensuring the workers are paid as an appreciation for their hardwork

Am also engaged in construction efforts of the schools and its sister projects.

Ensuring I coordinate the sponsored pupils with their sponsors and notifying them 3 times in a year about their progress.

When did this become a calling for you—teaching the young?

In 2010, I together with other colleagues and members of Kasese United Humanist Association, we thought it was a wise idea if we created a school and one year later we opened Kasese Humanist Primary School.

Kasese Humanist Primary School was only founded in 2011, which is a relatively short time ago, and is run by the Kasese United Humanist Association. It is a secular school grounded in science

education. How does the Kasese Humanist Primary School differ from the majority of other primary schools in Uganda?

Humanist Schools and orphanages differ from religious schools in the ways below:

We teach religious education on comparative terms.

Our learners are encouraged to think for themselves and are given opportunity to think freely without any sort of commands.

We cherish evolutionary science other than creation science.

Our school welcomes learners from all religions, it matters less if one is religious or proclaimed non religious since we look at our schools as a center or source of knowledge and not a place of worship.

We have secular posters or messages on classroom walls or compounds.

We observe and celebrate secular days by holding celebrations, happy moments or memorial events.

There are no religious instructions or observance of religious tenets.

We do not indoctrinate our learners to any religion or belief system but what we do is to enlighten and allow our learners to be curious, explore and come up with their perceptions.

We do not perform rituals of any kind.

It has a number of clubs and teaches during the day to a limited number of students. Are there after-school programs to cater to other students?

Yes, we do have after school programs like: Running activities, computer lessons, vocational skills training, playing a key board, music dance and drama, weaving, knitting and gardening

Is the primary school in high demand, but can't fill all of the potential slots based on a limited number of pupils being taught there?

Yes, there is a high demand for primary school education to accommodate learners,

Uganda has scores of children and the level of illiteracy is still high as some parents out of ignorance, poverty don't know the value of education, some times we do force parents to keep their kids in school.

As well, there are 3 campuses now. So within 5/6 years, not even, the primary school developed up to three campuses. What were the honest failures and successes on the road to development of Kasese Humanist Primary School up to the present?

Kasese Humanist School has developed over the years from being a nursery & primary school and now has 3 campuses in a period of 6 years now. We earlier this year opened the Secondary Section. In spite of this we have had successes and failures quoted as below:

Challenges:

Misconceptions by locals who don't know the meaning of Humanism or being a humanist, some locals tend to associate humanism to devil worshipping or satanic. The rumours are propelled by enemies of the schools mostly religious zealots and selfish locals who are enemies of development.

Salaries payment to the staffs sometimes delays or they get paid in bits due to poor collections as some parents pay in bits.

Disease out breaks is common among learners due to the living conditions in their homes. Poverty, ignorance remains a key factor affecting people here.

Successes:

Having our schools on permanent homes owned by ourselves.

All learning spaces have classrooms.

The Child Sponsorship scheme where more than 100 children schooling in our schools have sponsors who meet their tuition needs.

School's potential to have in place income generating activities like the Bizoha Tractor, maize & cassava milling plant, land for rent etc.

My projects have got international attention and this has been possible because of my online presence which has exposed me to organizations and individuals who have helped much in boosting up my works financially, morally and materially.

What are some of the main campaigns and initiatives of the Kasese Humanist Primary School?

Promoting humanism

Encouraging debates

Comparative religion

Vocational skills training

Computer lessons

Gardening

Anti Witchcraft campaign

Eco huts & botanical gardens project for eco tourism & out door learning.

Letter Exchange & pen pal program

Child sponsorship program

Reading for Pleasure program

Running program by Kasese freethinkers academy

In general, what are the perennial threats to the practice of humanism in Uganda?

Religious bigots who do not understand humanism and what it entails end up making ignorant statements about it and misguide people.

Some school proprietors most of them in the religious circles may also smear a bad picture in an effort to smear our schools out of envy.

How can people get involved with the Kasese Humanist Primary School, sponsor a child, even donate to staff salaries?

You can help my work by sponsoring a child at any of my schools.

Volunteering in my projects as teachers, nurses or farmers

Spreading the message to friends, relatives and working colleagues about our innovations.

Donate finances or material to my initiatives.

Offer moral support, knowledge, advice to my projects.

Donate to staff salaries or even sponsor a classroom.

Any closing thoughts or feelings based on the discussion today?

I think Kasese Humanist Primary school and Kasese Humanist Secondary School is on the right track. Setting our schools on a science and humanist foundation is a good thing that other schools in Uganda or any part of the world could adopt.

It remains our core duty to enlighten people about who we are and what we stand for.

I am so grateful for this brief interview. I thank Jacobsen of Conatus News for this interview.

Yours in free thought,

Bwambale Robert Musubaho

# Big Humanism and Small Humanism

March 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I have been thinking, over coffee, in Canada (again, who would've thought?). If you're just tuning in, I'm Canadian and am a sucker for coffee. This is less of a scientific thought, maybe a demographic one if that, and more of a philosophic thought—a thinky piece.

In conversations—not many—with young and old humanists, men and women, various people open about their sexual orientation or not, I see two broad, loose, strokes of humanism.

One, I'll call big humanism. Another, I'll call small humanism. Big humanism is expansive, inclusive, and pluralistic. Small humanism is contractive, exclusive, and monolithic. Monolithic does not mean bad; pluralistic does not mean good. They mean what they mean, and no different than that here.

Perhaps these can be seen as two poles on a spectrum of belief for humanism. Big humanism includes many, many more types of humanism, or humanistic beliefs. There's no necessary requirement for the full belief set for this type of humanism. People can align themselves at the periphery, simply holding fast to the moral imperatives in the core doctrines.

It's not really too precise. More gooey, more fuzzy, less solid, less specified, big humanism has a big net and catches lots of people. Small humanism contrasts with this in every way, except in the core belief structure of humanism. It includes fewer, and fewer, humanisms the more you move into its side of the spectrum. Its south-most or north-most pole is the bare bones, nugget of humanism.

Folks can only consider themselves truly humanist in this framework by adherence to the most stringent of standards in, probably, a formalized framework of viewing the world with humanism. Small humanism is like an Orthodox Humanism. By implication, its community is much smaller.

It is super-precise. Less gooey, less fuzzy, more solid, more specified, small humanism has a small bait and catches a minority within the humanist community. When I talk to some people within the humanist community, there are different criteria. Some believe you can only reject gods or God and affirm human values to be a humanist.

Others adhere to some logical principles to ground ethical precepts without reference for science. Others believe formalized scientific processes are the sole means to acquire knowledge, hard and fast empiricists. The list goes on, right? Still others view humanism as akin to militant atheism with the importance of combating religion as its highest modern aim, the destruction of religious structures, and so communities—and damn the consequences.

But what about the others? In a bigger frame of reference, which seems like a tendency in me, big humanism seems more cooperative, integrative, and workable in the wider world. And I don't have an answer to any of these stylistic preferences or self-defined, usually—sometimes other-defined, goals.

But in the end analysis, I guess it comes down to, on at least one grounding, preference in life. How do you want to live your own life? How do you want to relate to others, and other communities, and to your own family—inherited or made? Big and small humanism are a bit

hand-wavey, but, for me at least, they provide some context for more thought on the all-encompassing, all-important question, “How do you want to live your life?”



# 61st Commission on the Status of Women

March 26, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Anya Overmann

At the United Nations (UN), on March 17, in their headquarters in New York, the secretary-general Antonio Guterres along with other high-ranking officials within the UN, such as the executive director of UN Women Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, discussed, and emphasized the need for, women's international parity with men.

Secretary-General António Guterres holds a town hall meeting with civil society organizations associated with the 61st session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. UN Photo/Mark Garten

This was taken in the context of “all levels.” That is, the “political, cultural, economic and social” levels through women's rights for women's advocacy and empowerment. Guterres' statements were one of the capstones and highlights during the 61st Commission on the Status of Women (CSW61).

The emphasis at CSW61 was the link between civil society and government to improve governance. So how do we improve governance for greater international gender parity?

“As societies become more complex, and as social media's [impact continues to grow],” Guterres said, “and governments feel less and less secure because they have less instruments of control, one of the attempts is to try to keep civil society under control [...] Limiting civil society space is a reaction to the feeling of governments that they are losing control of society.”

So there's a goal for civil societies—to reach gender parity on various levels, e.g., cultural, economic, political, and social. Their goal, which is ambitious, is based on women having economic parity by 2030 rather than the comprehensive parity predicted by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in reflection on the Gender Gap Report. As we noted in *2030's Planet 50–50*:

*[The] World Economic Forum (WEF) [stated], “the overall gender gap based on the index called the Gender Gap Report published each year will not close until 2186.”*

That's 169 years from now, *just* for predicted economic equality. Political, cultural, and social equality could take even longer in some countries. It can take multiple generations before the value of gender equality is instilled within humans in a social and cultural capacity.

We chose to write about this event because it is significant that the UN secretary-general, and not just the director of UN Women has spoken up about this advocacy for gender equality. It's not just a women's problem; it's *everyone's* problem.

And, of course, if you're feeling despair in some moderately depressing times regarding the repeal of women's rights, and progress for women, you can, as always, move to Iceland. The time machine is ready-to-go.

## **An Interview with Julia Julstrom-Agoyo—Secretary & Treasurer of Americas Working Group of IHEYO**

**March 28, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**Let's delve a little bit into your background to provide a foundation for the conversation. Do you have a family background or only a personal background?**

A family background, my mom loves to tell the story about how she grew up in Lima, Peru and at the age of 7 she declared herself an Atheist after finding the word in the dictionary, which was unusual because the majority of Peruvians are Catholic, though her immediate family was less religious. She was a curious child and liked to challenge the existence of God in school, to the frustration of her teachers. She was very much of an outsider in that way, but she's always liked being different—being unique.

My dad, in parallel, went to a Christian church with his parents, but he grew up in a small, Republican town in Illinois. His parents were heavily involved in the church, in part through music, but at the height of the Vietnam War, some anti-war peace protests were organized in the small town and my dad and his family received significant backlash from the church community for having their names attached to them. His parents decided they couldn't be part of the church anymore, so they all left and joined the Unitarian Universalist church there, which was fine with my dad since he had independently kind of already decided he was an Atheist. That's where his humanism, atheism, kind of sprouted from. So when my dad and mom (who was studying there) met in the small town and eventually moved to Chicago—after they had a couple kids—they found the Ethical Humanist Society of Chicago.

So they started bringing us there because they wanted to have us grow up in a community atmosphere, where we could learn about all different kinds of religions and common values without the dogma. So they got to go to speakers every Sunday. Then us as kids got to grow up in a Sunday school learning how to be a good person. [Laughing]

[Laughing]

We got involved in volunteer projects and fundraisers, and stuff like that, and interacted with other kids who were not religious, which is really nice because most of our friends at school were religious and didn't understand what atheists were—or were taught to fear or dislike them. We were ostracized sometimes. It was whatever kids do like saying, "You're going to hell." It is a hurtful thing to say to a child, although even at that age I knew I didn't believe in hell. [Laughing] It was about community. I owe a lot of who I am today to being brought up in that atmosphere.

**With your mom realizing that she didn't believe in God, that she was an atheist in Peru in, as far as I know, a very religious culture and, therefore, society. Did she, herself, face similar prejudice?**

Apparently, not too much. She grew up in Lima, which is the capital of Peru—and so maybe that had something to do with people being pretty open. Anyway, I know she likes being a different person in a bunch of aspects. She was fine standing out from the crowd. I think her family was okay with it because they were actually not too religious—my mom even says they were

humanists without labeling themselves as such. Even many religious families in Peru don't regularly go to church—they feel they can simply pray in their homes.

Your dad with the Unitarian Universalist form of humanism. From my sense of American culture, it is taken a lot more softly than being an atheist, where atheist, as a self-identification, would provide more means for someone to be bullied than if someone was a Unitarian Universalist. Not only because Unitarian Universalist takes longer to say...

[Laughing]

**But also because people probably don't know what Unitarian Universalist is. For yourself now, if I may ask, where do you stand in terms of your own take on humanism—that is most comfortable to you?**

For me, I thought a lot about it the last few years. I do identify as an atheist and a humanist, but what has become most important to me in the last few years is my humanism. I see my atheism as what I don't believe in; I see my humanism as what I do believe in, which is much more important because I have a lot of religious friends. I don't think our belief or non-belief in God is too important in a way.

So what ends up bringing us together are common values, which is what humanism is all about, that's where I got my values, I think. It shifts the focus, which I think is more important these days with what's happening around the world—what brings us together, where do we have common ground, what's important, and don't focus on what's not important. God is not important to me, but I know it is important to a lot of people.

I don't want to minimize that. For me, the fact that I don't believe God exists is not the most important thing.

**Now, you're part of International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization (IHEYO). Together, we're on the Americas Working Group for IHEYO. What other, if any, humanist organizations are you involved in? What roles and responsibilities come with them—stated and unstated?**

I am involved with 2 or 3 that are all connected. I am part of FES, which is the Future of Ethical Societies. My role in that hasn't been too prominent because I spent the last year abroad, so I was limited in the things I could do. I did join FES after high school basically, and started going to the yearly conferences and was involved in planning in some of those conferences—not as of late, but I did have some roles.

For a year, I was the liaison to the AEU, American Ethical Union. My responsibilities in that were to call in on some of the AEU board meeting calls, which were very long. I'm not sure if I added too much to them, but it was interesting to see how they work, what kinds of things they do, and what those calls are like. I did attend the AEU conference in Chicago. I helped lead a workshop along with Emily Newman.

I was a FES representative for resolutions AEU passes on current events—like statements on what we think about climate change or gay rights. Now, I am back. Hopefully, I will get more involved in that, especially with the conference coming up. But now that I am also back in Chicago because I went to college in Iowa, I am now attending the local ethical society most Sundays. I listen to the platform.

There are actually some young people my age who are coming, which is exciting. Hopefully, we can begin to build the Chicago young group of the ethical humanists and hopefully get them involved in FES and IHEYO. So that's obviously related. Then there's IHEYO. I was involved after Xavier got us in there. He was the main person in charge of the Americas Working Group. I helped him out for a while as a secretary.

We were both working on outreach and what the Americas Working Group looks like, how we want it to look. There were leadership transitions. Now, it is looking very promising. Basically, we are looking on expanding our network. Now, we have Canada & America in North America, and South America, at the same time. [Laughing] It is for the first time, which is awesome.

Obviously, there are a lot of long-term goals, but, for now, I think expanding the network and working on things together, having calls, and planning. Helping where needed, I speak Spanish, so I can help with South American outreach too.

**In America, within the Americas, there are concerns within the public about the ability to practice and advocate for ethical humanism, humanism, even possibly secularism.**

**[Laughing] From your vantage, because you have a longer life history in humanism that I do, who or what do you see as the main impediments or threats to the practice, or advocacy, of humanism?**

If we're talking about the current political atmosphere in the U.S.—although, there's a lot to worry about with our current government, I don't think there's too much of a threat specifically against the humanist community. I think we're still going to do what we're going to do. I don't think they can do too much about us. Also, I don't think we're at the forefront of who they want to target. There are concerns about certain religious groups or people driving certain religious agendas, which I don't agree with and don't need to get into.

I don't see it as a sincere threat to the humanist community—at least in the U.S.; there are areas in Central and South America where humanists or non-believers do see more of a threat. Maybe, I am misinformed, but I don't think there is too much of a battle for us, comparatively. At least our society, we're not supposed to proselytize, which we don't—at least I don't think we're trying to convert everyone to our side. [Laughing] We're trying to open our arms and let them know we exist because there are a lot of people that think like us and don't know that there's a wider community that they can be a part of.

That's what a lot of people are missing, especially if they belong to a church and leave the church. They miss the community. Hopefully, they can see us as somewhere to go. Also, if you look at the numbers, our numbers are growing. They don't have to physically attend an ethical society. But I think nonbelievers are on the rise as far as I know.

You made an important note there by saying that we don't want to proselytize. In the question, I said advocacy was the concern. In traditional religious structures, it is encouraged for members to proselytize, which seems different than advocacy to me. I think humanism and ethical societies can advocate without proselytizing. Do you think that's a fair and reasonable distinction?

Yes, I do. I think it is difficult, but I do think you're right. It is just like, "How do we go about it?" It is something I have been struggling with for awhile. [Laughing]

**[Laughing] What are your hopes for humanism and ethical societies within your lifetime?**

On a global scale, I would like to see humanists, free-thinkers—or really anyone from any religious background for that matter—free from persecution. In the U.S., one thing I would like to see, at least in my society—maybe, other societies are going about it in a different way—is a re-energizing of the ethical action committee. I would like to see that expand and grow and become more effective because I think a lot of people come to these societies—and I know not all ethical humanists attend these societies, and they don't exist everywhere yet—to listen to these great lectures every week and leave with things to think about from these talks.

But there's a disconnect in actually doing things about it, especially in this day and age when we need someone—everyone—to be doing something about what's going on. Personally, in my own society, I would like to step up in the ethical action committee and have our presence at all of the protests, have our space also used for organizing. I would really like the societies to become more involved in interfaith activities, movements—reach out to all different kinds of places of worships, e.g. churches, and synagogues and mosques, and try to bring all different religions together. I think, in 2017 and going forward, we need not only to co-exist, but also co-resist.

There's a collective benefit in increasing mutual understanding and to be there in mutual solidarity, especially when we see Jewish cemeteries being destroyed and Muslim communities being gunned down in their mosques while they pray and Black churchgoers being shot while they also pray. I think it is important to reach out and tell them we're there to help and increase understanding of the different religions because I think that's a big impediment to where we're at these days. People will fear and hate what they don't know.

**Thank you for your time, Julia.**

# Catholic Pope Affirms Need for Humanism in Europe

March 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Anya Overmann

An incredibly notable public figure uttered these words last week:

*“As leaders, you are called to blaze the path of a new European humanism made up of ideals and concrete actions. This will mean being unafraid to make practical decisions capable of responding to people’s real problems and of standing the test of time.”*

Guess who said this.

Richard Dawkins?

Stephen Fry?

Tim Minchin?

None of the above. Believe it or not, these words were uttered by the Pope. Yes, *the* Roman-Catholic Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome, who lives in the Vatican and is the authority of one the most strict and well-established denomination of Christianity.

The Pope is quoted saying this on March 25th by the Catholic Herald within the context of an event at the Vatican celebrating the 60th anniversary of the signings of the Treaties of Rome. This should come as a surprise to both the religious and irreligious communities alike.

This was a momentous occasion, and so justifying both the lofty speech and large olive branch to the humanist community from the larger Catholic one by its leader. Pope Francis invited 27 European heads of state into the Vatican for this highly significant commemoration.

In a similar manner with the League of Nations—though it failed—providing the conceptual foundations for the United Nations, the Treaties of Rome, very likely, assisted in contributing to the foundation of the European Union.

The Treaties of Rome created both the European Atomic Energy Community and the European Economic Community. It, too, was signed on March 25, but back in 1957. It’s only a little after WWII, so these were important treaties.

This affirmation of a new European humanism is important for two reasons:

It is a commemoration or remembrance and honoring of an important part of the past

It assists in the development of further humanistic motions in the European region

Whether religious or irreligious flavors of humanism, the statements on the 60th commemoration of the Treaties of Rome and the affirmation by the major Abrahamic religion of humanism, with European tangs, is something to feel good about, almost choked up.

This isn’t something to necessarily be dismissed because it’s religious, or because it’s from a religious leader. It is important, and educational, to reflect on the centrality of leaders. The Roman Catholic Pope is one such figure.

If an affirmation of humanistic or positive things, then this is worthy of praise and further echoing of affirmation in and out of the community because this becomes a common cause, a common good, and, in a way, a common voice across conceptual lines and along parallel principles.

Most groups have leaders. And many, many Catholic adherents will listen closely to this message. So this is not an isolated good, but a great one deserving due attention. Besides, outside of groups, it is common principles that are more durable and will 'stand the test of time.'

## An Interview with Yvan Dheur

April 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

You've spoken on humanism in Europe. My common assumption is Europe is more non-believing than other areas of the world. Is it more humanistic as well? I would assert the fact, but want to make sure.

Yes and no. Non-believers, humanists, atheists, secularists, freethinkers and rationalists are the fastest growing life stance or 'religious group'—except that we define ourselves by its opposite:—the absence of religion. We use the denomination philosophical community or a non-confessional life stance.

In terms of our community in Europe, if you ask a Chinese official there is no religion in China. If you ask for an atheist or humanist youth group in China, you are referred to the Communist Youth organisation.

From that perspective, Europe is certainly not the region where there are more non-believers. It is quite hard to measure; most religious people in the world tend to be cultural believers, they celebrate transition rites like marrying and do funerals within their religious spaces but do not really believe in the existence of an invisible person above the clouds that rules over everything and initiated life. They sometimes define god as the origin of life but still have consideration for the big bang theory and Darwinian evolution theory even though they consider themselves as religious.

Most believers are born into a religious community and therefore stay attached to it without living out their beliefs in a strong and literal way. It is also true that every religious community has its own die hard, radical, fundamentalist “far right religious” members that live out their beliefs in a very extreme and literate way and often have little or no tolerance for other beliefs.

Many Europeans are culturally religious and if asked about the origin of life or the universe, or life after death, they tend to understand the value of science and are convinced of those basic principles taught to us in the spirit of rationality, free inquiry and humanism.

There are only two countries in the world where non-believers are officially recognized in the exact same way as “religious” life stances are: Norway and Belgium. In these countries humanists, atheists, freethinkers and non-believers have exactly the same rights as religious communities do, they are state funded, housed and allowed to organize themselves and offer services to their community in the same way religious communities are. Other countries in Europe function differently. They have organizations (sometimes huge ones) but funded as “cultural organisation” or “youth organisation” (like in the Netherlands) or by membership fees and gifts from the local humanist community in response to campaigns and fundraising (like in UK). It is undeniable that there are many non-believers in Europe. It is complex to define precisely how many because of all the people born in a religious community who do not believe but also people changing religion because of marriage or conversion. The vast majority of religious people do not believe firmly in everything that is written in the holy books but they agree with most scientific discoveries on the origin of life, afterlife, evolution of humanity and so long and so forth.



On the other hand, Europe has always been the epicentre of humanism and humanist knowledge creation, science and non-theistic thinking. The enlightenment and the strong evolution of science enhanced this humanist identity. From the ancient Greek philosophers to the post-modern scientists, we do have had a great deal of responsibility for the advancement of science, reason and non-believers in the world.

**By wanting to increase humanism in Europe, we've define a problem and posed a solution. How severe is the problem? How does activism and advocacy for humanism in Europe solve the tacitly proposed problem?**

I would not have phrased it in terms of us wanting “to increase humanism in Europe”. We do not believe in god or any magical/supernatural higher force defined as origin of life, morals, living creatures or what so ever. We observe that more human beings cease to believe in this magical concept and are happy with that; their atheistic life stance tends to be dominant or very fast growing at least. It is not the belief in god as such that seems to be problematic, but rather the consequences of that belief in terms of behavior, coexistence, values and directions that civilizations are taking. Religious communities have certain values that are often rather positive if they concern basic moral issues, like “do not kill”, “respect thy family, neighbour, friend or enemy”, be honest, help each other, do not steal, and so on.

What tends to be more problematic is that every religion claims to be ‘The’ only truth and that most holy books tend to suggest that people who do not adhere to that particular book, should be tortured in cruel ways or stoned or slaughtered or exterminated. In the history of humankind, religion has certainly not been the only tool to invite civilizations to engage in wars, but the study of conflict has taught us that every war and conflict where religion is involved, ‘miraculously’ tend to be more violent, more bloody and lasted longer. So yes, religion can be, and often is, a catalyst for conflict, since by definition it claims to be the only truth and claims other beliefs to be fraudulent.

We also observe that in situations where religions want to define rules for society and mingle with state structures that many problems emerge in terms of the coexistence with other religious communities. Separation of religion and state is a value that is important to our community but from a theological point of view we observe that this concept tends to be problematic for most of the major religions. Be it through the sharia (together with riba and fikh), the canonic law (used for instance to protect the many pedophile priests when they are molesting children), the halakha (Jewish religious law), or any other “legal” religious interpretation, these system do not adhere to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and are often in contradiction with secular, modern legal systems at all.

In the history of mankind and its relationship to the sacred currents, trends and (d)evolutions emerged. In the sixties we saw a rather strong expansion of secularism worldwide, as a consequence of the evolution of education and the economic boom. In the seventies, in reaction to that, we observed the emergence of rather radical fundamentalist “anti-evolution” religiosity very opposed to secularism and the advancement of liberties and freedom movements. The radical Islamic trends but also the strengthening of far-right Christian and Jewish movements re-emerged and grew rapidly. These emergences and regressions have occurred cyclically since then.

Today at the EU level we observe radical Christian groups working together with radical Islamic fundamentalists on common agendas—like the ‘pro-life’ one, (for which read anti-choice, anti-abortion, anti-family planning and anti-stem cell research).

Most Humanists in the world were raised with critical thinking and free inquiry as mental tools of intelligence gathering. They often have the feeling that there is no need for humanist activism because you cannot fight or engage against something that does not exist. I myself was also a bit sceptical as an adolescent, thinking most people on earth were not believers anymore and those who did clearly lacked of understanding and education, or at least the necessary critical thinking. When I discovered how strong religious lobbies were and how strongly they were intending to promote their religious values all over the world (often in unethical and disgusting ways), I realised it was extremely important to engage in the fight against bigotry, religious extremism and dogmatic ideologies. When I look at the situation of the world in regard with humanitarian issues, conflicts, international politics, the rights of women and gender equality, and so long and so forth, I am more than ever convinced there is a lot of work to do and it is crucial for as many individuals as possible to join the fight for freedom and against intellectual constriction caused by religious worldviews, the rise of political populism together with religious radicalism.

As if collective intelligence could not evolve on a constant and steady base but needed to evolve as a string made of patterns of evolutions and devolutions.

### **What are the common examples of restrictions on the open practice and lifestyle of the ethical and philosophical worldview of humanism?**

Donald Trump, making the availability of abortion services not mandatory throughout the US and turning down US funding to women's rights project (purely from a religious extremism point of view). Erdogan, in collusion with the far right religious lobbies behind him, suggesting women should make as many kids as possible and that abortion is wrong because the Turks should multiply. Putin giving basically all power to the orthodox church and censoring the LGBT community, almost legalising the beating up of gay people. Blasphemy laws existing in too many countries in the world. The Vatican protecting pedophiles very openly and actively all over the world. Saudi Arabia voting an "anti-terrorism" act with the first sentence of that act saying atheism is the worst form of terrorism and should be punished by death. Shall I go on?

Every day all over the world, our values are being neglected, reprimanded, censored. Atheists, Humanists, Freethinkers, and Secularists are being threatened, molested, arrested, tortured and murdered...

Shall I go on?

### **Who have been unlikely allies in the spread of humanism, in your experience?**

Intelligent people, scientists, independent woman, LGBTQI-community, journalists, enlightened intellectuals, academics, progressive forces, young persons (due to their strong capacity to rebel and evolve), freedom fighters, whistleblowers, democrats and enlightened liberals (who understand the philosophy of liberalism and are not blunt followers of what their rich environment told them to do), sometimes progressive religious people have adhered our values of freedom, and many others, anonymous freethinkers, freemasons (non-regular). But also in a contradictory way, the far-right religious extremists... Sometimes I even think they are our best allies, like the previous pope or these silly youngsters that explode themselves in the name of the invisible magical power in which they believe. The more religious idiots gain visibility the more the rest of the world is turning towards our values, our freedom our liberty and is gaining respect for other beliefs, other ways to interpret life.

Religion is doomed to disappear where intelligence is evolving, so the more narrow-minded religious entities become, the more the people will want to evolve in peace and to coexist with their fellow human being, whatever their colour, religion or wherever they come from.

### **How can people get involved and donate to the movement for humanism in Europe?**

There are many ways to get involved. First of all, by becoming a member of our community through media and social media, becoming a member of the mailing lists and following our groups on social media. Come to our events, meet other fellow freedom fighters and become a part of our network. Write texts for our media. Specialise in topics that interest you. Read books and reports related to values and topics that are of interest. Never turn to a constructive discussion with like minded but even more with religious people, ‘from discussion come the light’ said Voltaire. Learn about the relationship between religion and state, about religious values, religious conflicts and about the positive and negative impact of religions in the world. Learn about humanist values and learn to be critical towards them, -critical thinking and free inquiry form the core of our mindset.

Talk with friends and family about your vision. Never fight but always accompany people with a different mindset to learn to understand ours. Show genuine interest in religious people there they often use mental concepts that may seem weird to a non-believer but a great percentage of mankind is thinking in those patterns and it is crucial for a non-believer to understand why and how religious people think if you want to help them “see the light” or at least be critical towards their own “almighty truth”.

If you are young, engage in a youth section or movement. If you are an adult, then try to engage in an adult section or organisation but always be careful for your own safety and that of your family. Study science, and actually try to study as many possible topics for as long as possible in your life: knowledge is power.

**Thank you for your time, Yvan.**

*\*Views expressed are not necessarily those on IHEYO.\**

# An Interview with Danielle Erika Hill

April 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*\*This interview edited for clarity and readability.\**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** So we've been talking off-tape a little bit about demographics and the situation in the Philippines, and political and religious issues. But first, I want to take a step back and ask, "Do you have a background in humanism or non-belief? How did you have this as an awakening for you as the right philosophical and ethical worldview for you?"

**Danielle Erika Hill:** My entire family is Catholic. But it's not the whole fire and brimstone Catholicism.

**SJ:** [Laughing].

**DH:** Really, it is more along the Protestant work ethic. I grew up with my extended family. My aunt—who I was closest to—was a chemist. In that household, there was this idea that God created everything, but science helps us understand what He created. So for me, faith and science were never at odds with each other. It also helped that I had a mom who told me, "Everything in Genesis, take it metaphorically."

**SJ:** [Laughing].

**DH:** "The people who wrote that, whether they wrote it. They didn't have the scientific tools that we have now." So I always looked at *The Bible* as an [Laughing] anthropological work...

**SJ:** [Laughing].

**DH:** ...that showed people's worldviews from far off. And philosophically, they may have had good points, but don't believe in the historicity of all of the things there because a lot of them didn't know what they were talking about.

**SJ:** In America, there was a biologist, Stephen Jay Gould, who came up with the idea of the "Non-Overlapping Magisteria." The "Magisteria" are science and religion. Of course, they are non-overlapping. They do not mix. They deal with different domains of discourse...

**DH:** Yea.

**SJ:** ...in terms of how one approaches the world. So from your family background, with the family member with scientific training in chemistry, studying the natural world, and the highly liberalised form of Catholicism with Genesis taken as metaphorical, I am taking that as indicative of a healthier approach to upbringing or raising a child in a religious household.

**DH:** Yea definitely, but the thing is I was one of the lucky ones, because this is not how a lot of children were raised. A lot of people took Genesis literally—down to the whole 'people are made of dirt' thing. I spent 10 years in Catholic school. We were taught this as a theory of creation. I was in 6th grade at that time, and I just shot my teacher down when she did that. I had a lot of arguments with the nuns when I was in high school. Fun times! [Laughing]

**SJ: What were some positive moments of religious upbringing for you? What were some moments of camaraderie, where you found fellow non-believers—a community of friends?**

**DH:** Well, okay, what pops out is this retreat we had back in 2nd year—I should probably give a little background on the Filipino educational system. Right about now, it is K-12. But when I was back in school, there was only 10 years of education. Like 6 years of elementary school, 4 years of high school, and off to college you go. When I say sophomore high school, that's probably like middle school to you guys.

So that retreat we had in sophomore year. I was talking to this person, this brother. And I was telling him that a lot of people find God in the church, find the presence of God in the church, and looking at the cross and all of those icons. But me, I find God, the presence of God. I was still believing back then. I find the presence of God in nature, in trees. This is where I feel church is. This is where I can commune with God.

He's like, "That's understandable. The Buddhists feel that way too. Sometimes, that's true." There are Liberal religious people who take something from the Buddhists and put it into their worldview. In that same retreat, I was able to reflect on the fact that a lot of people worship a concept of God, but in different ways. So I thought maybe it's not—or we're not—worshipping different sorts of gods. Maybe all of these religions are just us are looking for the same thing, but just in different ways. I had that notion back in high school. That was pretty weird to my more Catholic colleagues back then because to them, "They are worshipping the wrong God." Especially for those raised in the *really* conservative families—the whole tolerance thing is a scale.

It also helps that when I was in 3rd year, our religion teacher taught philosophy because a lot of the saints in Roman Catholicism, they were philosophers—St. Augustine and stuff. I don't think we were taught dogma much. I remember being taught philosophy, good management, good conduct, and Christian living. There was a little dogma in the religion class, but it was more how you should conduct yourself in the world as a good Catholic. Our school had this emphasis on human beings as the stewards of Creation.

We should take care of others and the environment because this was something given to us to take care of. I think that when I discovered humanism as a philosophy in university, it just fit in, just was a logical progression. I lost the God, but I did not lose the philosophy.

**SJ: Do you find value in the philosophers such as Augustine, Aquinas, or Anselm, for instance?**

**DH:** Not so much, I tend not to delve too much on philosophy. I understand, though, that they can be of help. I think, really, that if religion wants to be a healthy force, maybe philosophy should be taught rather than dogma because philosophy teaches you how to think, not just what. It is teaching you what these guys thought, and why, and the circumstances in which they thought rather than "this is what you should think because he said so".

It at least gives you a pool of worldviews to choose from.

**SJ: Do you notice that tendency in more orthodox—I'll say—friends growing up, of fundamentalist upbringing—so Genesis is literal, back to that point—in the humanist community, in the atheist community, at all? And in what way, if so?**

**DH:** Oh yea! What I am seeing, there is certainly an effect on the psyche. The more fundamentalist the environment you were raised in, the more militant of an atheist you turn out to be, probably because you are frustrated in what happened.

**SJ:** **That's a really good point. That's a really good point.**

**DH:** Because there's that whole being angry...

**SJ:** [Laughing].

**DH:** ...because they feel like they've been duped for so long, which is why we've got a couple of therapists on our team. Jinjin Heger, she's going to be talking in the conference. So she volunteers to talk to people, give them therapy, because she knows these people are going through a tough time with the whole losing their religion thing. I have talked to people too. My best friend, when he lost his faith—there's this sort of bitterness that remains. Among the more orthodox friends, what I am seeing is a lack of critical thinking. When you're raised with information being force fed into you, and it is the authority, and this is the authority you should listen to, because they're the boss, especially children here—and this is not religion, this is more on culture. With children, there's still the tendency to think of them as things to be seen, not heard. Children should listen to adults. It is a hierarchy. There's this whole military 'obey before you complain' thing. We're the adults. You're the kids. You follow us.

I think a lot of them took that into adulthood, even when they lose their faith. So you have to give them something else. Part of it is—and I think there's a better word for it—re-education of the mentalities that you learned, so you can learn a new one to be a humanist or a non-believer properly.

Because otherwise, you'll still be a stupid, but a Godless stupid.

**SJ:** [Laughing] **I agree with you. Let's talk about some of the stuff that we talked about off-tape.**

**DH:** Okay.

**SJ:** **We talked about demographics in the Philippines. I want to add one thing we didn't talk about off-tape. But! In Saudi Arabia, there was about 5% of the population are non-believer, maybe even outright atheists, which has been listed recently as a terrorist offence or it is a terrorist act to be an atheist in Saudi Arabia, where maybe 13 other places it is the death penalty.**

**And we were talking. I asked if it .1% or 1% of the population that are non-believers. You said, 'It is hard to say.' Can you extrapolate further? Why is it 'hard to say'?**

**DH:** Okay, it is hard to say because there hasn't been any in-depth study of the non-believing population. I think it is high time somebody did. There's no official study that exists, that I know of. But what I can say is that there are a lot of people who are active in the secular community, and there are a lot of people who are actively saying they are not religious.

Others will say that they are non-religious, but spiritual. Many will be hesitant to call themselves atheists. Atheists get a bad rap over here. It is over 300 years of demonization thing coming from the Spanish.

**SJ:** **Wow.**

**DH:** But there has been a resurgence, especially among the more artsy communities. There's been a resurgence of more Indigenous art. And a lot of the pre-Spanish mythologies are being re-told. I think that helps out a lot. I think of what happened to a lot of people in Europe. Most of the countries in Europe are secular already, even though they started out really religious. I have many foreign secular friends asking me, "Why hasn't that happened in the Philippines yet?"

I said, "Maybe, it has to do with you having outgrown your gods. Our gods were taken away from us. We didn't have the chance to outgrow them."

**SJ: Right.**

**DH:** I think it's Stockholm Syndrome.

**SJ: [Laughing].**

**DH:** back to demographics, there are a number of people. But I can't say how much. HAPI has 18 chapters, I think. Most of those are in the Philippines. So you've got people really openly secular. But the thing is, I can't say that everybody who works in the secular sphere is an atheist because what we in HAPI have is a big tent policy. We accept all faiths. Our humanism is like, "As long as you would put humans over dogma any times those clash, you're considered a humanist."

Yea, so, we've got some people who still believe in a God, or in a Creator. We don't really talk about that subject much anymore in the HAPI forums because, to us, it is not important. It is not important what you believe. It is important what you do. If your belief in a higher power is helping you become a better person, if it helps you become a better human being, then go, no problem!

Our tiff is with the people who use their faith to hurt other people. That's what we're against.

**SJ: I like to think of it as big humanism and small humanism.**

**DH:** Yea, yea. I've heard in Europe that a lot of the secular communities, a lot of the humanist communities, are having trouble reconciling the two. I think we in Asia have done an okay job of it.

**SJ: What do you think is the backdrop that provides that better ease into harmony with different and more flexible humanist values rather than a more restricted form?**

**DH:** Well, I'm not sure. I'm thinking culture. I suppose because Eastern and Western cultures and values are very different. Here, people are more tolerant and more open of each other because it is in-built. You do your thing. We'll do our thing. What the Muslims would say is, "You have your religion. We have our religion." That's why in Manila you see one of the biggest mosques in the Philippines right, like, a block away from one of the biggest churches in the Philippines.

So it's pretty open. The fact that Muslims and Christians can live together and not hate on each other. That's a big thing. It goes a long way with the whole tolerance thing. I suppose it also has something to do with the fact that everyone in Asia knows there are a lot of religions in Asia. It's like, "Okay, cool bro!" That's why what I said earlier happens. Having a different religion is cool, but having no religion is like-[Gasping]!

**SJ: Emoji-worthy. Last question, you are the main organizer for an upcoming conference—I may be misremembering this part, which is for the Asian Working Group of IHEYO.**

**DH:** Yes.

**SJ: Oh thank God [Laughing]! Okay, so who are some highlights? What is the theme? Why organize it?**

**DH:** [Laughing] Okay, so The 2017 Asian Humanism Conference happens every year. It is the biggest event of IHEYO Asia. Last year, it was in Taiwan. The year before that it was in Singapore. The year before that it was in Nepal. The year before that, it was in the Philippines again, but in another part, in the South. This year, it is going to be in Manila.

And we've got a lot of speakers right now, and a lot of people from HAPI, because it coincides with an event HAPI was already planning for, like a homecoming thing. So we've got people working with us who are flying all across the globe. I think it is going to be a big thing right now. I am really excited for it. The theme is "Game Changers." I crafted it out of the notion that these are the people who are changing the world a little bit at a time with their work.

We've got David G. McAfee, who is a really influential Facebook celebrity in the atheist community. Lots of atheist writings under his name. We've got David Orenstein, chairman of the American Humanist Association and its representative in the UN. We've got a lot more people coming. Humanists from different parts of Asia, who we want to tell us how it works over there and the challenges that they face.

We want to bring people together and to see the different ways humanism is done there and how we can help each other out. I want this to be a networking thing, and maybe the guys over in one country want to do projects with guys from this other country. I think connection is now more than ever important because humanists are spread all over the globe. And there are so few of us compared to the rest that it is good to be able to stick together and build up a community, and that's going to help us be a little more—how do I say it?—prominent, I guess.

Instead of being fringe groups, instead of being seen as the Other, we can pass into the mainstream. The important thing is that people should know that we exist, especially in countries that don't think we do. In the Philippines, free speech is very highly valued. So I think this is the perfect platform for it. Did that make sense?

**SJ: Yes, it did. Thank you for your time, Danielle.**

**DH:** [Laughing] Okay. Thanks Scott.

*\*Views expressed are not necessarily those on IHEYO.\**



# Peshawar, Humanism, Poets, and Coming Together

April 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In Peshawar, there are poets who advocate for humanism in the literary world. To many youths who have grown up in a system with humanistic values—Unitarian Universalist, secular humanist, humanist, humanist Judaism, ethical culture, ethical society, ethical humanism, and on, and on and on, and on—the idea of advocacy for humanism might seem extraordinary.

Why would someone need to advocate for something so basic, so instinctual, and obvious? Well, it depends. Humanism is a super-minority in most areas of the world, and definitely regionally and globally. So its various manifestations, its sects, will reflect this too. When a Jehovah's Witness or Mormon Elder or Sister comes to the door (often in 2s), they are advocating.

"Have you checked this out? Don't you want to see? These are some of the wonderful blessings the Heavenly Father has bestowed upon me," the pitch might go. But take an area of the world such as Pakistan, the majority of the population, by a vast margin, are Muslim. And like other places in the world, whether the religion of peace or the religion of love, or otherwise, internecine conflicts, historically, globally, and currently, spark, fuel and maintain, and, sometimes, extinguish (often their own sparked), conflict.

So humanistic values such as those universal values seen in the UN Charter are desired by many in the international community, especially those with the ability, sense, skills, and talent to see beyond their borders, make sense of the external information, and to transmit the problems and promises of the expanded vision. The artists and culture formers at various levels of achievement and capability perform this function.

In Peshawar, the poets have been advocating for this spirit. Progressives, humanists, speak to the needs of the citizenry. They are essentially democratic in view and thrust. That runs back to the UN Charter, which, informally, runs back through some contents of most religious traditions, I guess. I don't know these names, which is unfortunate for me. I am culturally deprived here. But a recent event paid tributes to the "two Pashto literary giants Alif Jan Khattak and Saifur Rahman Salim."

Their literary works contributed to progressive, so humanist in part, values in the world, which, in a largely religious nation with religious conflict, is a fresh thing to read. Khattak was a "brave woman" who wanted women to have their voices raised, heard, and freedom realized in the country.

Salim was, by the account in the hyperlinked article, was a remarkably prominent poet among the Pashtun progressive poets. He had a fluency and ease of comprehension upon reading him. In other words, he was so good he was accessible. And what better way to reach a broad audience in a compassionate, warm, intellectual, and public way? Sagan fans, anyone?

Both of the literary giants "wanted equality and justice for people...[and] advocated [for] a social cause and both believed in a free society where people could enjoy equal rights." And I never knew of them, or about them, and I assume most people reading this are in the same state, but others around the world are in the same struggle, which goes to show, maybe a message from me

that, things can be done alone but require Herculean efforts; so our best bet is to band together at an international level—and IHEYO can help.

*\*Views expressed are not necessarily those on IHEYO.\**

# An Interview with Ariel Pontes—Chair, Americas Working Group, IHEYO

April 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Tell us about your family background—to give some groundwork.**

My mom is a singer/actress, my father is a music graduate who became a tax officer when I was born. Everyone in my family is nominally Catholic and I was also baptized, but my family never went to church except for special occasions (wedding, baptism, etc.). Brazilian Catholicism, however, is very syncretic, and in the southeast of the country it is deeply influenced by “Kardecist Spiritism” (especially in my family), which is very popular but not very organized new-age/christian-universalist religion. Everything I learned about spirituality was within a spiritist framework.

**What is your preferred definition of humanism?**

“A movement that promotes secular ethics as a means to achieve peaceful coexistence between people of different social backgrounds in an increasingly diverse society”

**How did you find and become involved with the humanist movement?**

I have always been very interested in spiritually, the meaning of life and deep questions of this sort. In my teenage years I talked a lot to my grandfather about the afterlife and communicating with the spiritual world, went to the meetings of his cult and watched all documentaries about the supernatural that aired on Discovery Channel (or similar). I quickly became obsessed with having first-hand supernatural experiences. I could never, however, experience anything more than sleep paralysis and semi-lucid dreaming, so I started wondering if the people who claimed to communicate with the spiritual world really weren’t just fooling themselves and if the skeptics in the documentaries were right after all. I started challenging them, with the best of intentions, and proposing experiments to check if their experiences really were real, and I was met with excuses and antagonism. I eventually became an atheist and was very frustrated at religion. Years later I got tired of hearing arguments based on superstition when discussing ethics and politics and I started looking for groups that promoted secularism. I joined LiHS in Brazil but never got very involved. When I migrated to Romania I went to atheist meet ups to meet locals and eventually joined ASUR and AUR (local Humanist NGOs). In a few months I attended the Humanist Eastern European Conference and discovered Europe had a thriving Humanist movement incomparable with anything in Brazil. Since then I became determined to promote Humanism in developing countries such as Romania, Brazil and Latin America in general.

**What have been the main benefits of being a part of IHEYO?**

Being in contact with members of much more developed organizations and learning from them. I’ve learned a lot in a short period about what volunteers on the ground can do to promote Humanism and also about the politics and bureaucratic aspects of growing as a member and exerting influence in a big organization. The main benefit though is probably the sense of accomplishment of working towards something that I believe in and being able to see the fruits of my efforts.

**Now, you're the chair of the Americas Working Group (AmWG). What tasks and responsibilities come, or will come, with this position? What is the purpose of the AmWG?**

The purpose of the AmWG is to promote Humanism in the Americas, especially among youth. The means by which we try to accomplish this are up to us to define. Our main strategy at the moment is to collect data about Humanism in the Americas and do knowledge transfer. We've created an [online form](#) where Humanists throughout the Americas can provide their contact info. We then contact them and schedule video calls where we learn about their activities, structure, etc. and teach them about the successes and failures of more mature organizations, making suggestions when we think it's appropriate. Another long term aim is to promote more international collaboration among organizations in the Americas, in particular Latin America. We hope to eventually be able to organize a Pan American conference somewhere in Latin America. In the present the AmWG administration is still disproportionately U.S. based.

**What are the main threats to the practice of humanism in Romania and in the Americas?**

The religious right and populist politics are a constant obstacle probably everywhere in the world. In Latin America, Catholic ethics and the anti-abortion narrative are very powerful. The rise of right-wing Evangelical Christianity, partly influenced by movements in the United States, is also a big problem in Brazil and has resulted in tensions with local African religions which are accused of witchcraft. Endemic criminality also contributes to skepticism towards human rights and the rule of law, which is extremely dangerous. In Romania, on the other hand, most problems seem to stem from a rural, traditional mentality. Difference and strong individuality is usually seen with skepticism and antagonism. Here, as opposed to Latin America, anti-LGBT discourse is a bigger problem than anti-abortion discourse, for example. The public funding of religion is another problem Romania faces. Humanists are divided when it comes to the solution to this problem. Some think we should fight to be recognized as a religion and get funds as equals, as is the case in Norway for example, but others think we should just fight to stop financing of religions altogether. I personally find the latter more unrealistically ambitious (though both are unrealistically ambitious).

**Who have been the most unexpected allies for the humanist movement in Americas?**

When I became active in the Humanist movement I quickly realized it was an extremely Eurocentric movement. It is of course only natural for historical reasons, and this is not accusation, but I was a bit disappointed. Fortunately, however, I very quickly realized that the mostly Western European leadership was very aware of this and fighting to change it. Every time I meet Humanists in international events, I quickly feel they are allies. In the AmWG needless to say I am learning a lot from the U.S. Americans and I am grateful about how committed they are to helping Latin America. Unexpected is a strong word though, after all I can't say I had pessimistic expectations. But I am positively surprised with how much focus the U.S. and Western Europe put in reaching out to the developing world.

# Evolution vs. Creationism via “Scientific American” E-Book

April 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Scientific American* published one short e-book, Evolution vs. Creationism: Inside the Controversy. It relates to the perennial social controversy, creationism versus evolution. Where the substantive evidence supports the bottom-up theorization around evolution rather than the top-down face value plus scriptural assertion from numerous religious sector from the religious subpopulation, not all, by any stretch, but, many, many religious folks, especially in America and the Muslim-majority countries adhere to creationist or quasi-creationist perspectives on the development and speciation of species.

In the world at large, evolution remains the minority view. Creationism remains dominant. Why? In-built agency detection mechanisms, legacy of fundamentalist-literalist interpretation of holy scripture, indoctrination of youth reliant on inculcation of ignorance to keep congregations at a low cultural level, newness of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, many reasons exist. What’s the solution? It depends on what you want and how you define the problem.

From the experts in biological sciences with full comprehension of evolutionary theory, and who have encountered the counterarguments in continual barrages from minority sects of the religious population that claim to speak for the totality of religious believers, well-funded fundamentalist preachers and literalist doctrines argue for the young Earth and the top-down narrative provided by literalist readings of the Book of Genesis.

Also, time is a big one. If a philosophy exists for a long time, more than others, and more people happen to believe in it, then the truth might have a hard time overcoming the continual message of top-down design. We seem hardwired, or wet-wired, or evolved to perceive patterns without appropriate natural reality to the pattern, outside of the conceptualization in our mind’s eye.

Back to this book that you should be reading instead of this, the controversy for evolution and creationism, among the majority of qualified professionals in the biological sciences—which can sound like argument from authority, but seems more akin to argument from authoritative authority, those with relevant expertise rather than irrelevant expertise or no expertise—amounts to ‘controversy’ because the unanimous vote is “for,” or “aye,” rather than “against,” or “nay,” regarding evolution.

We evolved. We remain evolved Great African apes from the Great Rift Valley. We can’t not have genetic relation in the beautiful phrase: the “Tree of Life.” It runs along Lebanon to Mozambique, and even makes for a good topic around Christmas and associated cultural celebrations. Evolution is like a random cousin from a faraway country, who barely speaks your language, hardly knows your culture, and stinks, but you come to grips with them because you realize, to them, you barely speak their language, hardly know their culture, and stink.

There’s a distant, yet deep, kinship in an evolutionary framework. It speaks to the commonality of everyone, but without reference to things outside of confirmed natural processes, except in idle speculation for fun. Humanism speaks to the same impulses. It describes, at least in its core

values—not everyone agrees to the letter of the law, one common species—not ‘races,’ whatever that means—with common evolved cousins and common ancestors in a massive Tree of Life spanning up to 3.77 billion years ago. Wow. So yea, life is super old and evolved, not young and created all-at-once in an act of creation only a few thousand years ago. (I’m bad at endings.)

## **An Interview with Emily Newman—Communications Coordinator at American Ethical Union**

**April 24, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**As our correspondence has unfolded, I have discovered that, not only you but, your family is steeped in ethical humanism, and ethical societies. So what is the deal? Where did your family first come into contact with ethical humanism?**

My parents were married at the Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture by an Ethical Culture Leader (our form of clergy) and became active members after having children. My father had been raised Jewish and my mother had been raised Catholic but both identified more as humanists/non-theists and had heard of Ethical Culture. They wanted their children to be part of a caring, multi-generational community in the neighborhood. My brother and I both graduated from the Sunday school and became teacher assistants as teens. It was reassuring as a kid to learn about the other Societies and the national organization, American Ethical Union, to know that I was not alone.

**Ethical Culture started with Felix Adler. When was your first encounter with his ideas? What definition really stood out for you?**

I learned about Felix Adler, the founder of Ethical Culture, and his colleagues as well as various freethinkers and social justice advocates. We use Ethical Culture and Ethical Humanism interchangeably so I was not aware of how “Ethical Humanism” began. I define Ethical Humanism as a philosophy that uses reason and ethics to shape our relationships with each other and the world.

**We’re on the Americas Working Group for IHEYO together, along with other people. Personally, what does IHEYO mean to you?**

IHEYO is a way to expand my knowledge of humanism and its impact on the world. As individuals we are always developing and as local communities we are always sharing, now we can learn and do more by connecting with each other internationally. I worry that we too often stay in our bubbles because they are safe and familiar, but by participating with IHEYO we become aware of the many ways humanists are similar and different across the globe and how we can inspire each other.

**How does ethical humanism better deal with the profound moments of life—birth, rites of passage, death—than other ethical and philosophical worldviews?**

From my experience, Ethical Humanist ceremonies are more personal than religious ceremonies. There aren’t traditional passages or rituals you must follow. The event is developed by the teenager, couple, or family to best represent what is needed and wanted for the people celebrating. That makes each celebration unique and special. We add our talents, we add our quirks, and we add our creativity to make it about that moment with those people.

**Who seems most drawn to ethical humanism? What are the main demographics?**

We draw people who strive for equality and human rights. Politically we have mostly liberals and progressives. I think ethical humanism is attractive to all ages, ethnicities, genders, races, abilities,

and socioeconomic statuses but that is not always reflected in our organizations' membership due to restraints on transportation, time, and money.

**Who/what remain the main threats to the free practice and advocacy of ethical humanism to you?**

I think we need more strong humanist leaders, spokespeople, advocates to broadcast the message and organize the communities. If we don't join together to strengthen our voice we will be drowned out by the voices of others who disagree with us, misrepresent us, or push their own agendas. I'm proud to work with The Humanist Institute to train such advocates and promote the humanist life stance.

**What are your hopes for ethical humanism within your lifetime?**

I hope that Ethical Humanism becomes more widely accepted and promoted across the world. I'd love to not have to explain humanism to people because it is being taught and discussed openly in schools, government, communities, etc.

**Thank you for your time, Emily.**



## **Exclusive Interview with Stephanie Guttormson - Operations Director for the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science**

April 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Stephanie Guttormson is the current Operations Director for the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science—a foundation she joined in March of 2013. Stephanie was the leader of an award winning student group at the Metropolitan State University of Denver which impressively brought in notable names such as Michael Shermer and James Randi to speak on campus.*

**Where does your personal and family background reside?**

Denver, Colorado, my last name, apparently, is Icelandic. Based on the name, my heritage is Icelandic, Vikings, and those kinds of people—Scandinavian.

If we look at the landscape now, especially in North America, atheism is a rapidly growing movement. From your expert position, what seem like the reasons behind this phenomenon?

In one word for you, the internet. The internet is where religion goes to die. I don't remember who said that. It wasn't me, but the internet is where religion goes to die. There's too many ways to get appropriate facts now. Yes, of course, there's tons of crap on the internet too, but being able to debate rationally with people and get them to listen to arguments that they wouldn't otherwise.

Also, they get more exposure to more news about the same facts. They consistently don't see atheists in the news doing violent things. I would also like to say that it has to do with the Richard Dawkins Foundation having a movement to get people to come out of the closet starting with the Out campaign. Now, there's Openly Secular.

I also credit people like David Silverman from American Atheists being super open about it as well as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Christopher Hitchens, and James Randi. These are people that I know opened my eyes and open the eyes of a lot of other people.

**Listening to these people and working for one of the organisations of probably the most prominent at present, you've probably heard most of the arguments. What do you consider the best argument for atheism?**

Atheism is more of a conclusion rather than something to be argued for.

(Laugh)

Atheism is what happens when you follow the evidence where it leads, where it leads right now is to the conclusion that there is likely no supernatural force watching over us or any magical force.

Everything we've been able to figure out. Everything we've been able to verify so far has not been magic. We are still waiting for magic to happen. It hasn't, yet. All of our progress has been the result of the method known as the scientific method, for the most part.

Even social change, you look at the situation and people think, “That’s not fair. That seems to hurt people. Let’s fix that.” The thing changes and things get better. The more we learn, the more things get better because we’re responding to evidence and the changing situations.

Humans were pretty good at doing that when they left savannah. Now, we need to get our brains to do it and change our minds with new evidence as the new landscape changes.

You hold two bachelor degrees. One in linguistics. One in theoretical mathematics. Both from Metropolitan State University in Denver. I want to focus on theoretical mathematics because it could be technically defined as a science.

**So, when it comes to having a mathematical understanding and know the scientific method more than most, does this seem to provide a bulwark for you to consider these topics of critical thinking, faith healing, and other topics along the range of pseudoscience, non-science, bad science, and real science and making that demarcation?**

Religion is not the only thing that benefits from wish thinking and that kind of thing. I really hate grief vampires like Adam Miller. He’s more of a straight-up conman. “Grief vampires” are psychics, mediums, and those kinds of people. I hate them so much.

Anyone promoting any non-scientific idea boils down to a couple of quotes. One is from my friend Matt Dillahunty. He said, “I want to believe as many true things and as few false things as possible.” Also, the other probably is “scientia potentia est” or “knowledge is power.”

If you look at the general public and the method of teaching critical thinking, if you could comment on the state of critical and ways to improve education of critical thinking, what is it?

It is garbage.

(Laugh)

The current state of teaching critical thinking in this country is garbage. I chose to take logic courses and things that challenge or made my ability to think better. I can’t say I wish it were mandatory, but I wish we would encourage it more, certainly. I wish it was a core class to teach critical thinking and its importance.

The fact of the matter is any false belief has potential to do harm because it is incongruent with reality. Those things that are incongruent with reality have great potential to cause harm.

**Do you think the work through the Richard Dawkins Foundations assists in the development of critical thinking to a degree?**

We would always want to do more, but I think the programs we have help with it. There’s one teaching evolutionary science, where we teach middle school teachers how to teach evolution. Some think, “You’re indoctrinating them with evolution.” No, evolution requires asking a lot of questions.

Kids are interested in it because you get to ask, “Why do cells do that? Why does this happen that way?” Teaching any science, especially evolution, will lead to more critical thinkers.

**When you were Metropolitan State University in Denver, you managed to bring Dr. Michael Shermer and James Randi to campus. What was that like getting people that prominent in the atheist, agnostic, and critical thinking movement to come to your university?**

That was pretty surreal, not going to lie. That's the only way I could put it. I was shell-shocked at that age. James Randi put forward a ton of effort to get to Denver. One of my heroes did something for me. That was incredible. I can't tell you how good that felt. It is hard to put into words.

For those that don't know, that aren't as involved in that community. Who are individuals that you would recommend to them, and what particular texts would you recommend to them?

I would recommend Ayaan Hirsi Ali. I would recommend Richard Dawkins, Obviously.

(Laugh)

I would encourage them to find a book, *How to Think About Weird Things*. That's a good book. *Lying* by Sam Harris, that is pretty decent. *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens. I would probably have them take any logic book, really, for those that are academically inclined.

They have them in different levels like "Logic for Dummies" all the way to a serious textbook. They all touch on the same things. Also, they should learn on how to be persuasive and how arguments work has been helpful.

**What are some of the other ongoing activities and educational initiatives through the Richard Dawkins Foundation?**

We have a ton of videos on our [YouTube channel](#). Tons of videos of Richard and other people with loads of information about science and evolution, but everything is in English. There weren't subtitles in other languages until we had the project to translate as many videos into other languages as we could.

We have many videos now in Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and so on. We have lots of languages. This is all done by volunteers around the world. Some of them as far away as Pakistan helping us translate videos. We get a translation and have someone double-check it. It is translated and checked by at least two people.

Even the English videos, we have to do the language in English first for something to be translated back for the translators. Those are some of the most important to get right.

**Is there an unexpected large following in the Middle East and North Africa region?**

We get quite a bit of people from that region contacting us more to get more involved with us.

**What initiatives are you hoping to host and expand into the future for the Richard Dawkins Foundation?**

Currently, we are merging with the [Center for Inquiry](#). We're not planning on launching anything new at the moment because we're in process of this merger.

You have appeared monthly on the [Dogma Debate](#) radio show and the [Road to Reason](#) TV show:

I stepped away from both for a bit because I had some mental health stuff to deal with first. I will be back for the Dogma Debate show soon. Same for The Road to Reason TV show. I am booking Richard's touring now. It takes most of my time at the moment.

Apart from professional capacities, what personal things do you hope to continue for your own intellectual enjoyment?

Next, I am going to start a video. I have a new target. As you probably know, I went after a man named Adam Miller. He sued me because I said he didn't have magic powers. I won, hilariously. There's this other little dumb fuck who I found on the internet that I want to go after. He claims to be a medium.

I want him to stop taking advantage of people. He's a grief vampire. He's one of these assholes that goes around saying, "Oh, I hear the letter F... coming out of my ass." You are a smug prick and are taking people who are vulnerable, fucking with them, and taking their money when you do it... You need to stop.

Those people are despicable and immoral. You want to talk about how pseudoscience harms people. You don't tell vulnerable people things that they want to hear. That can fuck with their emotions, especially pretending to speak with loved ones that they have never met. It is disgusting. It is despicable.

**Historically, pseudo-scientific, non-scientific, and bad scientific views had negative consequences. Sometimes very big ones. It's around now. It has been around in the past. Those around now, by implication, have been around in the past. What are the worst ones that come to mind for you?**

Psychics are really bad, but they don't seem as bad because you see the holes in the wall. The really bad ones are those that take advantage of people, such as John Edwards. They are the worst from an immoral perspective. I think the most harmful are medical ones.

The anti-vaccine movement by far is the most harmful pseudoscience movement that we've ever seen. It is followed very closely by chiropractors or any kind of "healing acupuncture." That kind of stuff. Medical pseudoscience by definition is the most harmful, no question—if you're talking about harm.

The medical stuff scares me to death. Mostly because we have people here that are extremely desperate to get better. They are putting their money in places they shouldn't, many times.

**Thank you for your time, Stephanie.**

## Brazil's austerity affects all Brazilians—but not its leaders

May 3, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Pamela Machado

The latest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) results placed Brazil in its deepest economic level *ever*, according to Reuters. In 2016, Brazilian economy shrunk 3.6%, following a 3.5% fall in 2015.

The economic downturn is, *allegedly*, being remediated by president Michel Temer—a centre-right partisan, and his Congress through harsh austerity. The greatest measure has been imposing a federal spending cap for the next twenty years. The cap is extremely harmful for the younger generation, who is already suffering from high rates of unemployment and inflation. Professor Phillip Alston, from the United Nations, called the spending cap “socially regressive”.

The spending cap looks even more absurd when it is taken as the only measure to find austerity. The New York Times reports that Temer's government is still refusing to apply taxes on wealth, another traditional measure in austerity rulings. In Brazil, shareholders are exempt from paying taxes on dividends—and still remain so, despite the current conditions.

When discussing the issue on the State not being able to afford food for the poor class, Legislator Pedro Fernandes actually suggested in session that the population could eat “every other day”

UN Charter Article 25(1) states, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.” Who is this going to affect in the present up to 20 years from now? There has been a 20-year public spending ceiling, basically compromising the educational and health system.

As with most similar examples, and most common sense based on observation of other countries' social strata, the usual victims of austerity in economic downturns—which worsen the downturn—are women with emphasis on single mothers, the middle and lower classes—or the working classes, and the young who are the basis for the taxation to support the retirements of the older and senior populations in many societies.

It is a easy cascade of conditionals with the catalyst being bad policy, poor implementation, and myopic self-interest among the ruling classes. Women are oppressed. The young are stifled. The poor are poorer.

The working classes are given stagnant or declining wages. If the policy put forth and implemented in the economic downturn is austerity, as it is, and if the austerity affects the usual victims of harsher economic policy, then the standard populations of women, single mothers, the young, and the middle and working class will be the most hurt by it, which will alter the situation for the chance for a decent end of life in retirement for many older people.

This has obvious intergenerational damages too. Men and women still want marriage and kids by the vast majority. Women want marriage more than previous decades as an important life goal. Austerity and economic struggles prevent healthy family formation because finances are probably the single greatest complaint between couples. Kids and marriage need money.

So if someone wants to form a family and be married, as most heterosexual men and women—who are 96.6% of the general population—have those as some of their highest ideals, secular or religious, and if the “unbelievable” devastation, predictable dissolution, of aspects of the healthcare and education system emerge from the actions in the present, then the leaders of the country have been irresponsible for the next a reasonable extrapolation for the next 20 years, so for one whole upcoming and ongoing generation of Brazilians. Of course, there are the perennial ignorant and myopic who do not see life in terms of legacy, but the vast majority want the responsible things in life.

The austerity, however, does not to apply to Brazilian leaders themselves. The economic recession and the precarious conditions of the population do not stop the politicians from enjoying the perks of being part of the government of the biggest country in Latin America; which means having abusive salaries and benefits such as monthly housing allowance, limitless medical and dental aid, extra payroll expenses and return air tickets to the capital, Brasilia.

A Brazilian MP made the suggestion that poor Brazilians might want to eat every other day rather than like normal people that prefer not be starving every day. One might assume this is akin to the gaffe of Republican politician Paul Ryan. Ryan suggested, ‘You don’t need healthcare because you have an iPhone.’ It was a recent unconscientious statement by the American politician. There’s salary increases of the leaders too.

Employees of Brazil’s Judicial branch are seeing a 41% increase in their salary. And in São Paulo, the most populous Brazilian state, Legislators voted to raise their own salary by more than 26%. To worsen the situation, the same Congress who is preparing to impose a major cut in the Brazilian pension scheme, is now offering lifelong pensions for its members after only two years in office. Real people are being affected by poor governance.

# An Interview with George Ongere

May 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Jacobsen:** To begin, do you have any prefaces to the conversation today?

**George Ongere:** When I was growing, my mother believed something was wrong with me. I was the only child in the family who could not succeed in cramming the catechism to graduate and eat the sacrament. She even made efforts to make the content of the book rhyme with a song to make it easy for me but it did not go well. My young brothers did well and mastered her catechism song and got all the content. What surprised her is that even though I could not cram the creed, I was a bright student in school! In that way, she failed to understand what was happening to me. I also could not explain, but I think it was the scepticism I had adopted after interacting with my grandfather as you will learn in the interview.

All my family members, including my father who was not fond of the church, graduated to eat the sacrament; I was the only one who dropped out of the session. Along these lines, the question is, did my skepticism start right from my childhood? As you will find, I was fortunate to have a grandfather who was skeptical of Christian religion, a father who was a Christian but was not a fond of going to church frequently, and a mother who was a staunch Christian who wanted her children to follow the way of God;—that combination provided room for growth of a skeptical young person like me.

There was no pressure to have me full indoctrinated into religion. Even though I grew as catholic child, where I was taken to a Sunday school, then to a primary school where we could worship and pray in the assembly, and finally to an Anglican sponsored high school, I still found my way into humanism. From my experience, as I demonstrate in the below engagement, reading widely, and having an open mind is the key to rationality and scepticism.

**Jacobsen:** Do you have a family background in skepticism and secular humanism?

**Ongere:** My family did not have any person subscribed to Secular humanism or scepticism, but the divergence of religious beliefs within the extended family helped me develop my skepticism at a younger age. My grandfather was a traditional person and when he witnessed the way Christianity came to Africa and displaced African religious beliefs during his youth, he vowed to remain a pagan. In this context, it meant he did not follow the Christian religion but adhered to selected African traditional beliefs.

As a child, when I asked him why he did not pray, he would tell me about the traditional concepts of African gods leaving me confused at that age. The puzzlement came since my mother was a staunch Christian who made sure we attended the Sunday school, while at the same time, grandfather stole me away and fed me with the traditional concept of god. It only confused me further and that is how I started getting inkling that not everyone was afraid of the God we were told in the Sunday school could strike dead disobedient people using thunder.

Moreover, even though my mother was a true Catholic believer, my father, though a catholic, was not fond of going to church every Sunday. My mother used to call him in our Luo mother tongue language “Jakafiri”. *Jakafiri* can also be interpreted as pagan. Though, in this context, my father believed in the teachings of Christianity but did not adhere to the rules like everyday prayers and

going to church regularly. Every Sunday, as we attended the Sunday mass, my father remained at home pretending to be attending some business functions. The only times I saw him in the church was during Christmas festive season and during Easter.

To sum up, I did not have many pressures from all sides, like most families do, to adhere to religion. In Africa, most children have pressure right from the grandparents, mother and father to adhere to one religion. I was fortunate since only my mother placed pressures that were absorbed by the traditional grandfather and my father; they did not pressure me to go through the process of eating the sacrament when all the other siblings were doing it.

**Jacobsen: When did you have your first inklings of skepticism and secular humanism in personal life?**

**Ongere:** As a young person addicted to reading all types of novels in late primary, high school and college, I met characters in the books who claimed they did not believe in gods, God and any supernatural entities. This was strange to me at the time because it was rare in the rural to find a person declaring a disbelief in gods or God; I did not even know the term “Atheism”. Even though my grandfather did not believe in Christianity, he still believed in the supernatural world like the ancestor’s power. Growing in the interior rural village during my primary and high school years, the only medium that could give me entertainment was the storybooks since there was no electricity to get fun from other mediums like the Television. As such, I could put my hands on any book that promised entertainment. I would go to local libraries and read anything that looked like a novel. Moreover, I had a cousin who was doing philosophy at the University and at one point when I was still in high school; I stumbled upon his course book on the philosophy of religion. I read about Sigmund Freud and Nietzsche. Their ideas puzzled me and this is where I gained interest in philosophy.

After completing my high school and was in early years at the University, I got engaged with the University of Nairobi Philosophy club. Here, I met the students who attended the first Humanist Conference organized in East Africa in 2004 by Uganda Humanist Association led by Deo Ssessitoleko. I received the first humanist materials. It is where I got to learn about humanist ideals. Excited with the knowledge I got from the magazines from CFI, IHEU and other humanists organizations, I declared myself a humanist.

**Jacobsen: What was the reaction of friends and family?**

**Ongere:** The first time I told my friends and family members that I was a humanist and an Atheist, they had different reactions. My family did not take this as a surprise; they had suspected I could end up in something close to that because of my childhood scepticism since I was the only member of the family who avoided taking the sacrament and was not even bothered by it. However, some of my extended relatives related this to devil worshiping. Since they are not exposed to different ideologies, they only know that anyone who does not believe in a god or God must be a devil worshipper, just the way Nigerian movies give Africans the picture that people who do not adhere to religion are in affiliation with the devil. They looked at me with curiosity and spread the rumours in the village. However, my generousities in the village, where I sponsor children to school have puzzled them and the perception is changing.

I had different categories of friends by the time I announced my Atheism. I had religious, sceptics and rational friends. I had problem with religious friends and to make it worse, I was also dating a



religious lady at the time. They did not want to associate with me and they advised my girlfriend to abandon me. She did;—but that did not deter me from pursuing my new found life stance.

My sceptic and rational friends praised my steps and they were happy about it. I was the first person to establish a humanist office where Kenyans could get Humanist materials and rational books that were difficult to get in most libraries. CFI sent me important materials that could be easily read and understood by first timers into humanism and skepticism. A good number of Kenyans who have declared themselves as Atheists and humanist in Kenya got the inspiration from my work with the campus groups and CFI Office in Nairobi.

**Jacobsen: You've written a number of articles for The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. What is the importance of major skeptical organizations such as The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and the Center for Inquiry?**

**Ongere:** CSI and CFI have supported all my projects in Kenya. By publishing my articles, they have made my activities visible to many people who have continuously supported my endeavours. When I joined CFI in 2007, my dream was to be published in their reputable sites. I knew that as a young person, still unable to write to the standards of the scholars I read in the sites, I had to go through self study and read widely. I started writing my skeptical and rational ideas freely and sent them to Norm Allen Jr., who was the director transnational programs at the time, intended to be published in the African American Humanism Newsletter, the *AHH Examiner*. When I finally wrote the article *How Can the Concept of Humanism Solve Witchcraft belief*, Norm informed me that Barry Karr, the Executive Director of CSI, was interested in publishing it. When finally the article appeared on the site, it was my breakthrough and it encouraged me to write further. Having my article published in the two sites has made many learning institutions to trust my activities and collaborate with me; the reason I am able to mobile University and college students to attend my activities.

Secondly, most people in Africa have no access to humanist and skeptical hard copy literature. Even in most libraries in Africa, finding journals or scholarly resources that promote humanist or Atheist ideals are rare. CFI and CSI have helped to fill this gap by sending reading materials to most humanists in different parts of Africa. Anytime I need reading materials to send to any group across Africa, I simply request the organization and they respond immediately by sending a package of books and magazines.

Most importantly, ever since I started CFI/ Kenya, the two organizations have supported all the programs financially and that is why we are able to sustain the humanist orphans and the On Campus activities.

**Jacobsen: How did you first come across Center for Inquiry in Kenya?**

**Ongere:** I first came across CFI by interacting with the philosophy group at the University of Nairobi. A good number of the members were sponsored by IHEU to attend the first humanist conference in Uganda in the year 2004. Here they met the then Transnational Co-directors, Norm Allen Jr. and Bill Cooke. They came back with reading materials like *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Free Inquiry*. I read them and became much interested in the ideology.

The visit of Norm Allen Jr. to Kenya in 2006 also made me get first hand information about CFI. By then, Boaz Adhengo was the contact person. Adhengo approached me to mobilize University students to meet Norm and after attending the meeting, Norm read some of my collected articles

and gave me his contacts. I started interacting with him and in 2007; he approached me to be the director CFI Kenya to replace Adhengo. That is how I became the CFI director.

Becoming the director of CFI is one of the best opportunities I have ever had. It made me to know many influential people in Africa like Leo Igwe of Nigeria, Deo Ssesitoleko and Betty Nassaka of Uganda. I travelled to Uganda through sponsorship of CFI and they also paid travel expenses for Leo, Betty and Deo to visit my office in Kenya. Without the organization, I would have not got such connections.

**Jacobsen: What did you see as the major need for science, skepticism, and secular humanism in Kenya at the time? How did this inspire you to form and run CFI-Kenya as a branch of Center for Inquiry in Kenya?**

**Ongere:** Science, rationalism and skepticism is needed in Africa more than any part of the world. Irrationality that is prevalent in the continent has led to major human rights crises. One of the examples in Kenya that featured in the international scene is the burning of old men and women alive, in the rural parts of Kisii in 2009 when they were suspected to be witches. The graphic video of old women and men burnt alive till death still haunts many people. Up to the current moment, old men and women are still targeted in witch hunts. Moreover, Albinos are still at risk in Kenya and Tanzania because most society believes that their body parts can make their business successful when put within the business premises while fishermen believe that their hair attracts huge mass of fish. Science and reason needed to respond to such unreason.

In West Africa, like Nigeria and Congo, children have since time immemorial been accused of witchcraft and become abandoned. Majority of the children are left to roam the street to become street children, some are hacked to death and fed poison. Close scrutinies reveal that parents who are incapable of raising children or look after distant relatives use witchcraft as a scapegoat and run away from responsibility. The most vulnerable children are orphans whose parents have died, those born with HIV/ AIDS, and those with disabilities. Abandoning children to fake bleak future is gagging the future generation and only through reason that they can be saved.

Moreover, religious institutions are not helping in any way. With many obstacles that African people face due to unreason, religious bodies have not tried to help but to immerse people deep into unreason. Currently, Africa still has a big challenge: HIV/ AIDS. Every year, about millions of people get infected. Instead of approaching the issue with logic, churches and other religious wings have advised people to seek religious healings instead of taking the Anti-Retroviral Drugs. The approach has caused many deaths and this leaves you to wonder if an all knowing, all present God celebrates the wiping of mass population of Africans!

The above problem statements made me to search for an organization that could respond. Before I got CFI connections, I was a youth volunteer at an organization called *Kumekucha*. *Kumekucha* is a Swahili word meaning sunrise. The organization promised to liberate youths from the dogmas of the society. However, the organization did not give much to the youths. In this direction, when I was introduced to CFI, I believed it was the organization to respond to the problems Africans faced and it had the capabilities to take action to the irrationality in Africa. That is how I started running CFI Kenya!

**Jacobsen: What has been the plight of children in Kenya? How has a humanist message improved their and their families' livelihoods?**

**Ongere:** Currently, it is estimated that there are about 300, 000 street children in Kenya. Increasing poverty and deaths of parents due to HIV/ AIDS are the major causes for the children to scavenge the street to look for ways of survival. In many cases, fathers who are not able to support their families leave behind mothers in the rural with even more than six children. Staying hungry and unable to go to school, most of the children migrate to the streets to try and find ways of survival.

In my article, *The Plight of Children in Africa and our Humanist Efforts*, I address the issues that children face in Africa. Even though declaring children as witches is not widely practised in Kenya, I am afraid that with the current inflation and rise of prices in essential commodities, Kenyans will look for ways of avoiding supporting orphan children whose parents were wiped by HIV/ AIDS. The only way they can do this is by adopting the Nigeria and Congo style where such children are declared to be witches. Declaring a child to be a witch is the easiest way relatives avoid the burden of protecting vulnerable children who have lost their parents. Killing children because they are a burden is hurting and that is why the humanist message is important. The spread of HIV/ AIDS in Kenya is rising and soon many children will be left without parents and it means many distant relatives will start using witchcraft as scape-goat.

CFI Kenya's program The Humanist Orphans Project is a strong humanist message responding to the plight of children. Demonstrating to the society that orphaned children are harmless members of the society is core and that when given education can become potential members of the society is important. As such, the dedications of CFI Transnational to help the children is one of the social justice stories that should be told across to inspire other African groups to join hands to save the future generation.

**Jacobsen: Reflecting on the 2014 article on the agenda of African humanism, in 2017 now, what is the state of humanism in Africa? What is the agenda, in brief?**

**Ongere:** As I wrote in the article, humanism in Africa has undergone different phases. The first phase, which was explained by reputable scholars in Africa like Es'kia Mphahlele (1919–2008) was a kind of humanism that needed to give Africans hopes by trying to reconstruct their history from that which was given by the western scholarship. From that phase, came Ubuntu, which even though gave good promises but still had hidden agendas of promoting religion.

With the changes in technology, where people across the world have access to information due to internet, African humanism is adopting another face. Whereas the forefathers of African humanism focused on reconstructing the African face in the international world, the current young generation are responding to the irrational beliefs that have held the masses captive. They believe the only way for Africans to be free is to delete the dogmas of religion and embrace, science, critical thinking and rationalism.

In Kenya for example, the Atheist movement have raised many contentious issues. First, they have demanded religious educations to be removed out of the curriculum since it is one of the avenues children are indoctrinated. They have also challenged faith healers who use tricks to steal from the public. It demonstrates that African humanist is catching up with the agendas that global humanists' movements are seeking and this is very important because it give room for many Atheists and people who are not easily accepted in the society, like gays and Lesbians to come out of the closet. With such developments, it demonstrates the Atheist movement is making progress in Kenya.

**Jacobsen: How can humanism support the least among us?**

**Ongere:** Humanism as a life stance compels many African humanist to work for Social justice. When I went to Uganda in 2009 together with Norm Allen Jnr., I witnessed how Uganda Humanists Effort to save Women (UHESWO) was liberating prostitutes and giving them financial empowerment. They took them away from the streets and taught them income generating skills like tailoring and salon work. Most of the women eventually left the streets and became employed in salons and others got sewing machines to become tailors. I also met Deo Ssessitoleko who had a humanist school that was sponsoring vulnerable children. I was inspired by the works of Ugandan humanists and believed humanism in Africa was capable of helping the less fortunate amongst us.

In 2011, I conceived the idea of starting the Humanist Orphans Kenya. I witnessed the plight of children the rural areas during the Anti-Superstitious campaign. Many children lost their parents due to HIV/ AIDS scourge when religious institutions started healing campaigns advising them to abandon taking Anti-Retroviral drugs. With many children left behind, we believed that our humanists' endeavours would try to solve the situation. In this way, we selected 11 children who were vulnerable and gave them essentials of life like education, basic needs and empowerment.

In this way, I believed that if African humanists can embrace social justice, then we will be a good example just the way Ugandan humanists have demonstrated through their projects.

**Jacobsen: What are your lifetime hopes for humanism, skepticism, and secularism in Kenya, and Africa?**

**Ongere:** I am happy that the young generation in Kenya today can easily declare their Atheism without fear. This was something I had hoped for. Kenya is not a very much radical country like many African countries where religious fundamentalism is core. When I started running CFI, I had hoped that a time would come when young people would come out of the closet and declare their unbelief. At the time, the internet was still expensive for the fact that people could not browse through their cell phones but to go to the cyber cafes that charged expensive. However, when cell phones were introduced, we had a revolution in humanism where youths had access to many reading materials. It became easy to engage the youth and direct them to important sites.

My hopes for humanism are that as youths become radicalized to abandon religion, they should focus on the gaps that humanism can fill in Kenya and Africa. I have always wished that humanism should not be another avenue of colonization just like religion. In my much engagement with youths who have abandoned religions, a good number of them do not understand the cause; they only think becoming a humanist is linked with intellectualism and fashionable. To me, being a humanist is to respond to the many unreasons in Africa and trying to help the situation through advocacy and social justice.

**Jacobsen: Any closing thoughts or feelings based on the discussion today?**

**Ongere:** Thanks for having me in the interview today. In sub-Saharan Africa, spreading humanism is still an obstacle. Many Africans still feel vulnerable when religion is deleted away from them. The bible promises them life after death and they believe they are the children of God because of the obstacles they undergo. They believe they will be rewarded in heaven and hegemonic nations that have conditioned them will be punished in hell.

What African humanists need to do is to empower Africans. Critical thinking is one of the areas that need to be explored. Being that African forefathers were superstitious, it is not inherent to be

superstitious in the current global world. There needs to be a change in mind and thinking. Humanism promises this kind of change for Africans to abandon blind faith and focus on the realities life.

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

## An Interview with Ray Zhong—Translator, Amsterdam Declaration

May 16, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**You live in Taipei, Taiwan and attended the Taipei Municipal Daan Vocational High School. What is the personal background in humanism for you?**

I became a humanist because of three things: my father's religiosity, Isaac Asimov's writings, and my English. All of them influenced me, one by one, in that order.

My father is a very pious Buddhist who often preaches about reincarnation and reciting Buddha's name. In his view, those who do not undertake all the Five Precepts (no killing, no stealing, no adultery, no false speech, and no alcohol) will not reincarnate as humans in next life. Instead, they will be reborn as animals, ghosts, and so on. However, there is a way out: reciting Buddha's name. Do it as often as you can and, after death, you will be led to Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss and freed from karma. Following my father, I bowed to Buddha's figure and recited Buddha's name, but I somehow remained unconvinced. This unsubstantiated skepticism followed me into adolescence. Then I met Isaac Asimov, in his works.

Isaac Asimov was an extremely prolific and prescient sci-fi author. He wrote more than 500 books in his lifetime. His most famous work is the Foundation series, which I read in junior high school. Fascinated by his novels, I moved on to reading his nonfiction works, of which there were a great many. In one of his essay collections, I came across a piece titled *The "Threat" of Creationism*. In that piece, he argued against teaching creationism in public schools by dismantling the creationist arguments, such as the watchmaker analogy. That was my moment of enlightenment. Not only was it the moment I became aware of the threat religion possessed to the society, but it was also the moment I understood the clash between religion and science, or rather religion and reason. Asimov ignited my enthusiasm for science and introduced me to atheism. Then, I started to learn English.

I am a graduate from Department of English in National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology. As a tool, English broadened my scope and granted me access to resources I had no been able to reach. I started from watching Matt Dillahunty debating the callers on his show Atheist Experience, and then I switched to watching the Four Horsemen's lectures and debates. I was so impressed by Christopher Hitchens's wit and style that I made Chinese subtitles for some of his videos on YouTube. To gain more views, I posted it on the Facebook pages of a few Taiwan atheist groups (there were very few.) This led to my friendship with Feng Ching-wen, an extremely erudite and resourceful humanist who was the founder and head of Taiwan Humanism Studio. He contacted me and invited me to attend the lectures held by his humanist club at National Sun Yat-sen University. That was when I first learned about humanism. Later that year, Asian Humanist Conference was to be held in Taipei. I had the honor to work as an interpreter at the conference and meet many great humanists, some from other countries. Then, I became a humanist.

**Any family interest in it?**

My father is still a Buddhist and my sister a Christian. There were some quarrels between them when my father learned about my sister's religion. I want no quarrels, so I have never told my father how I feel about his religious views. I remain silent whenever he preaches. He knows I do not believe it, but he never gives up trying to convince me.

**How do some of the principles play out in real life for you?**

I want to talk about a decision I made a few years ago: I may have sent my mother to hell.

It was the summer vacation during my second year in university. My mother had been ill with cancer and suffering for five years. She was bedridden in the palliative care. My father, sister, and I took turns to look after her. One afternoon during my watch, a young lady, no elder than me, entered the ward with a Bible in her hand and wished to save my mother from eternal hell fire. I stopped her and walked her out to the corridor. I thanked her for her kindness and told her that my parents were Buddhists and, maybe out of arrogance, that I was an atheist. She had the audacity to say that Buddha could not save my mother but Jesus could. Provoked by this comment, I retorted, "Then don't save her at all!" She left, fuming.

The compunction haunted me for the rest of the day. I could almost hear the French mathematician Blaise Pascal whispering in my ear, "what if you're wrong?" What if my atheism was not the right position and, because of my reckless defiance, my mother, who had already been in agony for years, was condemned to endless suffering in hell? What had I done? Wasn't it safer for my mother to be a believer? Questions like these filled my mind as fear and doubts took over me. Then, reason kicked in.

The counterargument to Pascal's wager occurred to me: what if the lady was wrong? What if my father was right? How should I determine who was right? Since neither side was supported by evidence, I figured what mattered here was my mother's feelings. There was a portrait of Buddha on the curtain around my mother's bed. My father had put it there to remind my mother of reciting Buddha's name. What would my mother have thought if I had let the lady talk to her? Hitchens captured this very well in a discussion with Sam Harris and two rabbis:

I mean, If Sam [Harris] and I were to go around religious hospitals—which is what happens in reverse—and say to people who were lying in pain: 'Sorry, did you say you were a Catholic? Well, you may only have a few days left, but you don't have to live them as a serf, you know. Just accept that was all bullshit, the priests have been cheating you, and I guarantee you'll feel better...' I don't think that would be very ethical. In fact, I think it would be something of a breach of taste. But if it's in the name of God it has a social license; well, fuck that, is what I say.

In hindsight, I saved my mother from needless concern, so she could have some peace of mind in her last moments. That was all it mattered, and that was good.

**You are a translator for the Amsterdam Declaration. What languages will the declaration have translation into by you—and others if you know?**

I cannot take all the credits for the translation, because it was a group work. Half of it was translated by Ted Yang, a very talented translator in our team. Back to the question, I learned Japanese and German at my university, because we had to take at least one second foreign language. But neither is good enough for doing translation yet. I might do a Japanese translation in the remote future. For now, I have to keep on learning.

**Is this part of a larger translation effort—of more IHEU and IHEYO, and humanist, relevant documents?**

I also help translate some short video clips and quotes about humanism or atheism for Taiwan Humanism Studio. I look forward to working for IHEYO again.

**Thank you for your time, Ray.**

Thank you for having me.



# **A Brief Note on the Vital Need for Humanist Voices**

**June 1, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

Humanism and ethical culture are not generally known. As many have experienced, anything not mainstream religious is sometimes termed in the atheist camps by vocal minorities of the religious, by default: “atheists,” “non-believers,” “infidels,” and so on. The lack of knowledge and the sometime negative emotional evaluation is a symptom of religious hegemony over many cultures, especially the religion of love, Christianity, and the religion of peace, Islam.

The need for the voices of the neglected, the humanist and ethical culture types, is for a couple of reasons. One is the void needing filling. We live in pluralist centres of the world. It is instructive to reflect on this fact and juxtapose with the hegemony by, for examples, Christianity and Islam. The television channels and radio waves continue to reflect the dominant mythologies, as with Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, and the Islamic Caliphate. All means of communication available at the time reflect the myths, especially among the educated classes with the religious texts.

Another reason is the alternative. Another way to derive meaning in life. Meaning from community in an ethical culture context through, for instance, an ethical society. No reference to the transcendent; nothing more than the ordinary community, to mobilize, to organize, to protest, to engage one another in the important transitions or events in life: birth, birthdays, graduation, adulthood, partnership, and death.

Humanist Voices is a way to give a channel for the neglected irreligious population. It is small, will grow, and seems like another way to bring some small (secular) meaning to our community.

# Q&A on International Youth Humanism with Marieke Prien—Session 1

June 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Marieke Prien is the President of the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation (IHEYO), which is part of IHEU. In this educational series, we will be discussing international youth humanism.*

**Scott Jacobsen:** You are the president of the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation (IHEYO). I am an editor and contributor to Humanist Voices, and am on the Americas Working Group for IHEYO. I wanted to learn more from your perspective, and in the exploration—for me—educate others. To begin this educational series on international youth humanism—its purpose, contents, and future, what are the demographics of youth humanism?

**Marieke Prien:** IHEYO's target group are humanists aged 18–35. This doesn't mean that people younger or older than that are not welcome, but it is the age group we are mostly working with and for. This is also connected to legal issues, especially at events where people under age would need a custodian.

But in the national organizations, there are also members younger than 18. For example, in Germany, many teenagers join and start being active after having done a humanist coming-of-age ceremony at age 14.

Unfortunately, I cannot say much more about the demographics, such as gender or educational backgrounds, as we do not get sufficient information from the member organizations.

**Jacobsen:** Who are some allies for youth humanism, e.g. ethical societies and ethical cultures?

**Prien:** In a broader sense, an ally could be anyone introducing humanism to young people. Family members, teachers or maybe even friends.

But more specifically, there are several organizations that are allies. Sometimes, it is merely the name that is different, sometimes they focus on different topics and measures but have a humanist world view. Some examples would be the Ethical Societies in the USA, the Prometheus Camp Associations in Finland and Sweden, Freethought associations, or Effective Altruism groups.

**Jacobsen:** As the president of IHEYO, you have unique insights, and responsibility, on international youth humanism, what is involved in organizing the global community? What is necessary to build and maintain one?

**Prien:** There are two dimensions to this: age and internationality.

Regarding age, it is important to take into account is that the lives of young people can be very unsteady. There is always motion because of changes in school, work, and the social circle. Many people have not settled yet and are unsure about their future. Their daily life can go through quieter periods in alternation with very stressful ones.

Because of this motion, people think twice before committing. For example, the members of our Executive Committee are elected for two years. This means that, to be part of it, you should at least somewhat know how you are going to spend the next two years, if you will still have time and enthusiasm to work with us. This can be scary and discouraging. So I think it is important to show that it is perfectly fine and normal, nobody expects a young person to have their schedule and daily life fixed like somebody who has worked in the same job for 25 years. There will be ups and downs, but that should not discourage anyone.

The other dimension, internationality, also has its challenges but brings this great diversity which I don't want to miss. I am not only talking about diversity of the people, I am especially talking about the variety of topics and issues we are dealing with as humanists. We have a common base—humanism—on which we build our projects. What these projects are aiming at depends on local circumstances.

To be able to account for this, IHEYO has Working Groups: for Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas. Of course a group cannot cover all local topics of an entire continent. But they connect the member organizations and plan actions together, targeting what they feel is most important in their region.

During regular meetings of IHEYO's group chairs, communication officer, secretary-general and president, we keep each other updated, make plans and take decisions.

This structure allows us to aim at more local issues as well as worldwide ones. I believe it shows the people that their local affairs are taken seriously while at the same time connecting them to a global community.

Common events are of course the best way to maintain a community, the atmosphere is amazing at it brings such a boost in motivation and enthusiasm. But sadly, due to financial and other restrictions, not everybody who is active in IHEYO is able to join, at least not internationally. So the community also relies a lot on social media and other means of communication. We are lucky to live in a time where this is made easy.

**Jacobsen: Some general provisions of IHEYO are associations, connections, a new publication (Humanist Voices). Can you describe some of these features of IHEYO in some depth?**

**Prien:** As I mentioned above, there are events organized by us (in cooperation with the local member organizations) which contribute a lot to the community. They usually feature several talks and workshops providing information and know-how to the participants. The program points are held by either our members or external speakers, for example somebody from an Effective Altruism group. So there is a lot people can learn, which makes half of the outcome of the events. The other half is the deep sense of community, the heated discussions, and the ideas and plans people develop together.

I would like to mention that participation is not limited to our members, anybody can join and is very welcome to do so!

Humanist Voices is a blog that we started rather recently. It is a collection of thoughts expressed by different people, a platform for humanists who would like to publish articles, not a publication with a uniform opinion of IHEYO as an organization. We want to show that being a humanist doesn't mean having a precast opinion that is entirely shared with other humanists. We want to encourage people to be sceptic, discuss, and form their own opinions.

Again—if anybody is interested, you are welcome to join!

## An Interview with Nabina Maharjan— Secretary/Youth Advisor, Society for Humanism Nepal

June 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Any family background in humanism?**

**Nabina Maharjan:** Most of my family members are Hindu and Buddhist. But at one point, they went beyond religion. I could say they made decisions towards something like humanism. There are lots of non-believer beliefs that family members in my generation ignore.

**Jacobsen: What was the moment of humanist awakening for you?**

**Maharjan:** Nepal is also known as religious country. My family also religious and in our community, religious activities teaches from childhood. Whether its worship a concept of God or goddess or believing in it. I was also religious during my childhood days. After my higher education, I started working. During my working time I met many people, I try to being socialize. When I was thinking about life and during social activities, I use my logic. Most of time, I feel awkward and uncomfortable being doing religious work or such unbelief matters. I feel that I am attracting people to show what I am doing, which I do not like. I always try to find an answer behind 'No'. Which made my family and other irritate, I believe in every No there is an answer.

Later I am involved in Society for Humanism (SOCH) Nepal. I read about humanism, its principles and philosophy. It is very new and hot cake for me at that time. Slowly I realise internally all those feeling that I have is called humanism and somewhere I have humanism. Specially headed in mind the word *Human* and we all human are *equal*. Where I don't have to be a Human Right activist, any humanitarian and any social workers because it's all in Humanism. If I said about inspired in Humanism, its scientific and critical thinking, its value and philosophies.

**Jacobsen: As the secretary/youth advisor for the Society for Humanism Nepal, what tasks and responsibilities come with this position? How do you build a support base?**

**Maharjan:** Since the establishment of SOCH Nepal, I was there and coordinating activities of SOCH. Being involved in SOCH and boosting the SOCH mission, vision and goals, I never realise my designation to work. I feel like it's my organization, that showed me the way of living and clear my vision. If I really need to talk about being the secretary, my tasks and responsibilities are calling meeting, taking minutes, and updating all of the activities happening in SOCH.

Since the establish time in SOCH, I have lots of familiarity with the activities, and I believe in change and opportunities. As a youth advisor, I guide the youth team in how to work in teams and conduct programs so they can directly become involved in activities and then groom their capacity to performance for the next leader. I, personally, do not interfere in their coordination, but needing supervision then I will be there.

**Jacobsen: What is the current state of humanism with Nepal? What is its brief history there too?**

**Maharjan:** The term Humanism is relatively new in Nepal—though many atheists and secular minded people campaigned for secular Nepal. Nepal remained the world's only one Hindu country for decades. The 2007 constitution of Nepal declared Nepal a secular country. Although,

the Nepali constitution clearly mentions provision of preserving old time religion, which is Hinduism. Nepal is the country where Buddha was born. Buddha probably was the first person to speak against superstition and religious dogmas in the East. His idea of secularism has flourished throughout the world. A famous education reformist Mr. Jaya Prithivi Singh promoted the idea of Humanism in Nepal during the 1919s. He has written dozens of books on Humanism and travelled to various countries to spread the idea. There was no organized Humanist movement till the late 1920s. An organization called Humanist Association of Nepal was formed during 1980s. However, it could not survive due to various reasons. Later, the Society for Humanism (SOCH) Nepal was formed in 2005, which became only one leading Humanist organization in Nepal. Thousands of members are associated to SOCH Nepal, which is also the member of IHEU.

**Jacobsen: Are youth or elders in the society more involved in humanism? What are the activities, educational initiative, and social and political projects related to humanism available to youth in Nepal?**

**Maharjan:** We do not have any exact record of youths' or elders' involvement in humanism, but during the program and discussion when we meet peoples they have the feeling of humanism. Elders have the concept of humanism, and followers too, and belief in the concept of humanism.

If we talk about in more recent times, more youths that I have seen are humanists because they are not ready to have belief in the concept of God, and those unseen things. They use their logic to question and the belief in science as much as we had interacted in colleges and groups. Yes, they have confusion on humanism, but somewhere they are humanists as I realise—and SOCH has made clear to them.

There are no educational initiatives, and social and political projects, related to humanism available to youth in Nepal done by the Government.

Regarding the activities, SOCH is one organization that is working in Nepal to promote humanism, its philosophy and values in society. We are regularly doing our youth discussion/seminars and youth talks on humanism, scientific & critical thinking in different colleges and schools. We are practicing in school to teach scientific and critical thinking, and run one class on humanism too. SOCH targeted to youth because they are change maker and tomorrow's leaders.

**Jacobsen: What are some of the main threats to the free practice of humanism in Nepal?**

**Maharjan:** Although, Nepal is a secular country now, right wing Hindu group are well-organized and practicing extreme radicalism. On other hand, Christians are proselytizing Nepali society getting benefit of secular constitution. Hindu and Christian groups are confronting day by day. Meantime, Humanists have become the enemy of both radicles due to its secular values based on science and atheism.

Radical Hindu are the biggest threat in Nepali society because they are more organized after the declaration of secular state. Humanist activists are threatened and attacked by radical Hindu group many times in Nepal.

**Jacobsen: What are your short- and long-term goals for humanism in Nepal?**

**Maharjan:** SOCH Nepal short and long-term goals are to promote a scientific way of life, good governance, democracy and justice with humanist values, to promote humanistic and ethical practices and to raise awareness about individual human obligation.

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

## Q&A on International Youth Humanism with Marieke Prien—Session 2

June 22, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** When you step down from the role, what will be the main lessons to pass on to the next president in terms of expectations and managing an international presence, which is no small feat?

**Marieke Prien:** You need a good team and good plans.

Without a working team, you cannot really do anything.

Of course there will be ups and downs, people who do more or better work and others who do less.

But those should be single cases. In my opinion, people who have not done well deserve another chance and should be provided support if they need it. This support could be help with certain tasks or something boosting their motivation. But if it becomes clear that they are causing more work than they get done, it's better to ask them to leave the team.

If overall everybody does a great job, is motivated and willing to spend time and energy, and you can trust them, that is the basis you need.

A hierarchy is necessary for productivity and decision making, but in my opinion, this should not be reflected in how people treat each other. For example, everybody must have the opportunity to say their opinion and voice concerns or make suggestions, and we should meet each other as equals.

Regarding the plans, you must have an understanding of where you are and where you want to go.

You must know what is currently going on: What is done or needs to be done in the background to keep things working, to have a stable fundament? And which projects are we doing based on this fundament?

The same goes for future plans. What do we want to do and what is necessary to do this?

Also, the plans have to be consistent with what is realistic. In IHEYO, everybody is a volunteer. Nobody is paid for the work, everybody does this on top of their job or studies. This gives us certain limits. The limits won't stop us, but they affect us.

**Jacobsen:** What are some of the main ways youth humanists tend to become involved in activism, e.g. in combating religious overreach in culture or law, in coming together for LGBTQ+ rights, and in fighting for the fragile rights of the secular and irreligious?

**Prien:** These topics are so important for the youth because they affect their everyday life. When you start having more freedoms, you immediately see where this freedom is cut and who is behind that. Becoming adults, the young people get a better understanding and more awareness of what is going wrong.

To be involved in activism, you need connections to other activists (or those who want to become active). Sure, you could do something on your own, but most people gather in groups.



In the beginning, something needs to challenge the person and make them aware of the problem they then decide to fight against. For example, a young person may be made uncomfortable for their sexuality, or they realize a friend is forced to follow strict religious rules. Then, they try to gather more information and talk to others about the issue. This can be face to face or online. When I was in the USA for a semester abroad, I loved how many clubs the university had that got people involved. This is such a great way to help people become active, and it has a good scope.

The internet is also a huge help. It makes it super easy to find like-minded persons and interact with them, and to potentially plan activities.

We probably all know people who like to post articles and rant online about issues but without going out and becoming actually active. And oftentimes this is frowned upon. While I also believe that working in an organization or the like is way more effective and cannot be replaced, the online activities also do help the cause in that they can trigger fruitful discussions and get people interested in topics.

**Jacobsen: On the note of activism, we both know of the attacks on women's rights ongoing since, probably, their inception, but the recent attack appears to be focused on reproductive health rights. What are concerns for you regarding women's rights, and especially reproductive health rights from a youth humanist angle?**

**Prien:** One main part of humanism is that it wants people to live freely and make their own decisions, forming their lives and going their ways. Cutting reproductive health rights means cutting this freedom. It takes away women's authority over their bodies and their life plans. The second point also affects men, though overall the effect is much stronger on women.

So this is one point where cutting reproductive health rights disagrees with humanism.

Another huge problem I see is that many people are unable or unwilling to make a distinction between their personal opinions and emotions (often influenced by their religion), and what may be "right" for others. For example, if you would personally feel bad about getting an abortion, you should still see the other side and accept that other people think an abortion is the right decision, and let them make their choice.

We must make a difference between opinion and fact, and many lobby groups mix these things up, actively misinforming or making false assumptions and relations. For example, some anti-abortion groups try to make people feel bad by saying that contraceptives and masturbation are immoral and against their religion.

Or they say that in the period where abortion is legal in some states, the fetus already has a heartbeat. That is true, but it does not mean that it can feel pain (or anything at all, for that matter), because its brain has not developed for that yet. But the fact of the fetus having a heartbeat is used to evoke emotions in people and to lead them to draw the conclusion that something with a heartbeat surely also feels pain.

As a humanist, I want people to make a choice based on facts and universal ethics, not based on opinions, superstitious beliefs and false statements. And I want people to understand that their personal opinion is just an opinion that does not necessarily count for others.

Cutting the reproductive health rights also causes a lot of other problems. It can lead to huge physical, psychological and social problems. For example, if a woman needs an abortion but cannot legally get one where she lives, she may decide to go through a very unsafe illegal

procedure, or spend a lot of money (that she doesn't necessarily have) to go to a place where abortion is legal.

That being said, of course an abortion could also cause emotional and mental damage. I am not trying to say that one should just get it carelessly. I am just trying to show that while it would be the wrong decision for some, it is the right one for others.

What really bugs me is the hypocrisy many anti-abortion groups or individuals show. They claim that they are pro-life, caring for everyone's right to live. But they don't care about the mothers' lives, they don't care about the circumstances for babies up for adoption, some even mistreat and judge single mothers working really hard to feed their children. That's not charity.

Regarding women's rights in general, things have changed for the better, but the fight is not over. Sadly, many people only point to the successes, ignoring that there are still problems. This also goes for other issues like racism. If you are in the privileged group, it is easy to overlook discrimination. But just because you don't see it, it doesn't mean that discrimination does not exist.

I also believe that many people choose to disregard concerns or complaints expressed to them because, if they believed them, they would have to admit they do or have done something wrong.

I wish that people would make more of an effort and listen, open their eyes, have empathy and change their behavior if necessary.

## **An Interview with Amjad Sattar**

**June 22, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**Scott Jacobsen: Was there a family background in humanism?**

**Amjad Sattar:** Yes, our great grandparents were secular and pragmatic in nature. They co-existed with multiple faith believers until their children had to leave their ancestral land due to division of Greater Punjab & Bengal on religious grounds by the colonial masters.

**Jacobsen: When did humanism become the philosophical and ethical worldview for you?**

**Sattar:** I had been participating in free thinkers' forums since 2002. My friends, who had more schooling than me, were active in study circles against religious dogmatism in Pakistan. Thousands of innocent citizens have been murdered since 1977, due to state sponsored extremist clergy. Seeing the predicament of innocent dissenting voices in this country, the importance of humanism was a natural development for me.

**Jacobsen: What seems like the main reason people become humanists? What is the best argument for it?**

**Sattar:** There are reasonable solutions for existing human problems by using scientific and rational approach. Blind faith on scriptures has spread chaos and bloodshed through the history.

**Jacobsen: What is your current work? How does your humanist value set influence this work?**

**Sattar:** Besides my business, I am promoting Humanism, wherever I can for peace and solidarity with fellow human beings.

**Jacobsen: What are the main threats to humanism today?**

**Sattar:** Extremely religious and dogmatic stance of terrorists and some nation states, for political gains under any sort of funding or sponsorship is a major threat to Humanism. We got to resist religious narrow mindedness all over the world.

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

# An Interview with Dr. Leo Igwe—Founder, Nigerian Humanist Movement

June 23, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Was there a family background in humanism, secularism, and rationalism?

**Leo Igwe:** There was no family connection to my embracing humanism. I found humanism, secularism, and rationalism during my education. My grandparents were traditional religionists. My parents were born traditional religionists, but like most persons of their generation, switched religion while growing up.

They became Catholics not really by choice, but due to existential needs and necessities. My father told me that he embraced Christianity because that was the only way he could get formal education.

My father was trained as a teacher and he taught in primary schools until he retired in the late 80s. My mother dropped out when she was in Standard Two. My mother was—and still is—devoutly religious, but my father never took religion seriously.

Today, I describe my father as an agnostic. I served as an altar boy when I was in primary school and later went to the Catholic seminary where I was trained to be a priest. I left the training in 1994, and started the humanist movement in 1996.

It was while in the seminary that I came into contact with the idea of humanism. I found the humanist outlook to be more realistic than religion. Humanism related to me directly, to human beings that I saw and interacted with.

That was unlike religion that focused mainly on gods and spirits, which I could not see or really interact with. I also noticed that religion encouraged people to be dishonest, to claim to be seeing what they are not seeing or to be in communication with somebody when they are in communication with nobody.

Religion encouraged fakery. So, some of these issues led to me embracing humanism.

**Jacobsen:** What is the state of these world views and movements in Nigeria?

**Igwe:** Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the socialist movement was very popular in Nigeria but the movement has been less visible and in fact has almost disappeared since the soviet bloc disintegrated.

I also heard about the pan-Africanist movement, which was effective during the anti-colonialism and anti-apartheid struggles. I do not hear so much about it these days. Apart from these

‘worldviews and movements’, the movement prominent in the region is religion, especially the Christian and Islamic movements.

Religious worldviews overshadow other worldviews. Religious movements override other movements. The most prominent movement in the region is religion. We are only beginning to see the emergence of non-religious movements, such as the humanist/atheist movements rear their heads.

However, these worldviews are far from commanding the influence and followership like the faith movement. I hope with the advent of the internet and the spread of information. We will witness a phenomenal growth of humanist, secularist, and rationalist movement in the region.

**Jacobsen: Of those prominent irreligious individuals in Nigeria, who has the most impact in changing the policies, the legislation, the culture, and the scientific literacy of the country? Also, outside of individual effort, what about associations, collectives, and organizations?**

**Igwe:** It used to be Tai Solarin but Solarin passed away in the 90s. Now, the most eloquent irreligious individual voice in Nigeria is our first Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka. Soyinka is an eminent literary scholar.

He has consistently argued for tolerance and respect for the humanity of all in the face of religious intolerance and extremism. Soyinka has not minced words in condemning the unconscionable religious gladiators in the region that have often turned the country into a theatre of absurdity and holy wars.

He has been consistent in his condemnation of the jihadists and crusaders who often orchestrate religious bloodletting in their quest to implement Sharia law or to further some self-styled divine mandate.

While I cannot say for sure how impactful his rational appeals are on policies and programs, Soyinka’s statements are sources of hope and light at times of darkness and despair. I can say for certain that on occasions when religious extremists push the nation to the brink.

When religion blinds and people are unable to see or think clearly, when fear and fanaticism loom very large, Soyinka is a voice of rational sanity, thoughtful courage, and moderation.

Apart from the individual voices such as Soyinka, there are no active irreligious associations making impact except the emerging irreligious bodies such as the Nigerian Humanist Movement and its affiliates.

**Jacobsen: What research points to the increasing secularization and scientific literacy of the general populace?**

**Igwe:** Gallup polls point to increasing religion and scientific illiteracy. In fact, not too long ago, Nigeria was polled to be the most religious nation on earth. However, one can point to the emergence of active humanist and free thought groups in the country as an indicator of the rise of secularism.

For instance, the Humanist Assembly of Lagos is hosting a conference in Lagos this July. Many irreligious individuals will be in attendance. Irreligious attendees are expected from various parts of the country including Kano and Plateau states in Northern Nigeria.

Recently, such meetings have taken place in Ibadan, Abuja, Calabar, Port Harcourt, Benin and Owerri; although, these are not captured in any poll or research they surely point to a growing secular space in the country!

**Jacobsen: What are some of the worst reactions to the non-believing community, from children through to the elderly, in Nigeria?**

**Igwe:** First, it is mainly a family issue. The state gets involved in more extreme cases. But this is rare.

The reactions take covert as well as overt forms. The reactions depend on how liberal or conservative a family is. Worst reactions are expectedly from conservative families. Just to let you have a feeling of what the reactions could be.

A popular Nigerian Muslim woman who was reputed to be a liberal person told me that she would have nothing to do with any of the children who renounced Islam. Under Sharia law, apostasy is a crime punishable by death.

So, reactions to non-belief include ostracization, severance of family support, abandonment, and other forms of maltreatment. In a society where the family is virtually everything in terms of social support and sustenance, family sanction is indeed the worse form of punishment for non-belief.

**Jacobsen: Of those children that are abused, what are the statistics on them? How many? What kinds of abuse? What has been one of the most bizarre and tragic cases you've read or witnessed of Nigerian children being abused based on superstition?**

**Igwe:** About 15,000 children are branded witches and subsequently abandoned in Southern Nigeria and in the Democratic Republic of Congo, many of the 25,000 homeless children living on the streets of Kinshasha are victims of witchcraft accusation.

I was involved in rescuing children who were accused of witchcraft and I heard very horrific tales. There were cases of children whose family members shackled and starved for several days. Some of children were flogged with sticks and iron and had bruises all over their body.

Others had gasoline poured on them and were set ablaze in the quest to expel the spirit of witchcraft.

**Jacobsen: How can religion be liberalized? In America, they had Carl Sagan and have Neil Degrasse Tyson. Is there an equivalent in Nigeria?**

**Igwe:** We don't have yet the likes of Carl Sagan and Neil Degrasse Tyson. It is not because there aren't some scientists who can disseminate scientific ideas and principles.

The science is there. The scientists are there. But the popularizing scientific will is not. This is because scientists are afraid of backlash from religious establishments. Scientists do not want to disseminate scientific ideas in a way that they could be accused of blasphemy.

Religious authorities are still very influential in Nigeria and will go to any length to suppress and neutralize any one promoting science in a way that puts religious claims into question. Science is still within the cocoon and control of religious authorities.

Religion in Nigeria has yet to attain that liberalized state.

**Jacobsen: What scientific discipline would have provided the greatest inoculation against the superstitions that most plague Nigeria, e.g. astronomy, biology, chemistry, or physics, and so on? Why?**

**Igwe:** In tackling the disease of superstition, all inoculations are needed because pseudoscience and anti-science manifest in various forms and shapes. Astronomy would be helpful in addressing superstitious beliefs regarding the universe.

Nigerians strongly believe that God, the angels, ancestors and spirits are out there, somewhere in the sky. So, the notion of exploring the planets does not intrigue or command an appeal. Going to the moon or traveling to Mars seems like venturing into the territory of the gods, or embarking on a venture that could elicit the wrath of the divine.

A discipline that sees the ‘heavenly bodies’ as an object of study not of worship will be resourceful in dispelling credulous beliefs. Biology and chemistry will provide the antidote to irrational notions of life and physics will inoculate the people against supernatural beliefs. In Nigeria, belief that human beings can turn into birds, cats, and snakes is pervasive.

This belief is not innocuous because those whom people suspect to traversing these terrains are attacked and killed. A discipline that encourages Nigerians to seek evidence or to base their knowledge or claims on evidence is an asset in the anti superstition campaign.

**Jacobsen: Is Creationism an issue there too, as with where I live, Canada? It is a problem here too. Moderate double-digit levels of superstition and Creationism exist—Young Earth Creationism even.**

**Igwe:** Creationism is not just an issue; Creationism is the issue and exists in its both young and older Earth formations. That means in Nigeria people subscribe to the notion that the Earth was created whether it is a few thousand years ago or tens or hundreds of thousands of years ago.

The belief is that Earth came into being through a divine decree. People often show disdain for science because it challenges their creationist ideas.

**Jacobsen: What has been a big victory for the humanist community in Nigeria?**

**Igwe:** Well, the victory is significant but not necessarily big because religions still have so much influence. Religious establishment still dominates public debate and policymaking. The humanist community is only trying to provide a counter weight and indeed there is a growing momentum of humanism and freethought.

I can only explain the growing visibility of humanism by stating as American philosopher and humanist, Corliss Lamont, once wrote that humanism is the next step. Yes, humanism is the next necessary step for Nigeria. Religion has held Nigeria hostage for too long.

Superstition has caused so much confusion, darkness, and deception. Dogma has been used to tyrannize over the lives of the people. So, this is the time for change and of some transformation based on reason, science, critical thinking, and humanity. People are yearning for freedom and emancipation. Humanism is critical in delivering that change and in the realization of social renewal.

**Jacobsen: What are the differences in beliefs on important secular topics between the young, the middle aged, and elderly in Nigeria? Why these trends?**

**Igwe:** The young tend to be more curious and critical as they seek to understand life and make sense of their experiences. But as they grow older they start questioning less and try to conform.

The young people tend to hold liberal positions on issues such as abortion or gay sex because they are not in positions of authority and not necessarily interested in the maintenance of law and order.

The youths are not interested in things or in issues as established, but in issues as they think. So, they can afford to challenge existing norms. However, as they grow older and get into positions of authority, the maintenance of law and order becomes paramount—and they become more conservative.

**Jacobsen: How respected is freedom of conscience, belief, and speech in Nigeria, especially, in line with the prior questions, regarding critical questions about religion and its role in society—and the status of women?**

**Igwe:** When it comes to critical questions of religion, freedom of conscience, belief and speech is a paper tiger in Nigeria. There is no freedom in religious matters. In fact, religion is presented as inadmissible of criticism, of opposing views and opinions whether it is the status of women, of children, gay, or of non-believers.

Religious positions are cast on stones. Views that are critical of religion easily get framed as blasphemy, which is a crime under Sharia law and is punishable by death or imprisonment.

Freedom of conscience, belief and expression is not respected because the exercise of such freedom ‘provokes’, ‘offends’ or insults the sensibilities of the religious and these are epithets to canonize and legitimize state sanction or mob action.

**Jacobsen: What do you think about theological and social arguments for the respect for faith, for religion, and for traditions from faiths and religions?**

**Igwe:** Theological arguments are supposed to provide ‘explanations’ for the existence of God. That means these arguments ought to persuade and make anyone who does not know about God to at least understand that God exists.

But unfortunately, this is not the case. Anyone who takes a critical look at the theological arguments would really wonder what those who advanced these explanations had in mind. For instance, the ontological argument explains God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.”

The cosmological argument states that God is the First Cause (of things). Whilst the teleological says that God exists as the designer of the universe. Now how have these arguments really provided justifications for the existence of the God of Christianity and Islam, or in fact any God at all? Given that the religions do not really agree on the notion and expression of the divine, which God have these arguments proved? The Biblical that appeared from nowhere, hovered over the void, created everything, and apparently retreated?

Or the Allah god who dictated the Quran to an illiterate in a cave, sent Muhammad, and then escaped back to paradise? Is that the being than which nothing greater can be thought? Surely, I can conceive a being greater than these Christian and Islamic constructs!



This flimsy reasoning applies to the social argument of faith which says that religion has a social value and provides a moral fiber that holds the community together. First, this idea is mistaken. Human beings are social beings with or without religion.

In fact, human beings lived in communities before the invention of religion. Religion only reinforced what has been part of human nature that is community life. In fact, the greatest tragedy is that religion hijacked the human sense of community.

This tragic role is evident in the challenges and difficulties of building communities in a religiously plural nation such as Nigeria. The role of religion in terms of community building is ambivalent.

While religion fosters a sense of family or community on one hand, it causes division and strain on the other because in a multireligious environment there are competing senses of family and community. Catholic community is different from the Protestant community.

Shia social sense is not the same as Sunni version. Faith or religion should not be respected to the extent that they peddle lies and deception, and fuel division, and hatred and intolerance.

**Jacobsen: Who is the worst charlatan offender in Nigeria that abuses the positives of religion—societal community building and ordinary citizen activism?**

**Igwe:** A key test of a community is how it treats the vulnerable members of the population. For me, the worst charlatan offenders are the witch hunters and the demon hunters because they ply their trade in ways that hurt and exploit human beings especially women, children, and the disabled.

Given my encounter with her and the church members, I would say that Helen Ukpabio of the Liberty Gospel Church is the worst charlatan and offender in Nigeria because of her vicious campaign against the rights and dignity of children using religion and witchcraft as a cover.

**Jacobsen: What happens to those who speak out against religion, or who ask the simplest of critical questions?**

**Igwe:** It depends on where in Nigeria one speaks out against religion and which religion is involved. In Muslim majority states in northern Nigeria, speaking out against Islam is blasphemy and it is punishable by death or imprisonment.

Criticizing Islam is dangerous not just because the state could prosecute, execute or jail the critic, but one could be killed by Islamic mobs.

In fact the chances are that one is more likely to die in the hands of the latter than the former.

Unfortunately, killers of real or imagined critics of Islam are never brought to justice. In a high-profile case that recently happened in Kano, the court declared that suspected killers had no case to answer.

**Jacobsen: Is prayer a standard and assumed ritual in meetings of political types, as in much of North America as well?**

**Igwe:** Yes, prayer is a standard ritual in meetings and events. However, it is not all religious prayers that are said at all meetings and in all places. In Muslim majority sections, Islamic prayer is the standard.

Christian prayer is the norm in the Christian dominated areas of the country and both Christian and Islamic prayers at national gatherings especially in Abuja. These prayers take place despite the constitutional provision that prohibits the adoption of any religion as state religion.

Saying Christian and Islamic prayers at official meetings attests to the non-neutrality of the state in religious matters and official discrimination on religious grounds.

**Jacobsen: How can formal education from the youngest ages to graduate training inculcate critical thinking, statistical principles of thought, scientific literacy, and heuristics of logic and formal reasoning?**

**Igwe:** It is by making the inculcation of critical thinking more than a classroom, examination-passing affair. For now, science, logic, and critical thinking are taught as classroom subjects, as courses which students take with the aim of getting certificates and securing jobs.

Young people are not made to understand sufficiently that these are tools that they need to navigate through life. Heuristics of logic and formal reasoning should be taught as skills that are needed to everyday life.

**Jacobsen: Who, in a neighbouring country, gives you hope for the humanistic future?**

**Igwe:** The Humanist Association of Ghana gives me hope; yes, it does. I founded the Nigerian Humanist Movement and worked and campaigned to grow and develop it. For decades, I worked to grow and develop humanist groups in different African countries.

Many of the initiatives have fizzled out or have remained at individual activist or contact levels. So, it gladdens my heart that at last an effective humanist group has taken off in Ghana and is actively involved in coordinating the Humanist Service Corps project in northern Ghana.

A few years ago, such a humanist group sounded like a pipe dream but today it is a reality. I thank Roslyn Mould and her team for diligently delivering on this key humanist promise. I only hope that the humanist association in Ghana grows from strength to strength.

**Jacobsen: Do many or some consider you a personal hero? If so, how does this feel, as an exemplar of the community of the irreligious with international reach?**

**Igwe:** I do not think that some people consider me as a hero. I don't really feel comfortable being placed in that box because I am not done yet. I want to keep doing my work in ways that would allow me to make mistakes and live my own life without being pressured to conform to anyone's pattern or expectation.

However, I am aware that there are some who have said that they were inspired by what I did or have done. My feeling is this: How I wish I accomplished more and performed better than I did. I have always worked under constraints, with limited resources.

I have not always achieved as much as I would have loved to achieve I still feel that I did not do enough and has not done enough. We still do not have effective humanist, freethought, and skeptics groups in most African countries. That does not make me happy.

It is only when we have active humanist organisations in all African countries that I would feel fulfilled. And as you can imagine we are certainly a long way from reaching that goal.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for the time, Leo.**

# Conversation on Humanism, Irreligiosity, and Education in Nigeria with Dr. Leo Igwe—Session 1

June 23, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Leo Igwe is the founder of the Nigerian Humanist Movement and former Western and Southern African representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. He holds a Ph.D. from the Bayreuth International School of African Studies at the University of Bayreuth in Germany, having earned a graduate degree in Philosophy from the University of Calabar in Nigeria. In this educational series, we explore Nigeria through Dr. Igwe's expertise.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** We were discussing the possibility of a series. In particular, I pitched an idea of a conversational, educational series to educate on the situation in Nigeria, with your broad-based and competent expertise in the science and superstition within the culture. You know a lot. What is the main problem regarding the educational system in Nigeria?

**Leo Igwe:** The main problem is lack of effective education. By this I mean, that what is called or impacted, as education, with the aim to lead the people out of ignorance, is not educative enough. This is connected with history; that is, the history of how the formal school system started.

Christian missionaries, whose aim was to spread Christianity, introduced the educational system as we know it today. Their Muslim counterparts have since joined in this education-for-conversion program. Thus, when it comes to schooling, religious ideology or tradition trumps education.

Of course, there are other problems with the school system such as distance and poverty, lack of learning aids, child marriage, and corruption and mismanagement. The fact is that in situations where the problems are not so pronounced, ideologies associated with religion often undermine the quality of what is taught in classrooms.

The ideological battle is pitched between the 'Eastern' Islamic and the 'Western' Christian interests. It is important to mention here that the name of the Islamic terrorist group that operates in Northern Nigeria is called Boko Haram, which roughly translates 'Western education is forbidden.'

So, education, when it is available and affordable, goes through a religious ideological filter, which distorts and corrupts the content of what is learnt and makes education less educational, an extension of religious indoctrination.

**Jacobsen:** What have been proposed as solutions to it?

**Igwe:** There have been efforts to address the ideological issue and dispel the religious ghost that haunts the educational system in Nigeria. In the 70s, the state tried to secularize the education system. Government took over schools from the missionaries after the civil war and tried to disentangle education from religion.

This decision did not go down well with the Christian establishment that controlled most of the schools. The state takeover of school eventually succumbed to religious pressures and politics in the regions. State schools in Muslim majority areas first became quasi-Islamic schools.

The same applied to state schools in Christian dominated sections of the country. Following the adoption of Sharia law in northern Nigeria, state schools became full blown Islamic schools and after many years of campaigning to have back their schools, some governments in Christian dominated sections of the country handed these schools back to the churches.

So, it was back to square one!

**Jacobsen: How can those within the country with secular values help—and those from outside too?**

**Igwe:** They need to support the secular education project in Africa such as the secular schools in Nigeria and Uganda. More secular schools are needed in the region to counteract religious indoctrination.

We should not think that the gains of promoting secular values go to the country, in this case Nigeria alone. The benefits are global because the threat of religious extremism is. Promoting secular values should be seen as a global campaign and responsibility.

**Jacobsen: What is the extent of humanism with the country? How about the continent? Has there ever been discussion of a continent-wide organization to bring together all humanist and associated associations, collectives, and organizations into one umbrella—outside of internationalist organizations such as IHEU or IHEYO, more in conjunction and cooperation with them?**

**Igwe:** There has been a growing visibility of humanism in the region especially since the 90s. Individual activists and groups have been emerging and focusing on different projects. Many of these initiatives have stagnated or fizzled out after some time. Some have blossomed.

So, there is need for sustainability. We need to sustain the humanist momentum in Africa. It is only through a sustainable organized humanism that we can achieve a continent-wide organization that brings together all humanist and associated associations, collectives, and organizations into one umbrella.

To this end, African humanists need to come up with a way of organizing humanism that reflects the socioeconomic realities in the region. Sometimes, we make the mistake of thinking that we can organize humanism in Africa exactly the way it is organized in Western countries forgetting the structural realities are not the same.

African humanists need to put in place an organizational model that works for them; models that are effective and sustainable with or without external funding. This organizational model must work at the national level before we can aspire towards anything continental.

Africa needs working local organizations to build a regional umbrella. In 2004, there was an initiative to start a regional body. African Humanist Alliance was inaugurated at the IHEU conference in Kampala. But the body could not function because there were no effective national organizations to shoulder regional responsibilities.

A sustainable model of organizing humanism in the region was missing. Organizational culture capacity and experience was lacking. So, we need to put in place effective national humanist

groups first. It is only on these functional national humanist initiatives that a functional regional body could rest and flourish.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Leo, been a pleasure.**

# An Interview with Houzan Mahmoud—Co-Founder, Culture Project

June 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Houzan Mahmoud is the Co-Founder of Culture Project. She is a women's rights activist, campaigner, and defender, and a feminist. In this wide-ranging and exclusive interview, Mahmoud discusses the Kurds, Iraq, women's rights, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** You are a women's rights activist, feminist, and an anti-war activist. You were born in Iraqi Kurdistan. What were the moments of political awakening for you?

**Houzan Mahmoud:** One of the things I'll never forget is the break-out of war between Iraq and Iran. I was only six-years-old at the time. Iraq's bloody dictator Saddam Hussein coming to political power in 1979 changed our lives in Kurdistan and Iraq forever. Being Kurdish poses all sorts of problems as it is, and living under the fascist regime of Saddam made things incredibly hard for my family. Prior to Saddam coming to power, my brothers took up arms during late 70's against Iraq's regime, I was too little to remember the particulars. However, what I do know is that from 1973 to 1991 I grew up and lived under one of the most horrendous regimes in modern history.

I am forty-four years old now, but I still live with the horrors I faced during my childhood and adolescence years living in Iraq. From the day I was born, all the way to this moment, all I have witnessed is war, a never ending war in Iraq. That's why even my life in London is very much shaped and affected by the events that have and are still unfolding in Iraq and Kurdistan. I have many shared memories with my own people from the region, memories of struggle, loss of loved ones, horrors of genocide, and the pain of having to leave our homes again and again. I live like a nomad; even if I live in a home I always think to myself "I am not sure how long I will be living here—where next?"

**Jacobsen:** How did you come to align with the principles inherent in feminism and anti-war activism?

**Mahmoud:** I grew up in a warzone, a climate of long lasting and bloody wars, a constant exodus and displacement. I am strongly opposed to war because it only brings devastation and abject poverty. It destroys homes, it destroys entire lives. However, I wouldn't say that I am a pacifist largely due to the environment in which I was born. As Kurds, we are always subjected to the horror of war, occupation, and repetitive cultural, linguistic and physical genocides. For example, I support the armed struggle of Rojava against the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS). In such cases, you can have one option: you either take up arms or be ruled by the monstrous forces of ISIS.

As for my feminist principles, there were various reasons that are personal, social and political. Of course, when you grew up in a socially-conservative society, a place in which every move you make somehow amounts to either shame or honour, if you adopt progressive views there is considerable backlash, you become a 'rebel'. The mentality that women are 'inferior' and men are superior is somehow imbued within almost every aspects of daily life—politics, art and literature.

The language we speak carries a great deal of words that reinforce women's subordination. I must admit that from a very early age, I was aware of my own position in my society, I felt trapped, powerless and lonely. I felt stranded on a small planet that was destroyed by war. Making the smallest demand for women's rights felt like a crime. Everything was about war, killing, survival and political-struggle against the enemy. There was little room for feminist ideas. Even when I joined a leftist political party, hoping that it provide the equality I sought after, I felt it was a man's club. I left it and started reading feminist books intensively, as well as the history of feminism and the different schools of thoughts. I found within feminism a home, a place in which an ideology truly spoke for women. So, yes, going through a painful life journey full of loss and being a woman was and still is not easy. That's why feminism is vital to me, to my thinking, activism and worldview.

**Jacobsen: What are the more immediate concerns for women's rights relevant to the Iraqi Kurdish community?**

**Mahmoud:** There are many issues to fight against, such as so-called 'honour killings', female genital mutilation (FGM), forced and arranged marriages, and other forms of violence—like many other societies in the world. Kurdish women are fighting against all of these issues, and they're fighting outside invaders too—such as ISIS. So the problems are not limited, but are changing and are varied in addition to the political instability that, as we know, forays into the lives of women and their rights.

**Jacobsen: You co-founded Culture Project, which is a platform for “Kurdish writers, feminists, artists, and activists.” What inspired it—its theme and title?**

**Mahmoud:** I am one of the founders of Culture Project and have supported it, as well as having worked with various organisations and campaigns that highlight and assuage violence against women. One thing that was missing was a holistic approach to the important need of raising awareness about gender and feminism and challenging cultural productions that are patriarchal and male dominated. So I discussed the idea with a couple of friends and supporters about creating such a platform, a platform that supported those people who have non-conformist views, as well as challenging regressive/conservative norms and values which are “traditional”. This platform is open for all regardless of sex and gender. We would love to bring forward new faces, young writers and others in order to create a debate and produce new knowledge that challenges the old schools of thought. As for the name, I thought that if we give it a name that gave our organisation the appearance it is female-only, it will just limit our scope of work. We decided to call it *Culture Project* in order to be inclusive of all people: activists, writers, philosophers, feminists, novelists, poets, etc.

**Jacobsen: What have been some of its more popular articles—title and contents?**

**Mahmoud:** We have various writers on both our Kurdish and English websites—websites proving to be very popular. Of course, on the Kurdish website we have far more writers, poets, feminist writers, philosophical essays, art and cultural reviews, etc., as well as short stories. On our English website we have a very well-informed new generation of young Kurds who are active politically and are critical of the status-quo in Kurdistan. They challenge existing gender relations. You can find some very interesting poems, short stories, artistic-writing, and essays. One of the important pillars of our project is that we have gender and feminist awareness at its core. We promote and motivate our writers to be gender sensitive and champion feminist positions. When

we were in Kurdistan in May, we hosted a debate on Feminism and Art, which was very well attended and created a very interesting debate.

**Jacobsen: As a secular feminist have there been threats to your life, or others involved with the project?**

**Mahmoud:** There have been several threats directed at me when we launched our Anti Sharia Campaign in Kurdistan and Iraq back in 2005. Even now when I write and criticise Islamism and advocate for feminist ideals I get hate mail, threats and expletive diatribes on Social media. Also, one of our writers who openly writes against Islamism received letters containing death threats. The fact is that those of us who are non-compromising and are open in our criticism of Islam and Islamism our lives are automatically in danger. We are not safe in either the Middle East nor in the UK.

**Jacobsen: What are the unique concerns of women and girls in war in contrast to boys and men, in general?**

**Mahmoud:** One of the major features of all wars is the use of rape as a weapon of war. Most of the times women in war situations end up becoming victims to rape, trafficking, sexual slavery and dealing with the consequences of the devastations that war brings to their societies. For example, women who become widows in socially conservative societies who have very little welfare are living in dire conditions. Conversely, men and boys, who are fighting, face death, injuries and other war traumas. However, in some cases men who are caught as prisoners of war are sexually assaulted as an act of humiliation in order to breakdown their ‘manhood’. The case of the Yezidi genocide committed by ISIS symbolises this horror. Women were taken as spoils of war; they could be raped, sold and turned into slaves. Men who did not convert were killed.

**Jacobsen: Looking into the past a bit, you were one of the speakers for the March, 2003 London, United Kingdom anti-war rally. What was the content of, and the reaction to, the speech?**

**Mahmoud:** I used to take part in anti-war demonstrations against US-lead wars in Afghanistan. Later on, when the US and its allies decided to attack Iraq in 2003, I became more involved and active in the anti-war efforts in UK and elsewhere. I asserted my opposition to the war on Iraq, despite the fact of being Kurdish and someone who has suffered immensely under Saddam’s regime. I still didn’t think that any foreign intervention was going to improve our lives. I also emphasised that this war will only bring more terrorism because it will strengthen political Islam, i.e. Islamism. Some people on the political Left liked my opposition to the war but disliked my opposition to political Islam, as they view them as an “anti-imperialist” resistance. To me, however, this is absurd—how can a terrorist force that kills, beheads, and oppresses women have anything to do with resisting imperialism? There is no doubt that we all wanted an end to Saddam’s totalitarian regime, but I was opposed to foreign invasion. In this region we don’t have a good experience with foreign interventions and colonialism throughout history. Imperialist powers invade, destroy and support or install puppet regimes to serve their interest only. Look at Iraq and Afghanistan—since the invasion we are faced with much more terrorism, instability, poverty, displacement and mass migration of people. There is a humanitarian disaster and an endless tragedy of war and bloodshed.

**Jacobsen: As well, you have been on major news media such as The Guardian, The Independent, BBC, CNN, NBC, and Sky News. You have campaigned strongly against**



**Sharia law in addition to the oppression of women in Iraq and Kurdistan. Does this campaigning against Sharia law extend into the international domain?**

**Mahmoud:** Yes, because political Islamist groups are now everywhere seeking to impose Islamist ideals on people and restricting freedom of speech and expression. Even in UK we have problem with religious schooling, Mosques that advocate for Jihad, and hate speech. We have Sharia councils that violate women's rights. I am part of the One Law for All coalition that seeks to expose these violations and influence government policy makers. The struggle for women's rights, secularism and universal values is an international struggle. I always felt I was part of this worldwide struggle even if we are confined to local issues, but we fight with a universal vision for rights, gender equality, secularism and an egalitarian alternative to patriarchal capitalist system.

**Jacobsen: What religious/irreligious worldview and ethic makes the most sense with respect to the proper interpretation of the world to you?**

**Mahmoud:** I am not interested in any religions that seek to convince me of *another* world. I live here in the now, that is what it matters to me. I take a stand against injustice, class division and the gender apartheid that is currently taking place. We need to replace the horrendous climate that has been created by capitalism and corporate profit-making by creating a heaven on this earth, one in which we are all treated equally, fairly and with justice for all. I have no time for tales of heaven and hell in another world. There is no evidence of such realms. However, I have experienced very similar places here in *this* earth. After having lived in war zones and having had fought for survival, being in London is to me like heaven. I felt human again. I can enjoy the freedoms I am entitled to as a woman. I owe it to the struggle of generations of powerful feminist movements in this country.

**Jacobsen: Does this comprehensive activism—women's rights, Kurdish culture, feminism, anti-war, and, I assume, others—come from the religious/irreligious worldview at all?**

**Mahmoud:** To me, they come from an irreligious worldview. This is because religions limit our imaginations and they limited our freedom of thought. Religion restricts human creativity, it restricts our freedom of ideas. It subjects people to an outmoded dictates—be they from the bible, the Quran, or any other holy book. The notion of sin, guilt, shame and honour create a gender divide and it imposes a heteronormative narrative that is shamefully discriminative. As a woman, I felt I was half human when I was religious. I felt everything I do was loaded with guilt, and that I am somehow inferior to men. When I started to question and dislike all the restrictions I realised that religion is not for me and that it is a man made and merely in the service of men. The more I read into world-religion, the more I realised it is extremely patriarchal and oppressive towards women.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the Culture Project, or in the advocacy and promotion of Kurdish culture, even donate to initiatives relevant to their advocacy and promotion?**

**Mahmoud:** Well, we really need help and support from talented people, people who have editing skills, who can review and analyse art work, who can write reports, proposals, and we need people who have design skills. Any support through volunteering would be deeply cherished.

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

**Mahmoud:** You most welcome, it is my pleasure.

\*Views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of IHEYO.\*

# An Interview with Chris Worfolk—Founder, Leeds Atheist Society

June 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was there a family background in humanism?**

**Chris Worfolk:** No, my family are open-minded but rational people. So there wasn't much in the way of religion or belief in our household. My parents just get on with life.

**Jacobsen:** How did you come to find humanism, or a humanist community?

**Worfolk:** When I arrived at university, I was greeted by a huge array of religious activity. I'm not sure whether I expected university to be a temple of reason or not, but it definitely wasn't. The religious societies were huge. They ran loads of events and put week-long marquees outside the student's union touting their existential wares. I have no problem with this. But it did lead me to ask

**Jacobsen:** Where do the humanist students go?

**Worfolk:** The answer was nowhere. So I founded Leeds Atheist Society. I then spent the next few years of my life fielding the question "what is the point of an atheist society?" But evidently many people did see the point because a few years later we were one of the most active societies on campus, running three or four events per week to accommodate all of our members.

**Jacobsen:** What seems like the main reason for people to come to label themselves as humanists, from your experience?

**Worfolk:** I think it varies depending on generation. Ten years ago, West Yorkshire Humanists had a predominantly elderly membership base. And many of them were there as a reaction to religion. They had been hurt by it in the past, mostly over LGBT issues, and so came to Humanism as a place of refuge. On contrast, our younger membership base seems to have found Humanism for different reasons. Some are Dawkinites, but I suspect that most are here because they're looking to fill the hole left by the breakdown of traditional neighbourhood communities in the West. Or because as society continues to become smarter and better educated, we all become more existential, get more depressed, and want a positive answer to the whole life, the universe and everything question without resorting to "a magic man in the sky did it".

**Jacobsen:** What was the experience of finding a community of like-minded individuals?

**Worfolk:** It's an easy way to find high-quality friends. Typically, anyone who takes horoscopes seriously, or refuses to vaccinate, is filtered out, for example. I also met my wife through LAS, and most human behaviour is probably driven by the desire to propagate our genes.

**Jacobsen:** You play guitar. How has the development of this skilled improved personal life? What is your favourite kind of music? Any favourite artists?

**Worfolk:** I've had a guitar since I was about 17. But I never learnt to play it. Then, when I reached 27, I decided to take lessons. I think it took me that long to gather enough emotional maturity to say to myself "look, a year of practice misery will give you fifty years of enjoying playing the guitar. And that's a good deal." I like to think of myself as a poster child for proving

anyone can play an instrument. I have no music aptitude. I couldn't play anything for the first six months of lessons. Nothing. Then it clicked. Now I play the piano, as well, and sing. I think learning one really hard skill gives you the confidence to go on and learn others. Now I play in the "house band" at Sunday Assembly Leeds. Which is a great way to improve your skills because the good musicians pull you forward. I don't often discuss my music tastes because it leads me to lose all credibility as an adult. I like Avril Lavigne. Also Smashing Pumpkins, Dire Straits, Sheryl Crow, Lordi, rock music you can sing along to.

**Jacobsen: What is the best argument for atheism, and theism, that you have ever come across?**

**Worfolk:** Personally, I used to struggle with morality. I found it difficult to make sense of objective morality without an omniscient rule maker, which led me to adopt subjective morality.

But that never sat well with me either. Sam Harris finally cleared it up for me with *The Moral Landscape*. He makes an eloquent case for objective morality inside a Humanist framework.

**Jacobsen: Who are personal heroes?**

**Worfolk:** Bill & Melinda Gates because they are almost single handily wiping out malaria and polio. Jimmy Wales because he took all human knowledge and made it available to everyone for free.

Also Ray Kroc and Colonel Sanders. Kroc was 55 when he founded McDonald's, and Sanders was 62 when he founded KFC. Which gives me hope that even if I achieve nothing in the next thirty years of my life, I could still make a valuable contribution to the world before I die.

**Jacobsen: What differentiates New Atheism from 'Old Atheism'?**

**Worfolk:** I'm not sure anything does. I think the "new" represents a new wave of interest. It boomed in the seventies, and again in the naughties when people realised the battle for freedom from religion had not yet been won. But it's essentially the same merchandise.

**Jacobsen: What is the current strategy of the atheist movement to advance its cause?**

**Worfolk:** I think the "movement" is probably too diverse to have a cause or a strategy. We can't even agree if we're atheists, agnostics, humanists, secularists, freethinkers, sceptics, etc. So there are many different movements worth commenting on.

In the UK, the National Secular Society changed its constitution so that it no longer affirms atheism. They want to be seen as objective as it is difficult to argue against an organisation campaigning for a level playing field without being able to accuse them of anti-religious bias.

Sunday Assembly is out there trying to create a secular church. It's a well-trodden route: Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity, the ethical societies of the late nineteenth century, Humanist Community, Church of Freethought have all tried it.

But Sanderson Jones is doing a great job of building a new movement. Then you have organisations like Atheists Feeding the Homeless and Humanist Action Group attempting to convert humanist ethical values into positive action. But the efforts are rather fragmented.

Take Atheism Plus, for example. It's atheism plus social justice. Which is Humanism. But for some reason they wanted their own movement. Which is always likely to be the way when you try to herd free thinkers. Ultimately, what will advance the cause is the slow march of time.

We can rely on the tranquilising drug of gradualism if needed, because the world is only going to get smarter, and better educated, and more caring. The Moral Arc goes up. And that is good news for humanism and bad news for outdated and silly belief systems.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Chris, I enjoyed that.**

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