

The background of the cover is a vibrant cosmic scene. On the left, a large, swirling nebula in shades of red and magenta dominates the space. To the right, a dense field of stars in various colors (blue, white, yellow) is visible against a dark blue and black background. The entire scene is framed by a thin black border.

CANADIAN ATHEIST SET VI

SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

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Scott

Interview with Will Lane on Personal Background, Brexit, and the UK

April 9, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Will Lane is a Contributor to Conatus News. Here we talk about Brexit, the UK, progressive politics, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your own background in religion, or not, and progressive politics? How did you get your start in it?

Will Lane: I am an atheist, and apart from a brief period in my early teens have been for my entire life. However my personal experiences with religion have not on the whole been negative, being British means that the most common forms of Christianity in my country tend towards the moderate and community focused rather than moralistic or dogmatic.

As to progressive politics I'm not really sure whether I do have a background in it, the word progressive isn't really a term that applies to British politics, we would call progressives either liberals or socialists depending on their political viewpoints. I would consider myself a liberal, since my focus is on individual rights and freedoms, and as such would probably agree with most progressives on issues like LGBT rights and universal healthcare.

Jacobsen: You have done some commentary on Brexit and the UK. What was the summary of your analysis in 2016 and 2017?

Lane: My argument had two essential parts, the first was that the classically liberal political ideals that lead people to vote Leave, the ideals of nationalism and especially national sovereignty, had been ignored by analysts in favour of narratives based on economic and social factors such as poverty or immigration.

I wasn't arguing that those economic and social factors were unimportant, indeed they might have been more important to Leave voters overall than the political ideals. However, the political beliefs still mattered, and they were being overlooked because they didn't jive with the political narratives being set out by either the right or the left, both of which were dealing heavily in immigration being the main factor in the Brexit vote.

My second argument was that in order to survive in a post-Brexit world, liberals needed to re-examine the ideals of liberal nationalists such as Giuseppe Mazzini and John Stewart Mill. Liberalism as an ideology has moved away from nationalism since the Second World War, and this has meant that it struggles to deal with the resurgent nationalism that has sprung up in the last decade. In its place conservatism has become the main bulwark against the far right, a state of affairs that is hardly encouraging for anyone who wants to see more open and accepting European societies.

I argued (and still argue) that liberals need to re-discover liberal nationalism in order to mount an effective counter to both far-right xenophobic nationalism, and the insular, navel gazing nationalism of traditional conservatism. The Leave campaign paradoxically proved that liberal nationalist ideals resonate with a large portion of the British population, the campaign's slogan 'take back control' and the general idea of freeing the UK from the chains of an oppressive

empire was ripped straight from the playbook of the original liberal nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini and would have been familiar to any 19th century classical liberal.

In order for liberalism to matter in the midst of this nationalist upsurge we need to compromise with the prevailing cultural mood, not by giving in to the worst instincts of xenophobia, racism and bigotry as the far right do, nor by pulling up the drawbridge and shutting out the rest of the world as conservatives would have us do, but by re-imagining potent classically liberal ideals of freedom, national identity, tolerance and civic duty for the 21st century.

Jacobsen: What is your updated view on Brexit and the UK with more time to read, digest, and see new developments of it?

Lane: My view of Brexit overall has always been fairly bleak, and the last two years haven't changed that. It looks likely that what will happen is a fudge on the most important issues, such as the financial industry and especially Northern Ireland, while smaller issues are left hanging for years after our date of leaving. It's difficult for me to see Brexit as anything other than a bad thing for all concerned; the EU will be without its second biggest economy, most internationally focused voice and one of its largest militaries, causing a massive budget hole and almost certainly making it more insular and less willing to respond to outside threats.

Meanwhile Britain will be left with damage to its vitally important financial sector, without EU funding and subsidies for protected industries, and less ability to punch above its weight in international politics. This isn't even going into the nightmarish issue of untangling EU from British law and regulations, nor the social issues and rise in hate crime dredged up by the vote itself. Brexit won't be the collapse of the UK, nor of the EU, but it will leave both poorer and weaker than they were together, and any decision on Northern Ireland is perilous at best given the possibility for more violence if it is handled poorly.

Jacobsen: What will be the positives and negatives of Brexit in your analysis?

Lane: The negatives I've already gone over, regarding the positives there are potentially some in the way that Brexit has shocked the existing dynamics of British politics. Brexit has forced the different parties to actually consider what their vision for Britain is outside of the EU, and already we have different politicians and pundits arguing for extremely varied political directions. Some have argued for a return to the fixed work day and strong unions of the 1970's, some for Britain re-inventing itself as a low tax, low regulation Singapore of the west, and yet others for Britain to rely on the commonwealth and try to create a cohesive trade bloc from its former empire.

I'm not saying I agree with any or all of these ideas, but the very fact that there are such wildly different views on where we should be going next does show that the Brexit vote has forced those in power to actually consider what direction the country should be heading in, rather than simply assuming everyone agrees with its present course. If nothing else, Brexit has shown the people of Britain that their votes do matter, and that they can use their democratic vote to change the direction of the country if they do not like where it is going.

Jacobsen: What will be the next step in your writing projects? Where can folks get to know you?

Lane: I'm currently conducting an interview with video game analyst, feminist critic and former Canadian television personality Liana K on her new YouTube show Lady Bits, which should hopefully be appearing on Conatus News in the next few weeks. Aside from that I've considered

doing an article on the EU's current problems, as I feel this has been badly neglected in the English language press especially given the recent Italian elections.

Brexit was not the Anglo-Saxon disease some on the continent hoped it would be, and while I very much doubt any other country will leave the union any time soon, the underlying factors behind Brexit are clearly expressing themselves in other forms in other European countries. While I am considering trying to branch out to other platforms, for now you can find me on Conatus News, where all of my articles thus far have been published.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Lane: Liberalism has been the dominant ideology in the west for so long that I feel Liberals have almost forgotten that it needs to be defended. While Brexit, the election of Trump in the U.S. and the growing disenchantment with liberal democracy in Eastern Europe all have their individual causes, when taken together it is hard not to see them as part of a wider global move against the liberal ideas of freedom, tolerance and openness.

How long this illiberal cloud will last nobody can say, but we must be prepared for it to stick around for a good long while. This being said, I don't think Liberals need despair too greatly, as there are obvious counter examples to this movement towards illiberalism. The elections of Emmanuel Macron in France and of Justin Trudeau in your native Canada are good examples of how Liberalism can win elections when it has a strong sense of purpose, combined with policies that can appeal to the majority of people.

Liberalism is in dire need of renewal for the realities of the 21st century, both social and economic, but if enough people still believe in individualism, freedom, tolerance, reason and openness then I believe it will still be around for a long time to come.

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

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Needs Fulfilled from Cults, and Benefits to Leaders and Followers

April 10, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott is the Founder of Skeptic Meditations. He speaks from experience in entering and leaving Self-Realization Monastic Order, a Hindu-inspired ashram headquartered in Los Angeles and founded by famous Yogi Paramahansa Yogananda. Here we talk about some of the benefits of ashram residents and their guru-leaders. Also, we discuss the drivers that keep people stuck inside an abusive community.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I want to take a 25-degree slant on the conversation around cults. What small benefits came from the extensive training found in the ashram?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: Yeah, you'd hope there were some benefits from spending a decade and a half of my life in an ashram. A few benefits were: I got exposed to people from all over the U.S., Canada, India, Australia, Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, England, Scotland, and Ireland. Interestingly, other than India, there were no monks from other parts of Asia. Of course, the SRF monks in the ashrams were fairly homogenous in terms of beliefs. But I got to enjoy traditional recipes from around the world.

While in the ashram I learned how to prepare and cook food, to cut hair, to grow herbs and vegetables. The ashram routine taught me how to be extra neat and tidy, as there was lots of rules and household duties to clean toilets, clean dishes and community areas of the ashram.

Jacobsen: Did any big benefits come to you? It seems odd to ask because the focus is on the negative, but, with a hint of humor, only a small percent of all things are ever all bad.

Scott: Everyday the monks practiced meditation for four hours both individually and in groups. I learned how to introspect, to sit quietly, to meditate and watch my thoughts. There was nothing quite like sitting in a chapel full of monks for hours to force me to sit still though my thoughts could be racing. There were times when I was able to have so-called mystical experiences, which many of those altered states I now understand have alternative explanations that are more natural than supernatural.

Perhaps there's no other human experience quite like living as an ascetic, like a hermit or a monk. Professional monkhood demands total self-involvement. Taken to extremes monkhood or ashram life becomes quite self-absorbed. Despite all the "spiritual" rhetoric about selflessness and ego loss as an exalted human state, frankly, my experience was "spiritual" selfishness is this self-absorption into excessive meditation or contemplation,

Monkhood in a closed-community, like the SRF ashram, forces you to withdraw within. After the first 2-3 years the honeymoon wears off and there's not much going on that is new. It became a monotonous routine. Deadeningly predictable.

The bigger benefits become traps. All the forced solitude, meditation, and monastic rules stifled my psychological development and creative imagination. In the SRF ashram, developing intellect and self-expression is considered egoic. Of course, you'd find exceptions but most monks who were creative outside of serving the ashram organization had more or less secret

avenues of creative self-expression. Again, this is the double-life I've mentioned that monks were forced to live if they were to stay in the ashram.

Jacobsen: What is the need fulfilled by the joining of a cult for those that do join them? What need does this serve?

Scott: Well for me, joining the SRF ashram and becoming a monk was a way to escape the world on the pretext of spiritual searching. It's not that I was insincere in my search. It's just that looking back I realized what I searched for was answers so I no longer had to search. The guru and his organization of SRF seemed to have all the answers to my questions. I just needed to follow and I'd find everything I'd been searching for. The culture of nonthought is rewarded with its own benefits. Ignorance is bliss, goes the cliché. Until disillusionment hits.

Outwardly the ashramites presented themselves as pious disciples. Inwardly they were ordinary with human desires, neuroses, and deep fears and insecurities. Of course, followers have to pretend that everything is wonderful. Many monks that I spoke with had admitted that to survive in the ashram they had to have double life. First it started with little things, a coffee maker in their bedrooms (consuming caffeine is against the rules), the buying a TV or sneaking out periodically to watch movies (only ashram approved movies were to be watched and were shown once a month). Or, though all monks had to take a vow of celibacy occasionally there'd be scandals when renegade monks ran off with nuns or had sexual affairs with church members.

I digressed. But coming back to your question. I think the needs change for members who join these groups. At first they join for idealized, starry-eyed, spiritual purposes. It's no wonder that these high-control, thought-deadening communities are on the outside appearing to be peaceful, harmonious, and idyllic. While on the inside a terrible battle goes on in each person and among the residents fighting for attention from the leaders. Spiritual advancement is often equated with position, power, and authority over others. So the ashrams become a nasty breeding ground for bringing out the best and but more often that not the worst, passive-aggressive behaviors, in residents.

Jacobsen: Obviously, the main benefits of cults come to the leaders, whether finances, followers, or, apparently, people to have sex with for an extended period of time. These seem like casual observations of consistent phenomena. What seems like the main driver for the highest leadership in a cult?

Scott: In a recent blog post I wrote about how the supreme leader-guru gains his superpower from his devotees. The guru needs disciples for his identity. The disciples need guru for theirs. The guru-disciple relationship is based and maintained in this power exchange.

Allegations of sexual impropriety are common among Hindu gurus in the U.S. The guru-disciple relationship is built and maintained on a power exchange and often by sexual attraction. Here's some examples I will quote.

"Yogananda was also formally accused of impropriety by Swami Dhirananda in 1935 and Sri Nerode in 1940; these two men worked originally with Yogananda to spread Kriya Yoga" wrote Lola Williamson, a religious studies professor at Millsaps College in Jackson, MS and researcher of Hindu-based groups in the US, in *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion*.

Yogananda was apparently never found guilty of abuses by a court of law. However, there's been numerous out of court settlements and testimonies of disgruntled former followers.

One disillusioned female student of Yogananda wrote in a letter dated 1938:

“...After we started living at Mt. Washington, Swamiji [respectful for Swami, Yogananda], whether at Encinitas or here, had me come to see him every night....On these nightly visits to his rooms he always had me lock the door or he did it; then all he'd do was either to sit and look at me or talk about his experiences with beautiful women on his tours and of sex....Before this time he had me take an oath of unconditional friendship to him promising never to reveal what he tells me to another person. He says there should be no conditions, no barriers between us now that I took the oath...He said I was creating a barrier between us by not letting him kiss me, or at least not wanting him to. He kissed me every time I went to his rooms after the first time although it was against my liking. Sometimes he tried to stick his tongue in my mouth but I wouldn't stand for that! He says that nothing he would ever do to me could possibly hurt me but bless me since it was God manifesting through him.

“He has told me that any place his hand touches that person is blessed. At times he has placed his hands on different parts of my body and made suggestive movements to put his hand inside my dress and would have if I had not pushed it away. If he would do such things as this on just a few months friendship, what does he do with the girls who are with him constantly and wait on him like slaves?

One afternoon up in his office here at Mt. Washington we were sitting on the couch and he pulled me back on his big lotus pillow and kissed and held me so tight I had to fight to get my breath. This was not an unusual occurrence however. We had been discussing the barrier which he said I had erected by resisting him (he always brought this subject up until finally I got so sick of discussing it I refused to say any more on it) when he told me this about Jesus Christ. He said that a spiritual man can touch a woman and it won't be in the physical plane. He said Jesus “had” Mary Magdalene in a certain way.”

I don't find the allegations surprising. I would expect a few students to come forward to testify they'd been abused by a charismatic god-man who claimed spiritual authority over their souls. The leader-gurus use students for their personal pleasures, self-aggrandizement, and to maintain an extravagant lifestyle.

Jacobsen: When it comes to followers somewhere in the privileged circle of the leader, what benefits accrue to them? Why do they keep following when they must see the hypocrisy and faults of the leader more closely than others at the bottom of the cult pyramid?

Scott: The inner circle of followers, those who are closest to the powerful leader, have much control of the followers further outside the circle in addition to influence over the guru-teacher leaders. don't believe followers can remain long in the inner circle of the leader if they focus on the leader's hypocrisy and faults. There would be too much cognitive dissonance (inner psychological conflict) for the follower who no longer believes in the infallibility of the leader. Or, at least that the leader is the unquestionable channel or conduit for the infallible God or Guru. Or, in some rare cases some monks or follower disciples might be able to go through the outer motions, pay lip service, while inwardly not believing in the teachings, doctrines, or edicts of the church and its leaders.

What keeps “followers” following is complicated. The longer followers follow, especially an ascetic, enunciate, monastic life that is dependent on the church or spiritual organization the harder it is to break away. When a follower inside the ashram or any cult-like group realizes they

are trapped inside a system or by a leader they no longer believe in, often followers choose to pretend everything is OK. It's too hard to leave identity, adoration, mission, purpose, and community. Where will that follower go if they've been living inside a closed-community?

The Clergy Project is a community of current and former religious clergy who no longer believe in god or supernatural. As a member, I have heard many many stories of clergy who can't leave or who finally left but couldn't without support from groups like Clergy Project, other former cult-members, family and friends. Having left a high-control group, the SRF ashram, I understand how difficult it is for followers inside these groups and how much more difficult it is to leave the longer they stay inside the group. Frankly, it should not be surprising that people stay in abusive relationships. Relationships are powerful and difficult to break from the longer we stay and the more our identity and survival feels wrapped up with them. It becomes an existential fight for survival to question or break away.

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

In Conversation with Professor Tom McLeish, B.A., Ph.D.

April 13, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Professor Tom McLeish, B.A., Ph.D., is a Professor Natural Philosophy in the Department of Physics, and works in the Center for Medieval Studies and the Humanities Research Centre at The University of York. Here we talk about science and faith.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have a book, *Faith and Wisdom in Science*. What inspired it?

Professor Tom McLeish, B.A., Ph.D.: I think Western society seems to be losing faith in science. The title has multiple valence. It is a multiple pun. I am anguished as a scientist – that science is not in the basket of things that make us human.

If I say, “Science belongs with books, with literature, with plays, with great music, with art, with all of the things that make us feel deepest human,” people look at me with a weird expression. The fact that we have lost that is serious.

I say, “Science has lost its cultural narrative. Science has lost its story. It has pulled up its roots.” There are horrendous political consequences of this. Look at what has happened, science has become optionalized.

It is okay if it agrees with you. But if it disagrees with you on, say, climate change, then you can ignore and optionalize it. As a scientist, I do theoretical physics and physics, but I have been fascinated in looking at some social science and working with social scientists who look at public narratives around science. Some of them have said some very powerful things about how the discourses around nuclear energy, genetic medicine, climate change have developed – those tough science questions.

They have picked up very negative narratives, like “don’t open Pandora’s Box,” “science is the priesthood today, so we will all be marginalized.” Those sorts of things. I have been looking for a new narrative, or perhaps a very old narrative, a healthier narrative for science itself – culturally.

Jacobsen: What is that narrative?

McLeish: I think its source is to be found in the genre of ancient wisdom. So, it may sound very wacky and weird, but I do not think it is. After all, only 200 years ago, physicists or scientists would be called natural philosophers. That is why I am so thrilled that York University – my new employer – has agreed to not call me a professor of physics but a professor of natural philosophy. I love it.

It is the old word for science – natural philosophy. Unpack it, it has to do with the love of wisdom to do with nature. If you do not like science – I have said this to people for whom science is not their thing, I say “Forget science. What if you were invited to ‘love wisdom to do with natural things?’ Would you perhaps like that better?”

But that is all science ever was. In some of the ancient wisdom literature, some of it is preserved in the Old Testament of the Bible. For example, there is a book, which is far less read and thought about than it should be.

But every philosopher who has ever had something to say about philosophy has commented on it. That is the Book of Job. The story of the Book of Job. The Book of Job contains – in fact not just contains but is – a deep, inviting, participatory narrative into human connectivity with nature, with the physical world with its chaos as much as with its order, with its humanness as well as its strangeness.

So, at the heart of *Faith and Wisdom in Science*, there is a scientists' commentary on the Book of Job, because it stands equally with Plato and Aristotle as a foundation to modern philosophy. The Book of Job is, I think, a tributary of modern philosophy and modern science.

Jacobsen: Something I have noticed in UK culture is the split between moral philosophy and natural philosophy. These become separate branches of philosophy. In that context, scientists as natural philosophers become applied philosophers.

It clarifies the context and landscape so much in terms of what scientists are doing. Also, it provides bounds on what is and is not within its purview. So, someone like Professor Sean Carroll at Cal Tech will talk about a “conclusion” – his word – that derives from the findings of science with naturalism.

But it seems lacking in historical context. I noticed Professor Lawrence Krauss has the same notion. It is that, but only in its long-term historical context. It was natural philosophy. So, of course, you are going to derive naturalism if you have forgotten your history.

McLeish: I absolutely agree, 100%, with that. I tell people about *Faith and Wisdom in Science*, that there is something not to like for everyone in this book. There is science. There is history. There is philosophy. There is theology. So, no one will like all of this book.

But I am trying to pull those three together, as you so beautifully put it. In the UK particularly, moral and analytical philosophy have been divided off from natural philosophy. What I want to say is that when we do science, we are doing something intrinsically ethical and moral.

Now, we should not get confused, I am not saying every consequence of every technological application of science will be moral. We have to think there as well. But we will risk severe wrong turns unless we realize science itself is a moral act.

It is also, by the way, a theological act. So, here is a thing, as part of this cultural insouciance with science, I have noticed the conflict narrative.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

McLeish: More particularly in America, it is the distancing of, perhaps, rather modern versions of what they think to be orthodox Christianity, but which really aren't, with science. Whereas, historically, within Judeo-Christian faith the nurturing of science has been a no-brainer.

It has been the seed-bed, the nursery, of science, for good reason as well. It goes something like this: the Christian analysis of the human condition is that there really is something wrong. We are in a nest of broken relationships.

We are in a broken relationship with each other. We have go broken relations with God. *And*, in some sense, we have a broken relationship with the world around us. We are ignorant of it. We are afraid of it. We can exploit it.

It is a deeply broken relationship. *And*, if in a nutshell, I can, with some St. Paul, summarize Christianity in one breath, as he does, I derive a clue of where science stands theologically. He writes to the Corinthians, “We have the ministry of reconciliation.” I love that.

Because, in perhaps more modern language, St. Paul is saying that Christianity is in the business of healing broken relationships. That could be applied all the way around. The reason we can do this is because the fundamental source of healing broken relationships between God and people has been the resurrection and crucifixion story.

The big healing Christian story, that enables us to go about the work – hence, the garden trowel analogy (science is to nature what garden tools are to a garden) – of healing our relationship with nature. This is, by the way, the genre of people like Nick Walterstorff in the context of art, or Jeremy Begby has done with music in his wonderful musical *Theology, Music, and Time*.

These are people asking questions like “How do we think theologically about...?” or “What is the theology of art, of music, of politics?” I think it is creative. Whether one is a believer or not, actually, asking the “What is the theology of something?” is helpful for one’s purpose, one’s teleology, one’s ethics.

I asked, “What is the theology of science?” The reason I asked it goes back to my first analysis. That we do not have a healthy cultural narrative for science. I think that the source of a healthy, productive, fruitful cultural narrative for science will be a theological one.

That is my belief. I think it’s source is to be found in the Book of Job and in the wisdom literature in the theological tradition itself. So “What is science for, theologically?” is the question; not, “Can you reconcile science with your faith?” That is a silly question.

“What is science for?” is the real question. “How should we go about it, morally and ethically?” “How should we bring our branches of science and the multiple branches of philosophy together?” I think it is this.

I have come to the conclusion that it is the engaging of the tools we have been given with this healing of this rather damaged or broken relationship of mankind with nature.

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

McLeish: [Laughing] Okay! I really enjoyed that. Thanks, Scott.

Developed Nations, Healthcare, and Pharmacare with Professor Gordon Guyatt

April 13, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

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

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

We conducted an extensive interview before: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). We have other interviews in [Canadian Atheist](#), [Humanist Voices](#), and [The Good Men Project](#). This interview in [Canadian Atheist](#) does mean pro- or anti-religion/pro- or anti-non-religion. It amounts to a specific topical interview. Here we talk about national pharmacare.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Developed countries that have a national healthcare program will have a national “pharmacare” program as well. Canada does not. Why?

Professor Gordon Guyatt: Historical accident. When what we call Medicare was brought in, it was limited to hospital and physician services. The plan of the people who got started was that eventually it would be expanded.

It never got around to being expanded. So, it was a particular accident of the way Medicare came about in Canada. Whereas, in other countries, they considered all the issues together to a greater extent.

Jacobsen: With regards to the discussion happening now, I do recall an article with the finance minister, Bill Morneau, discussing building a committee and looking into the development of a national pharmacare program for Canada.

What is the status of that as far as you know?

Guyatt: The status of that is, at the moment, unfortunate. So, Eric Hoskins resigned as health minister in Ontario to go and work on this. We thought – it is hard to know – that he was quite progressive. That he would be doing this because it is very exciting to have a real national pharmacare.

However, Bill Morneau has gone up in public and said, ‘You know, it doesn’t really need to be a national pharmacare. It can be a mixed public-private system,’ closer to what Mr. Obama engineered in the United States.

If it happens that way, it will be extremely unfortunate. Whereas, people who are interested in national pharmacare got very excited about the apparent initiative. The way Morneau has talked about it, subsequently, has considerably dampened the enthusiasm and gotten people much more worried.

Jacobsen: This is of a concern, probably, for lower SES Canadians. People with part-time jobs. People with jobs that don’t pay that well. Jobs that are low-skill. As well, as you know better than I do, there is the health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

Not only in health span, but also in lifespan, 10-15 years in lifespan; this is a concern for poor Canadians and some Indigenous Canadians as well.

Guyatt: You can check this (More information [here](#)). But I was with a colleague yesterday who told me that the Indigenous have drug coverage. That is one group that has drug coverage. If you look at it, I believe that is the case. The Indigenous are spared the problem.

But the other folks, low-income individuals, particularly, if they are not in a job with drug benefits, do not have it. The job I am in has drug benefits. Those poorer people have a real problem.

Jacobsen: Do you know the number of people?

Guyatt: I have seen different statistics. I think it would be of the order of 15% or 20% who, when asked, would say, “I haven’t filled a prescription because of the financial issues.”

Jacobsen: What are some progressive steps Canadians can take, e.g. call their local representatives and so on, essentially, to move things forward that may help them have the national pharmacare program?

Guyatt: Letters to the federal MPs. The federal MPS are the people putting group signature type stuff for pharmacare. I think the politicians are more impressed at individual letters, individually written. Anyone who cares about pharmacare and who would like to write an, even brief, individual letter.

Those things make a difference.

Jacobsen: In terms of the representatives in Ontario, what ones would be most appealing to those of the population who are lower income in the population?

Guyatt: Kathleen Wynne did something quite progressive. She said, ‘We are covering all the drugs for everyone under 25.’ So, people on social assistance over 65 get coverage. Now, she has extended it to everyone under 25. Here is pharmacare for everyone under 25.

Now, it is a relatively easy population because people under 25 don’t usually need many drugs. So, it is good. It is nice. But a relatively inexpensive group to extend to. In terms of what is required to gain both the equity and the efficiency goals, it is a program that would simply give universal coverage. The way we have for physicians in hospitals.

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

Interview with Rakshit Sharma – Writer, Conatus News

April 21, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you? You have an educational background in Indian history. What is the nature of the progressive political movements in Indian history?

Rakshit Sharma: So far as my early life is concerned, it was that same as it would be for any other person coming from the same age group and class as mine. The only distinction though being my garnered interest in studying religion and an attempt to grasp the questions revolving around the same and God, of course.

I'd say it was also because of the kind of free atmosphere I was given, helped me shape and move through my ideas. No doubt I've gone through a radical change. From someone who was a staunch believer to a skeptic.

I was born and brought up in a humble practicing Hindu family, went to a Catholic school and had friends from other communities too. So, I kind of never had a strict atmosphere that could have dictated adherence to a singular truth and perhaps that also was my earliest encounter with dissent.

Now coming to your second part of the question, progressive movements in our political history. It depends what you mean by that. In a sense, our freedom struggle was quite progressive as it embodied great ideals of equality, liberty, justice, and fraternity. Plus, the constitution of our country, which might also call as a manifestation of our struggle and ideals secured this progressive ethos.

Developing a scientific temper is a fundamental duty for us Indians as a matter of fact.

Jacobsen: How does the political trajectory of India look in the past 5 years and look forward? Do things look to be heading in a more progressive or a more conservative direction?

Sharma: Communalism and Casteism aren't new players so far as Indian politics is concerned. The very inception of free India took place after a bloody partition on communal lines. So, it won't be wrong to say that India always had this challenge of getting rid of this baggage and push polity in a more inclusive and progressive sphere. But that doesn't seem to have happened.

Initially, communal forces had a hard time, but things took a turn in the 80's and the eagerly waiting communal block got the chance it was looking for. In hindsight, they have capitalized quite cleverly upon the socio-political conditions in the decade that also saw the assassination of 2 Indian Prime Ministers.

Since then, it has been an entirely different scene. And to help their cause, economic liberalization was also embraced in 92, thus creating a big middle class, generally consisting of Upper Caste Hindus, who form the target demographic of the BJP, the ruling party.

So far as trajectory is concerned, yes, we've lost on what we had been, though quite peculiarly, able to carry through.

That is the trust of religious minorities, Muslims in particular. Communal riots though had been a bitter reality of the Indian experience, and let's also not forget that more riots have taken place under the Congress's rule, which today portrays itself as the sole flag bearer of communal harmony, the feeling of alienation is something new.

A perception has taken roots in the psyche of minorities that the present disposition is destined to work to their loss and misery. And now jumping to the other part, whether India will tread a progressive path or otherwise. Truth be said, India is a country of contrasts. Too diverse for any sort of generalization and dynamics here change very fast.

Plus, we have the next general elections around the corner and as it's imperative for any democracy, let's hope people take the right step. The rest would be mere speculation. But, yes if it stays on the same path, unfortunately, the picture doesn't seem to be something that would qualify as nice.

Jacobsen: How does the caste system alongside religion play out in the political scene within India?

Sharma: B.R Ambedkar, the chairman of the drafting committee of the Constitution is said to have remarked that till caste remains a force in the social dynamics, politics isn't immune to it. This has proved to be quite germane in the post-independence Indian political history.

Political parties across the spectrum, i.e., one way or the other capitalize on the caste factors. Be it open caste-ist agendas, hate speeches to polarise caste groups, special provisions to woo caste groups or even something as tacit as filing candidates that come from dominant caste groups in their constituencies.

Some are open about it and while others opt for the clandestine channels. But the truth is that a social reality as stark as caste is potent enough to decisively influence political processes. Every party has its pet vote bank, and the determinant here is unsurprisingly caste.

The sad state of affairs can be very aptly gauged by this oft-used taunting comment, "In India people don't cast their vote, they vote their caste." And as it stands today, nothing much seems to be changing anytime sooner.

Jacobsen: If you could take two figures within Indian political history with positive progressive impact on the political and social scene within the country, who are these two individuals? Why are they crucial to the development of the progressive movement within the Indian political scene?

Sharma: These two leaders, in my humble opinion, would be Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India and Dr. B.R Ambedkar, the chairman of the drafting committee of the constitution. The former commands relevance for his efforts to usher India into the Modern Age through his prudent programme on Higher Education and Industry and the latter for the remarkable work for the underprivileged sections of the people.

Both apart from being in politics were also men of great intellectual acumen and have numerous masterworks to their credit, which is also an intellectual storehouse for the Indians of the New Age.

So far as Progressive politics in India is concerned, these two have made great contributions. The ideals of Inclusiveness, Secularism, Social Justice, and Equality, were transformed from mere abstractions to spirit because of the genius of these men. Indian political scene thus owes a lot to these two men as regards progressive politics.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Sharma: India is a country of great diversity and contrasts. Too complex to be generalized. And in its dynamic character, I lay my hopes for a better and more rational India.

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

Interview with Mandisa Thomas – Founder, Black Nonbelievers, Inc.

April 22, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Mandisa Thomas** is the Founder of Black Nonbelievers, Inc. One of, if not the, largest organization for African-American or black nonbelievers or atheists in America. The organization is intended to give secular fellowship, provide nurturance and support for nonbelievers, encourage a sense of pride in irreligion, and promote charity in the non-religious community. Here we talk about the recent transition from full-time work to full-time activism for Thomas and building community.*

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, you recently quit your full-time job to begin full-time activism. Why did you make the switch? How are you making the transition?

Mandisa Thomas: Yes, the reason why is that I founded Black Nonbelievers back in 2011. Due to some changes at my full-time job as well as the request and even demands with the atheist community, requests for me to speak or to participate in various projects (and boards that I serve on), it became clear to me.

I needed to take this activism into a full-time direction. I had already been contemplating this for the past few years while developing the organization. Now, it was the optimum time to take that step. Black Nonbelievers is still a volunteer organization.

I am doing my work with that. In the meantime, I have also created a Patreon link, where people can support my atheism, building content, as well as build content, and possibly a podcast. I am sharing appearances there.

I am sharing any information relevant to patrons and the community.

Jacobsen: Your background does show exposure to Christianity, Black nationalism, and some Islam. How will this be influencing your activism?

Thomas: I think this gives me a unique perspective to the table because of my exposure to religion but not indoctrination. I grew up very progressive, with a progressive mindset. I have a very unorthodox point of view.

I may say things people are thinking, but do not necessarily say. As a black woman who is an atheist, there is the freedom to have those discussions and reach people in a way that will help them personally and the community too.

Jacobsen: Who else, and what other organizations, provide that basis for black and African-American nonbelievers and atheists to build community, focus activism, and find the sense of belonging that they might not have otherwise?

Thomas: I may be biased. But we are the largest black organization within the atheist community, which is providing such an avenue. There are maybe smaller groups in local areas, but, particularly for African-Americans, we are the organization that is doing it.

There is still African American's Outreach. It provides information. They are a subsidiary of the Center for Inquiry. There is also an avenue through the American Humanist Association, the Black Humanist Alliance. They are primarily an online entity.

Black Nonbelievers provides support online and offline for community building.

Jacobsen: What form does the online and offline community building take? Because I could see many ways that could take place.

Thomas: Absolutely, we host in-person events in the areas where we are located. We hold general meetings. We have potlucks. We have movie nights. We host various in-person events, which are mostly social with some as informative.

We also table at various events. We table at other outdoor festivals as well. We do some of everything that engages. Also, I am the co-host of a quarterly radio show here on FM radio in Atlanta, where we talk about everything atheism-related.

In addition to meeting in person, we do have a media outlet here.

Jacobsen: If you happen to know about any Canadian association or individuals who are leading a similar organization in Canada, can you recommend anyone? Or if people are looking to found a similar local organization in their own community to serve certain needs, how can they take those first steps?

Thomas: Actually, there is a David Ince in Calgary, Alberta. He is part of a Caribbean association. He hosts a podcast called *Freethinking Island*. He used to be in New York. Now, he is in Canada.

He is looking to reach fellow nonbelievers and atheists up there. I would recommend Black Nonbelievers is a domestic non-profit corporation in the United States. We are a 501(c)3, domestic. Until we get to a point where we are international, I would suggest that meetups are a good place to start for any organizers looking to build that medium for people.

But also, it would be good to look up the rules and regulations of their area to see how they can start a non-profit, can be tax exempt in some way, if that applies to where they live. Then once they have that information, we can point people in the right direction.

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

Thomas: Thank you!

Concerns for Safety Among the French Ex-Muslim Community

April 24, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Waleed Al-Husseini founded the Council of Ex-Muslims of France. He escaped the Palestinian Authority after torture and imprisonment in Palestine to Jordan and then France. He is a friend. Here we talk about secularism in France in 2018, the status of the Council of Ex-Muslims of France, new books, recommended books, and concern for safety.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What do you see as the issue for 2018 and secularism in France?

Waleed Al-Husseini: For me, the most concerning issue in France this time are the things that have been said by the president when he said that the state is secular, but the society is not. This is one of big things. We do not agree here.

Even French secularism cannot accept this because since the beginning, that society also incorporates secularism. If the society does not incorporate secularism, that means you will open the door more for Islamism (political Islam).

There will be more things like *hijab* and then separated sexes in the society, and make more of a micro-society within the larger society. One that does not integrate. Also, the president went to church and asked for church to be into political and return things back between the republic and church.

But this also is a danger to open the big door for Muslim fundamentalists to come into French political life. These two issues, for me, are the most dangerous things done by president Macron. They are anti-secularism in France.

Jacobsen: It has been a while. What is the status of the Council of Ex-Muslims in France? Is everyone safe? Is the community growing?

Al-Husseini: Yes, we are all safe. I received more threats, but I'm still alive. I founded one conference with ex-Muslims in Norway. It was good to speak about the right of blasphemy and what is going on in Europe and how things going on with isolation and other stuff.

So now in Norway, we got some ex-Muslims from Turkey and Pakistan too. It means we grow to be in most of the European countries and share the ideas because the situation is different from country to country.

Jacobsen: Any new books in the works, coming around the corner?

Al-Husseini: My second book was published in France last year. I wish it would be translated into English because this one is important. I speak about the celebration of Islam radicals in Europe. I explain the strategy of political Islam.

I try to find solutions with explaining things like "Islamophobia" and racism and the using of these definitions to throw at the liberal society, and then using freedom for soft isolation from society.

I would like to publish in English, but still now there no suggestions for translation.

Jacobsen: Can you recommend some books for people interested in learning more about the experiences of nonbelievers and ex-Muslims in particular?

Al-Husseini: *The Blasphemer: The Price I Paid for Rejecting Islam*, it's my book. The book of Ayaan Hirsi Ali called *Infidel: My Life*. Another book by Ibn Warraq entitled *Why I Am Not a Muslim*. These books are testimony and published in English.

We have others in other languages: French and German but not English.

Jacobsen: As you know, I have done several interviews and articles on and with the ex-Muslim community around the world. What is their primary concern regarding personal safety and getting their messages out to the secular, democratic world, which tends to be the Western world?

Al-Husseini: Yes, sure and thank you for all this work you do to help us reaching our voice for more people; for us, yes, because we face the dangers there, we get killed or arrested without knowing about us.

That is why we try to make our voice heard more, especially for the Western world. Because the Arabic world doesn't accept us. They do not have the democratic culture. For the Western world, to tell them, there people are leaving their region.

They will understand us because they face the problems of religion and dictators. All these reasons make us send these messages for them. Messages about our personal safety. As you know, this is our big problem. Anyway, it's become problem for anyone to speak about Islam or Islamism and the reason is clear as to why.

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

Interview with Vivek Sinha – Writer, Hindustan Times and The Times of India

April 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Vivek Sinha** is a Writer for Conatus News, Hindustan Times, and The Times of India. Here we talk about Kashmir, global terror, young life, sitting down with an ex-terrorist, and more.*

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have written for both the *Hindustan Times* and *The Times of India*. Some focusing on global terrorism (Sinha, 2017a). How is the struggle for Kashmir a subset of global Islamic terror?

Vivek Sinha: The genesis of this “struggle for Kashmir” dates back to 1947 when India gained independence from British colonial rule. At that time there were two kinds of regions in the Indian subcontinent– British India and the Princely States.

British India was directly ruled by Great Britain and Princely States through their proxies. At the time of Indian independence British India was divided into two dominions, India and Pakistan... and the Princely states were given the option to join either the Indian or Pakistani dominions.

Jammu & Kashmir was a Princely state. Now, given the strategic location of Kashmir, British wanted it to join Pakistan as they felt a populous Islamic strip on the north of India could act as a buffer against spread of Communism. During post World War-II, USSR was aggressively pushing Communism across the world.

Even though the erstwhile Maharaja of Jammu & Kashmir acceded his Entire Princely state with India, the Islamic state of Pakistan attacked Kashmir and grabbed almost one third of Kashmir and continues to occupy this chunk (Gilgit-Baltistan, Muzaffarabad etc) even today.

Ever since then, Pakistan continues to foster discontent among Kashmiris, dreaming of the day when Kashmir is united with Islamic state of Pakistan. And what better way to realize this goal than to indoctrinate Kashmiri Muslims into fighting for the greater cause of establishing Islamic Caliphate.

This instantly connects common Kashmiri with the rest of Muslims spread across the world. The Kashmiri Muslim feels that (s)he is not alone and his/her struggle is for the greater Islamic cause. It helps give Islamic sanction to the deaths of Kashmiri. Sheer acts of terror are hailed upon as valour.

For several years mosques and madrasas in Kashmir have been used to preach this line of thought. Terrorists are branded as Militants and those killed in counter-insurgency operations are hailed upon as martyrs who have laid down their lives for the cause of Islamic Caliphate. Islamic endorsement ensures a steady stream of recruits.

The world has come to know of this story when, in recent times, a few of these indoctrinated Kashmiri youth have openly professed their allegiance to fighting for Islamic Caliphate rather than Kashmir’s independence. Zakir Musa, the ousted Hizbul commander operating in Kashmir, minced no words when he said Mujahids like him are fighting only towards establishing Islamic Caliphate and their fight in Kashmir is only a part of this grand design.

Several other Kashmiri terrorists have been circulating messages across social media networks reiterating that their struggle is for Ghazva-e-Hind which aims to spread Islam across Indian subcontinent and establish the Islamic Caliphate.

Jacobsen: How was youth for you? What was your family's geographic, cultural, linguistic, and religious background?

Sinha: I was born in a middle class family. I was born and brought up at Kanpur, an industrial city around 445 kilometers south east of New Delhi. I am a Hindu and have completed my school from a Catholic Christian School.

The religious beliefs in my family are quite liberal. Despite being devout Hindus, my parents educated me and my brothers at a Christian school.

Growing up in Kanpur I had (and still have) several Muslim and Christian friends apart from Hindus. So we celebrated almost every festival (Diwali, Holi, Eid, Christmas) with equal enthusiasm and fervour.

Despite coming from a family of engineers I took up journalism and writing. My parents never objected to my taking up writing as a profession, rather they always encouraged it.

Jacobsen: Also, you sat down with an ex-terrorist (Sinha, 2017b). What was the experience like for you? Also in hindsight, any further reflection insights on the experience and conversation in general?

Sinha: Right from the moment he (the ex-terrorist) walked in, I could read it in his eyes that the guy wanted my help very badly. I felt concerned for him. All the time, as he spoke, his eyes were moist with tears.

He felt betrayed and violated. He felt trapped by the same people whom he trusted and revered. He told me categorically that he understood this devious game only after everything was lost for him.

He was desperately in need of a saviour who probably could help him and his family lead a simple and normal life. After the coffee he hugged me tight and whispered "please help me brother" in my ears, even as he thrust a sweet candy on my palm.

After my meeting I spoke about him, wrote his story but have not been able to contact him yet again. Despite my earnest request he did not give his contact details.

In hindsight, I wish he could have given his contact details to me, because I genuinely want to help him.

Jacobsen: What concerns do you have about the progressive movements in the UK and in India?

Sinha: I feel that progressive movements should not be hijacked by any one set of ideologies. The progressive movement, by definition, should challenge the status quo and cull out the prevalent ills from societies and nation states.

Sadly, both in India and in the UK progressive movements seem to have fallen into the trap laid down by Leftist ideologies.

Instead of raising issues that could help in the betterment of societies the Leftists (aka Communists) have taken up the progressive movement and are trying to push their agenda in its garb.

A case in point is the concept of veil (burqa/hijab/ etc) in Islam. Across India and in UK a section of progressives can be seen justifying wearing of burqa by a Muslim woman as her freedom of choice.

But this same group maintains stoic silence when another Muslim woman discards her veil. Instead of defending her in the name of freedom of choice to Not wear the burqa, they castigate her and all the progressives who side with her are branded as Islamophobes. Similarly, other contentious issues like female genital mutilation are never taken up as aggressively as they should.

This nips in the bud all talks of Islamic reform. If the progressive movement has to convert itself into a formidable Movement then it needs to snap ideological knots off all hues and focus only on the issues.

Jacobsen: How do you recommend younger generations become involved in progressive politics and social movements for the improvement of the social conditions of those often neglected by the wider society?

Sinha: The younger generation needs to develop a thinking mind and question all kinds of beliefs till they get satisfactory answers. The connected world has opened new vistas of knowledge for everyone all across the world.

Rather than tying themselves with specific groups or ideologies and blindly aping thought processes of these ideological groups they should inculcate a reasoning mind and question set beliefs and dogmas.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Sinha: One cannot be a Thinker and Follower at the same time. If one sincerely wants to be a part of the Progressive Movement in their respective country/society then (s)he has to be a “thinker”. Only a thinker can challenge dogmas and initiate discussions, which ultimately leads to a better society.

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

Sinha: You are welcome.

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Millennials More Probable to Believe in Afterlife

April 26, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The *National Post* reported on belief in the afterlife for Millennials (Brean, 2018). They believe in it. They also do not believe in it. But they believe in the afterlife more than other cohorts of Canadians.

A survey reported the sociological trend of older generations of Canadians' disbelief in a literal afterlife. The afterlife filled with creatures and wonders, and the dog from childhood named "Penny" or "Woof."

Miracle stories tend to become more metaphor and allegory and less a map of another realm and the literal writ of the all-powerful. This coincides with other data. Information indicating the increased religious belief and religiosity of the older.

Two skews with more of an afterlife belief for the young. Then the increase in religious seriousness among the old. The trends hold for supernatural beliefs too. Examples given were "angels, ghosts and communicating with the dead."

The immanence of death seems to quicken concrete, naturalistic thought. Reginald Bibby, of the University of Lethbridge, described Millennials as "far more open to a wide range of things." 70% of the 18-to-29-year-olds believe in an afterlife.

Pre-Boomers, it comes to 59%. The main subtext of the narrative, of course. Most Canadians believe in an afterlife of some form. A form describable by Abrahamic faiths' presuppositions and philosophy.

But not quite as well, 66% of Millennials believe in a higher power (God sometimes sold separately). 80% of the pre-Boomers believe in God or a higher power. Bibby argues for a shift in spiritual culture.

That may suffice as a first-blush explanation of the dual-inversion phenomena.

Bibby explains:

It's not life stage... It's not that older people have given up and figure there's no life after death. It's just that, in addition to those preachers and priests and others that were drilling into people in days gone by the fact that there's life after death and you better shape up or you might go to hell, that kind of stuff, we're just saying the life-after-death theme has been given an incredible shot in the arm from culture as a whole, and from the most unlikely places, particularly the entertainment industry.

Brean indicates the belief in an afterlife divide comes from GenX and the baby Boomers. Boomers with secular pop culture. Boomers with afterlife talk in church. GenXers with lack of attendance at church.

But Millennials work within a context of an afterlife in the culture in "video games and pop culture. It is normal again." They contain "cartoonish cultural traditions of ghosts, mediums, psychics, fortune tellers, clairvoyants, and Ouija boards."

Professor James Alcock, a professor of psychology at York University, notes the various meanings of “belief.” These can include confidence, faith, trust, and so on. Canadians reading the survey may respond individually to particular meanings of “belief.”

Brean interpolates an explanation into the narrative. That technological advancement permits more imaginative leaps. People can think of more possibilities. These increased possibilities bring more openness to belief in an afterlife. Church numbers continue downwards. Afterlife belief goes upwards.

Alcock opined:

In an age (ed. 19th and 20th century science) when new scientific discoveries were rapidly changing the understanding of how nature worked, it made sense for scientists to show interest in what was being reported from the séance parlours. It was possible that, just as with X-rays, radio waves, and radiation that had been hidden from human knowledge until science uncovered them, there might be a psychic dimension of nature awaiting discovery.

Brean considered this a basis to reflect more. That the belief in the afterlife of the young, but modest declines in religious faith, amount to residue. Historical religiosity as a curiosity and the afterlife as another secular possibility.

Bibby reported on the frame of the question. If stated as if death amounts to absolute finality, then the response leans more to a strong negation. An afterlife *must* exist. He concluded, “In fairness to people, they don’t really know.”

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Male and Female Ex-Muslims – Narrative Interpretation and Escape

April 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Waleed Al-Husseini founded the Council of Ex-Muslims of France. He escaped the Palestinian Authority after torture and imprisonment in Palestine to Jordan and then France. He is an ex-Muslim and an atheist, and a friend. We have published interviews in Canadian Atheist ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), The Good Men Project ([here](#)), Humanist Voices ([here](#)), and Conatus News ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Here is an educational series on ex-Muslims in France.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Can you tell some of the stories, anonymous if need be, of some of women members of the Council of Ex-Muslims of France?

Waleed Al-Husseini: We get a lot of testimonies. One of the most touching was for a French girl. Her father is Algerian. Her mother is French. She was born and lived all her life in France. She questioned herself when she was forced to wear the *hijab* at the age of 13. She stopped playing with her childhood friends because it became a forbidden activity.

She used to, at that time, read from the holy texts of Islam. But then she became an atheist, but she still wore the *hijab* and lived with her family in an area full of Muslims. That is why even she can't take the *hijab* off. She can't tell her family that she left Islam. She supported us. She came to one of our meetings.

Another woman, she left question Islam after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack and was asking herself, "Why do we do this? Why do we live in secular society and act like those who live in Islamic state?"

She asked her family and others always she got the answer that we are different and we always should belongs to Islam till she start reading and knowing about me from my 1st book she read it and she became atheist and she really fighter for freedom

Jacobsen: Can you tell some of the stories, anonymous if need be, of some of men members of the Council of Ex-Muslims of France?

Al-Husseini: Men's stories, it is rarer because Islamic society provides men all that they want. Their mistakes mean nothing. The stories, I have more from a refugee who came to France. There is a man. He is from Morocco. He started with freedom of women. Then he went into the freedom of not taking part in Ramadan, but he was arrested.

Then he got discrimination in the court. When he was out, he studied Islam very well, then he understood it very well. So, he left Islam for the same reason

Jacobsen: I ask those two prior questions to provide a basis of the experiences of members, ordinary refugees or French citizens who ex-Muslims are – apostates. How do these stories differ for men and women?

Al-Husseini: Most of the women, they left the suffering because of Islam. That is why they read and become atheism, so there is a clear reason for them. But for men, it is harder because he needs to be humanist and to do more reading to see how to become an atheist.

This is a difference between the stories of men and women. For sure, for women, its clearer with *hijab* and with the ability to have freedom in life. So, they suffer more than men because of Islam.

The space of freedom is much larger if you are me.

Jacobsen: Have the stories been getting better or worse in terms of the people who leave Islam?

Al-Husseini: Every story is a special case. But we still have a hard time, so the stories are always hard. It is not a fairy tale. We do not have happy ending stories, because even for the ex-Muslim who leave their family.

They will have problems in work between their friends, so the stories still the same: worse.

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

In Conversation with Hari Parekh – President Emeritus, Humanist Students

April 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Hari Parekh is the President Emeritus of Humanist Students. Here we talk about atheism and humanism, and the analysis of religion.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Atheism is known to be a negation of gods and affirmation of non-gods. What does humanism negate and affirm as a worldview?

Hari Parekh: As a worldview, Humanism aims to affirm that we can live an ethical and fulfilling life on the foundations of reason and humanity, in a universe that is a natural phenomenon. Humanism centres around people.

As a result, it remains equivocal to centre a worldview in the intention to further human fruition, flourishing, and fulfilment. Humanism provides an understanding of the purpose of being human, rather than the circular stagnancy of atheism.

Humanism may negate the need for ethical and political decisions to be based on superstition and belief. The pragmatism of the natural world remains significant to how one's worldview may develop.

Defining 'Humanism' Thinking about life can cause someone to unknowingly entrap themselves into the negative spiral of solipsism – thinking and questioning everything around them to be something to be dubious or unsure about.

Thinking that as a human being, who's mitochondrion cells will deplete in energy one day causing one to die, that I will not exist one day. This is a difficult thought to have, yet incredibly significant. Yes, life is short, and yes, we will all die one day.

But, the significance of being able to live and breathe and contribute to society, making the most of this life that I have, remains the single most significant part of being alive. To the point that I endeavour to value the life that I have in making each day without regret.

Defining Humanism does not provide an answer, as each person defines ideologies dependent on their own experience. The value of Humanism remains in understanding the significance of its perspective.

Jacobsen: Where do atheists go wrong in their analysis of religion? Where do they go right?

Parekh: The question allures to me answering whether in my view, atheists may be right or wrong in their analysis of religion. Atheism, principally is interested in whether there is a notion of a 'God' or not.

Following that, remains little that Atheism can provide to understand areas other than the circular argument of whether a 'God' exists or not.

However, this does not account for the high numbers of people that live in countries where it remains illegal to be non-religious. As a result, the purpose of whether there is a 'God' or not is not simply a theological argument as highlighted above – it becomes a question of identity.

This would suggest, as a result that, there may be a purpose to atheism in such conditions where blasphemy laws are still stringent and prevalent, for example – where people are persecuted for not believing in a ‘God’.

Atheism is neither wrong or right as the question asks.

Jacobsen: What would a humanist society look like to you?

Parekh: My dad will often talk to me about how he sees one calamity after the next on the news each day, to which each day he will repeat the remark: if only people cared more about people.

My dad may be religious, but the sentiment of how he would like society to be is valid. As a result, that is how a humanist society would look – a society where laws, legislation and policies that affect people first and foremost were considered based on how they may affect people.

To intrinsically care about the wellbeing of people in communities within society would be how a humanist society would look like to myself.

Jacobsen: Why is Humanist Students important for the development of the humanist community on campus?

Parekh: Humanist Students remains highly significant for the development of humanist communities on campuses across the UK. Why would a student become a member of Humanist Students in the first place?

Going to university for the first time is a significant life event. This episodic event is a pivotal moment, where the majority leave the family home for their first opportunity to test their boundaries of freedom.

A poignant moment being that, when this person leaves their household, they are a representative of everything they have learnt. Going to university is more than just achieving a degree – it is an opportune moment to challenge the ideals, and *a priori* knowledge one brings along with them.

As a result, university is an environment where students that are religious are more likely to question the ideological construct of their religious faith, whereby they may question the very notion of whether they believe in their religious faith.

The transition from being religious to non-religious can be a difficult journey – with an increase in mental health issues such as depression, due to the deconstruction of one’s original sense of identity, which was formed within the trilogy of religion, culture, and tradition.

As a result, the importance for the development of a humanist community on university campuses remains paramount to ensure that people who might be going through such a transition, have a safety net and community to call their own.

Jacobsen: What do you plan to do after your time as the President-Emeritus of Humanist Students?

Parekh: The aim remains that there is a necessity for humanist communities to be formed within the local community, not just at universities, to provide support and a sense of belonging to non-religious people.

The task of creating this community within the local community remains a challenge – however, with the above apostasy example, there remains an ever-growing need for people to be supported within their local community.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Parekh: Having worked in the student sector of Humanist UK for the past four years, I've had a great opportunity to learn, develop, and support people in creating communities across the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland.

It is never an easy endeavour, as attendees may not come in vast numbers, people question the need and necessity of such a society or community on campus, some people do not have the awareness to know that there is a choice to be non-religious.

The constant pressure to continue to highlight the need and necessity of such a community has the potential to demotivate even the most energetic of individuals in continuing to develop such a community.

But, my final feeling remains to say that, people who take time to create a community for non-religious people at their universities must remember that they are the sole representation for non-religious students for their university.

They are the only representatives to highlight issues and provide their student audience with an awareness of what it means to live a life believing in the natural world – to believe in the good nature of human beings.

To stand tall at the sight of injustice and to be the only people on their entire university campus to be empowered to do so. Moreover, to be a safety net to people that are currently transitioning from being religious to non-religious.

If, anyone reading this is currently running their student society and feels discouraged and demoralised – to read this, and reignite that drive and grit, to represent non-religious people on campus.

Interview with Ghada Ibrahim on Islam, Saudi Arabia, and More

April 30, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Ghada Ibrahim is a Former Muslim and Saudi Activist. In particular, an activist for the rights of women in Islam and talking about her former faith. Here we talk about growing up in a Saudi Muslim family, family life, aspects of Islam, well-being of women and men in Islam, and the net analysis of Islam in Saudi Arabia and the MENA region.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You grew up in Saudi Arabia to a Muslim family, naturally. What was family life for you?

Ghada Ibrahim: Arab culture is big on familiar relations. Families are large, and family tied are heavily emphasized. Though I lived 1.5 hours away from the rest of my extended family, we still saw them regularly (at least once or twice a month on a weekend) It would be a big gathering.

Uncles, aunts, cousins, all together at a grandparents house for lunch, afternoon tea, and sometimes even dessert. My first friends were my cousins that were around my age. We played together all day long and got into trouble together when we didn't listen.

Though we were very religious, there was no actual "segregation" in my family's gatherings. The men and women sat together in the family room and talked, laughed, and shared meals together.

Women still wore hijab from the non-mahram men. Non-mahram men were men that weren't sons/nephews/husbands/brothers/fathers/uncles. Brothers-in-law were still considered non-mahram, and so did cousins. That didn't necessarily ruin the experience.

It was a nuisance to have to cover up, but spending time with family made up for that nuisance.

The main patriarch was usually the grandfather. He would be the authority that made most decisions, but he also had the biggest heart and he loved his wife, the main matriarch, very much.

My grandmother would sometimes cook the lunch feasts (which were always delicious) and my grandfather would usually distribute fruits after or before lunch. It was very lively, loud, chaotic, overwhelming, and honestly, a lot of fun.

Jacobsen: How did this family life provide a basis for knowledge about the religious teachings texts, and major religious figures?

Ibrahim: My family was and still is very devout. Most of our conversations and what we watched on TV revolved around religion and religious figures. A lot of the stories exchanged during our gatherings were stories of the prophet, the 12 Shia Imams, the prophet's daughter Fatimah, and the state of affairs of Muslims (Shia Muslims especially) in the current time.

A lot of my knowledge on religion and religious figures came from the stories my family shared in our gatherings or watched on TV from religious scholars. Books were also exchanged or recommended, especially that it was very difficult to find Shia books in Saudi Arabia (They are banned).

A book smuggled over the border from Iraq, Iran, or Bahrain is usually read by everyone in a third for “knowledge”.

Jacobsen: How did those understandings provide the basis for precise critical inquiry into the belief structure of Islam rather than a general, and simple, disbelief in the religion more often seen in those who thrust the cloak off?

Ibrahim: It was not necessarily the teachings that got me to begin looking into the religion in a more critical manner. It was another aspect of Shia Islam that I saw in my family and in my community as well.

It is this belief that Shia are victims of injustice at the hands of the unbelievers (usually some kind of Sunni Muslim ruler) and that the only way they will be free from this injustice is when the Mahdi, a Messiah-like figure, will return at the end of days and bring justice and peace to the world.

During the time, the Shia I knew were not doing anything to fight back the injustice and those that did, were criticized. Even if they were hailed as brave and courageous for standing up, they were still dismissed as not being able to do anything because the Mahdi is still the only one that can ever bring about an ever-lasting change.

It made me question why we, as Shia Muslims, had to rely on a figure we never met (only heard stories of) to better our conditions.

The reason I didn’t shed the whole cloak off was because Islam was the only religion and only “truth” I was ever exposed to. I was never exposed to other possibilities or the possibility of Islam not being the ultimate truth.

The interactions I had with my immediate family in our home and with the extended family was very sheltered from the broad outside world. I “heard” of Christians, Jews, Hindus, and nonbelievers, but I never really interacted with them.

Not until the internet was introduced in the 1990s to us and I began to speak to people from all over the world through the click of a few buttons. Even then, I never considered the possibility that Islam was not the truth.

Only that Shia might be misguided into not doing anything themselves to better their conditions. The strong familiar lies and the sheltered upbringing all made it much more difficult to shed the cloak of religion all together.

It just made me poke holes in a few different places and begin an inquiry into why these holes were even there.

Jacobsen: What points made Islam the least plausible to you?

Ibrahim: It was the role of women in the religion. Before I even began to look into Mohammad, the prophet of Islam, I read the Quran thoroughly along with different interpretations and asking several scholars on what I believed then (and still do today) “problematic” verses.

This includes the famous 4:34 verse that allows men to have authority over women and to discipline them, whereas women had no such right or authority over a man.

I’ve read several interpretations from both Sunni and Shia scholars, so-called “feminist” interpretations, asked several scholars and the answers varied from: “That’s not what

it *actually* says” to “women have a lot more responsibility towards the household and thus, her straying from the true path will lead to far more dangerous outcomes”.

It all sounded anti-feminist, anti-woman, insulting, and demeaning. It was the way women are portrayed in Islam that got me to begin questioning the authenticity of the religion as a whole. How could a religion claim to be perfect for all time and space and be so demeaning and insulting to women?

Jacobsen: How does Islam provide a worse basis for the well-being of women than men?

Ibrahim: I can list a few:

Men are allowed to marry more than 1 wife (up to 4) and have any number of sex slaves. This completely ignores women’s sexual and emotional needs and gives only men the sexual and emotional satisfaction in a marriage.

Men are allowed to discipline who they fear to be a disobedient wife (advise them, leave them in bed, and then hit them), while women have no right to even try and discipline a disobedient husband.

Women receive only half the inheritance they rightfully deserve and are required to have a male family member “take care of them”. That is infantilizing and assumes women are helpless and are always in need of a man.

Women’s testimony is half of that of a man. The Quranic reasoning is if one forgets, the other could remind her. This is extremely insulting to women’s intelligence.

After a divorce, women have to wait either 3 months (without any pregnancy) or if pregnant, have to wait until the baby is born before being able to remarry. If widowed, she has to wait 4 months and 10 days or until delivery of the baby if pregnant.

If a man is divorced or widowed, he doesn’t have to wait any amount of time to remarry. This is clear discrimination and in the time of DNA testing, there is no reason to have this time to “make sure the baby’s father is known”.

Women have to be covered up in hijab. Men do not need to cover up at all.

Women do not get the power to divorce. Women lose custody of their daughters after the age of 7 after a divorce.

A virgin woman is considered “more favorable” than a non-virgin. There is no distinction at all for men.

Jacobsen: Is Islam a net positive or negative force in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region?

Ibrahim: I see it as a net negative force in the MENA region. It holds back people from progressing and adopting humanist values.

Everything has to be looked at from a religious perspective and as long as Islam is the rule of law, there can never be women’s rights, minority rights, LGBT rights, freedom of speech, freedom of and from religion, and even rights of prisoners/criminals will be neglected.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Ibrahim: When people look at Islam, they look at it from a “their culture” perspective instead of the very real threat it is. The reason the MENA region is so behind on human rights, women’s rights, etc IS Islam.

Islam is as much as Abdul who you go drink with on Friday nights as it is Hamzah that beat up his wife because she refused to sleep with him.

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

Iraqi Atheists Arrested for Atheism

April 30, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Al-Monitor reported on the arrests sent out for Iraqis charged with the crime of atheism.

The charges come through the Dhi Qar province Garraf district judiciary. Atheism as a crime gained lots of social media attention. Some argue this is against the rights of the Iraqis.

The Iraqi Constitution guarantees freedom of belief and expression. Others see this as a political move. The chief Garraf district judge, Dhidan al-Ekili, charged atheist Iraqis.

al-Ekili said, “[They were] holding seminars during social gatherings” to promote and popularize atheism. Four of these people were arrested on March 11.

The local administration set the intelligence agencies to crackdown on atheism. al-Ekili notes this is within the Iraqi Penal Code. At the same time, the Iraqi Constitution permits freedom of belief and intellectual views.

Legal and political analyst Ali Jaber al-Tamimi had different views. He said, “There aren’t any articles in the Iraqi Penal Code that provide for a direct punishment for atheism, nor are there any special laws on punishments against atheists.”

Desecrations of religions is different. But not the simple holding of the belief of the non-existence of God.

The Iraqi Constitution allows “freedom of belief and intellectual views.” Social media critics were harsh on the authorities.

Ahmad Wahid, a stand-up comedian, ridiculed self-professed atheists who do not understand atheism.

Iraqi newspapers assert these atheists come from failed reigns. The failure of the Islamic ruling parties. Corruption as an additive factor.

Gallup reports 88% of Iraqis are religious circa 2012. It is in the top 10 for religiosity in the world. Myths exist about atheism, misunderstandings too.

Clerics associate secularism and atheism as a lump. One category merged together. Others see liberalism and communism as anti-religion.

They become equated with atheism. Shiite cleric Amer al-Kufaishi urged resistance to these ideas. Because they promote anti-religion.

Some Islamic parties rule since March 2003. Safaa Khalaf, a reporter, said, “The idea of atheism in Iraq is rooted in political pressure and its economic and social ramifications.”

Atheism, according to Khalaf, becomes a reaction to political Islam. Political Islam’s inability to solve people’s problems. Modern communication helps with this.

Social media as one reflection, where criticism happened.

Khalaf, explained further, “Secularism was considered an adversary of religious faith.”

Secularism, as a term, is gone from political circulation.

The Iraqi Communist Party replaced the term with “civility.”

“Inaccurate and misused labels are being used to describe incorrect behaviors by the political authority in light of the security mentality prevalent in both society and state,” Khalaf stated.

Continuing, “The authorities are comfortable with this illiteracy because it immensely aids them in oppressing any opposed view, especially if it challenges religion, clerics or practices that interfere with public freedoms.”

Iraqi leaders are suspicious of atheism. Some fight against it. Further, others see it as an assault on the Islamic parties.

Are Outcomes Better in Afghanistan?

April 30, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

There is an increase in the quality of outcomes based on reportage about Afghanistan. For the last 15 years, Afghanistan has made progress in the health outcomes for its citizenry.

This is “especially for women and children,” even in spite of the insecurity well-known in the country. The basis for the improvements are from large-scale partnership models with non-governmental organizations as the deliverers of service.

One report, “Progress in the Face of Insecurity: Improving Health Outcomes in Afghanistan,” (2018) talked about the health gains undergirded through the expansion of the healthcare system and health services for the population.

ReliefWeb reported that the growth has been strong and sustained since 2003. As the World Bank described, “These improvements were in fact larger than in more secure provinces in the country. However, rising insecurity since 2010 has slowed some of these gains.”

Public Finance International reports that there is a long path ahead for the parity of Afghani health outcomes with the world in general.

The World Bank Country Director of Afghanistan explained, “Long-term focus and investment by the government of Afghanistan and many partners has moved the country forward on health, despite many challenges... Afghanistan still has a long way to go to ensure quality health services for all, and we look forward to be a being a partner in that effort.”

The more insecure the areas in Afghanistan then the more the maternal health rate of improvement has slowed. The World Bank made a recommendation for the local health service delivery methods to become autonomous in order to improve outcomes.

More investment in monitoring and information is said to help improve the outcomes too. Fewer children are dying before the age of 5. It dropped 34% from 2003 to 2015. Women seeing a qualified health professional increase at a rate of 3.5% per year in addition to the use and contraceptives and births assisted by those skilled professionals.

“Afghanistan’s health gains despite continuing insecurity is a story from which the world has much to learn,” the World Bank Group Senior Director of Health, Nutrition and Population, Tim Evans, explained, “Rather than retreating and unravelling in adverse conditions, the health system is driving forward to secure the health of all citizens – especially mothers and children – drawing on deep reservoirs of local ingenuity.”

Chinese Authorities Restrict Christianity

April 30, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Chinese authorities have viewed Christianity with suspicion for some time. They view Christians as potentially threatening political dissidents.

This has been a concern of the Communist Party of China. Online marketplaces within China have been removing the Bible. Beijing is restricting citizens' practice of religion.

China has controlled the sale of Bibles in the past. Only state-sanctioned churches having the ability to print and distribute them. Online marketplaces were a way to sell them without state sanction.

This appears to have changed recently. JD.com, Amazon.cn, and Taobao show few or no results when searching for the Bible.

A senior research analyst, Sarah Cook, for East Asia at Freedom House described the bans. Cook noted the mismatch with religious freedom and online censorship. Religious topics, and other sensitive areas, are censored.

Cook found, "... the Chinese authorities increasingly using more high-tech methods to control religion and punish believers." These methods can include surveillance or arrest of believers.

Only five faiths are recognized by the Chinese government. These are Catholicism, Chinese Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism, and Taoism.

The Chinese Catholic bishops remain unappointed by the Pope. Beijing and the Pope have this continue opposition to one another. Relations between the Chinese state and the Vatican broke in 1951.

Yang Fenggang is the head of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University. Fenggang explained, "It sounds like the opposition force within the Chinese authorities who oppose the Vatican-China relations have their voice."

There appeared to be progress made in Vatican-China relations. Some purported this would happen around Easter. Unfortunately, this did not happen.

The banning of Bibles is in line with worrying developments in China about freedom to religion.

A public white paper asserted religions should "adapt themselves to the socialist society." It continued, "Religious believers and non-believers respect each other, and live in harmony, committing themselves to reform and opening up and the socialist modernization, and contribute to the realization of the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation."

Some work is being done to make a Sinicized Bible, a Chinese Bible. It would be along the lines of other faiths' efforts to rewrite their holy texts to fit the atheist worldview of the Community Party of China.

Sarah Cook posits that this may backfire for the authorities. Chinese Christians tend to be apolitical. But these restrictions may make them go to external sources for the Bible and may also make them more outspoken against the Communist Party and Xi Jinping.

Stephen Skyvington on Early Life, Belief, God, New Book, and Trends in Canadian Politics and Religion

May 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Stephen Skyvington is the President of Politrain, Inc. Here we talk about early life, belief, God, an upcoming new book, being the President of Politrain, Inc., and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let us start from the beginning, as I have said in other interviews, like a superhero origin story. How did you get here? What were early life and education like for you?

Stephen Skyvington: I was born in 1958 — on New Year’s Eve, no less — in Toronto, Ontario. I spent the first twelve and a half years of my life going to school and playing sports in Scarborough, before we moved to a small town about fifteen miles north of Toronto in 1971. I say small town but it was really more like someone had plopped down fifty houses in a corn field on what had been prime Ontario farm land before the farmer who owned it sold the land to developers. As a result, I’ve grown up with something of a “split” personality, in that I feel just as comfortable living downtown in a big city — as I did for seventeen years in Toronto, from about 1990 to 2006, before moving here to Cobourg — as I do living in the country.

Jacobsen: How did these influence personality insofar as they influence temperament and belief structure?

Skyvington: Although my parents told me many times I was the only “planned” child, arriving a full eight years after my middle brother and ten years after my eldest brother, the reality is I ended up being left on my own quite a bit growing up. Especially after we moved to the country. My one brother stayed behind to go to university while my other brother met someone, fell in love, and returned to the city to live with his new wife after being with us for only one year. As a result, I spent most of my days reading and drawing and dreaming. All worthwhile activities, to be sure — although, unfortunately, I started to become more and more reclusive like my mother and less and less gregarious like my father. I suspect this is why — even to this day, some forty-five years later — I often feel “alone in a crowd” no matter where I happen to be at the time.

Jacobsen: What did God seem like as a kid and adolescent, whether in observation of others and with a theory of their conceptualizations or in your mind?

Skyvington: I’m not sure I had much of a concept of God growing up, although I do remember standing up in class one morning for Show and Tell and proudly announcing that my Grandpa “went to Heaven last night!” a couple of months before my eighth birthday. I also vividly recall crying one Sunday morning and telling my dad I didn’t want to go to Sunday school anymore, that I wanted to stay home and watch the “Roy Rogers Show” on TV. Much to my astonishment, he let me skip church, which began a long — and to this day, pretty much unbroken — estrangement from organized religion.

Jacobsen: Your next book has a standing title of “Un-belief-able: An Atheist’s Take on God, Organized Religion and Spirituality.” What inspired the topic, the title, and the content?

Skyvington: I'd just finished writing my latest book, "This May Hurt A Bit," which is about how we might go about reinventing Canada's health-care system, and was casting about for something new to explore. Around the same time, I found myself reading Christopher Hitchens' excellent memoir, "Hitch-22," in which he explores his atheism and speaks at great length about organized religion, when the title "Un-belief-able" popped into my head. Now, regular readers of your magazine will recognize that title as the one I used for a piece I submitted to you for publication a few months ago, which I wrote after attending the funeral service for my wife's cousin. Re-reading the article, I realized I'd barely scratched the surface, as it were, and that there was a whole lot more I could talk about on the subject. I asked my wife what she thought about the idea and if she'd be good enough to dig up as many expressions as she could find that had something to do with God, organized religion or spirituality. From the dozens she came up with, I narrowed it down to twenty-five, and set myself the task of writing a 3,000-word essay on each topic over the next few months. Hopefully, this will result in my publishing a brand-new book sometime in 2020.

Jacobsen: As the president of Politrain, Inc., how does this build into the religious/non-religious views to you? Politics, ideally, does not influence religion, but the world does not reflect this. Citizens will vote for religious identification of a leader. Of course, Canadian citizens have full right to vote for the reasons deemed fit by them.

Skyvington: A few years back, I wrote an article that was published by the Sun Media chain entitled, "Why can't an atheist be prime minister?" If memory serves me correct, I believe the article came about as a result of watching all those presidential candidate debates on CNN, where it seemed that every two or three minutes someone would invoke the name of God or Jesus as a way of reaching out to individual blocks of voters — typically the "religious right" — as a way of validating their candidacy. While I found it frankly appalling that so many of these candidates felt it necessary to pander to that particular sector of society in hopes of winning the nomination, it got me to thinking about just how nearly impossible it would be for an atheist to become president or prime minister these days — even though, as I argue in the article, we'd be a hell of a lot better off if we were to elect an atheist. Needless to say, that article and a couple more I wrote on similar topics set off something of a "sh*t storm". I guess it's sort of like what Mark Twain once said. "It's easier to fool people than to convince them that they've been fooled."

Jacobsen: You experienced more time than me. You witnessed more than me. You read more than me. These give the basis for substantiated reflection. In Canada, over the last four decades, what trends in religion and politics concern you?

Skyvington: Ever since Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated in 1968 — and particularly since 9/11 — it seems to me that the world has lost its sense of humor. We are incapable of laughing at ourselves and have lost the will to love and find joy in the little things that make day-to-day life so worth living. I've spoken before about the need to "ban" organized religion, that it has caused just about every war world-wide over the past several centuries, and that too many people use prophesy and The Word as a way of spreading hate and keeping people down. While Canada has managed to avoid much of the religious strife we witness going on elsewhere on what seems like a daily basis thanks to both mainstream media and social media, it's clear our Day of Reckoning is coming soon. This is why it's so important, I believe, that those of us who are atheists speak out in a very public and even forceful way in order to help those whose vision has become clouded by lies, half-truths and myths. While I realize banning organized religion would be tantamount to the book burning that the Nazis engaged in or an

outright act of fascism, the fact remains that religion — as it's being practiced today in the 21st Century — is every bit as dangerous as a nuclear bomb and should be treated as such.

Jacobsen: Over the last four decades in Canada, what trends in religion and politics seem positive to you?

Skyvington: Pretty much nothing in religion or politics seems positive to me. As I say in my forthcoming book, governments used to do things *for* people. Now they do things *to* people. Our leaders are no longer “giants” — they are mediocre at best; thieves, liars and crooks at worst. They like to say they are leading from the middle. Well, leading from the middle isn't leadership. It's following. While I try to be sunny and optimistic as much as possible, and lead my life following the example of the great American author Henry Miller, whose code was “always merry and bright,” I do find myself wondering more often than not if I haven't somehow ended up on the wrong planet. Idiocy reigns supreme. Not just in the world of politics but also with organized religion. Everyone is afraid of the unknown and of each other. The Internet is a place where people go to vent and spew all kinds of garbage. We don't know how to love one another. We only know how to hate. No wonder the aliens haven't bothered to visit our planet. Clearly, there's no signs of intelligent life down here.

Jacobsen: As an atheist, this begs questions. What defines God to you? Why deny this God?

Skyvington: It's not really a matter of denying anything. The way I look at it, *we* are God and planet Earth is Heaven. Which is why I believe we should live for today, not for tomorrow. What do I mean by this? Simple. I often watch my dogs — we have three: two that we rescued from abusive situations and a big, beautiful puppy who's full of life. Whether they're playing in the backyard, going for a walk, eating, sniffing the grass or just lying on the couch sleeping, they seem so wise to me. If only human beings could be more like animals, I can't help but think we'd be a lot better off. Unfortunately, instead of being full of loving thoughts and caring for each other, humans are constantly scheming and looking for way to get ahead by taking advantage of the sick and the vulnerable. I hate to be so negative, but we really are a disgusting bunch.

Jacobsen: Does organized religion seem more like a positive or negative force in Canada? If a mixed answer, what domains seem good? What domains seem bad?

Skyvington: Negative, of course. It's sort of like that old joke: “Life is for people who can't face drugs.” For an atheist, life is for people who can't face religion. As you've probably noticed by now, I have something of a built-in B.S. detector. I know when I'm being “spun” and I know when I'm being played. The Bible is a great story — and yes, in case you were wondering, I have read the Bible cover to cover — but that's all it is . . . a story. Written by ordinary people just like you and me. It's not the word of God. It's just a bunch of made up stories written by people with an agenda. To fall on our knees and bow our heads in prayer and repeat these stories and sing a bunch of hymns . . . well, it kind of reminds me of communism, to be brutally honest with you. It's mind control. It gives hope to the weak and provides a sense of importance to the well-off. And while I understand the need to make sense of this old world, and that everyone is looking for answers and for a way to not feel so afraid all the time, I'm afraid the Bible and other religious texts like it no more contain the answers to the mystery of life than the phone book. In fact, in some ways, the phone book is better, because at least if you dial one of the numbers inside, you're likely to get a real, live human being on the other end. Calling out to God,

however, will in all likelihood leave you deafened by the silence. At least, that's been my experience anyway.

Jacobsen: What equates to the spiritual and the spiritual life to you?

Skyvington: People are often perplexed when they hear me — an avowed atheist — say that I believe everyone has a spiritual side. By that I mean, we all have that voice in our head that tells us the difference between good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust. Whenever I sit down on a bench in a park, or walk through the trees in the woods, or sit beside a lake or stream, I like to quiet my mind and engage in what I call “the spiritual life”. It has nothing to do with God or organized religion. It's merely a time where one can see the world as it is — a place of great beauty, filled with peaceful, loving creatures — and appreciate the perfection of it all. We don't need to fit the real Garden of Eden into a box or try to turn it into some kind of morality play. The real thing is plenty enough and fine just the way it is.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion based on the conversation today?

Skyvington: Bob Dylan once said that the Bible is the most under-rated and the most over-rated book of all time. I think that about nails it. Mr. Dylan also wrote a song in which he suggested that to live outside the law, you must be honest. That's how I, as an atheist, have always tried to live my life, and how I think all of us should face each and every day on this wonderful planet. Not by perpetrating the Big Lie, but instead by being honest and loving and telling truth. After all, as someone else once said, the truth will set you free. Something to think about the next time you see someone flailing their arms like a maniac, waving the Good Book, and telling you he or she has all the answers.

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

Free Hearts, Free Minds GoFundMe

May 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

A new organization has been founded by the Canadian former or ex-Muslim Yasmine Mohammed. Mohammed is an ex-Muslim activist, author, instructor, and podcaster. She wrote *From Al Qaeda to Atheism*.

In early life, Mohammed was beaten because of a failure to memorize the Quran at times. Then she was coerced into marriage with a fundamentalist Muslim man, who turned out to be a member of Al Qaeda.

The Al Qaeda member husband was bailed from prison by none other than Osama bin Laden. Mohammed has lived a life experienced by some Muslim women. Eventually, she was contacted CSIS, which she describes as the “Canadian CIA.”

Mohammed knew nothing of them before their contact with her.

In interviews with her, and a personal opinion here, Yasmine does not get sufficient recognition for the pain, heartache, trauma, and loss of life quality and time because of the circumstances of life experience for her.

When an adult, she did wear the *niqab* and “lived in a home/prison with paper covering all [over] the windows.” She only earned a high school diploma at that time. She had a baby as well. However, she fled. These reflect the stories of others.

I have talked to many leaders and others in the former Muslim community. Not all or even most Muslims experience these traumas, and ordinary Muslims live normal healthy lives full of giving and receiving love with family, friends, and community; however, these other stories exist, and community and organizations, and councils, do not by necessity solve their problems – internal and external, but they do provide some solace, safety, and sanctuary in working through their problems.

The new organization has a GoFundMe campaign. When I asked Mohammed about the foundation of the campaign for the new organization Free Hearts, Free Minds (FHFM), she said, “I was getting inundated with messages from people from the Muslim world asking for help. I tried as hard as I could, but I didn’t have the resources to help them all. I was frustrated and sad and it was starting to affect my life and my mental health.”

When she was hearing and reading those stories, she felt a personal connection to them based on the life experience for her. She lives in British Columbia, Canada now. However, she knew the experience of living in a non-free and non-secular society.

Mohammed noted the possibility of wallowing. However, she chose to not wallow “in feelings [of] helplessness, frustration and sadness, I decided to start FreeHearts, Free Minds.” She feels as if reaching back a decade or more to help her young, suicidal self.

FHFM provides the basis for people to be able to know about leaving Islam as an option. They can stay if they wish, of course, as comes from freedom of religion and freedom of belief. However, the ability to know about the other option is important.

“Today, with the help of technology, and FHF, I want to do all I can to ensure that no one ever feels that alone,” Mohammed said. As the organization is young, and with only a current team of ten people, the organization is small.

However, as things move forward, Mohammed explained, “...we are prepared to launch a dating site that will support Ex-Muslims in the Muslim world trying to avoid forced marriages and/or circumvent guardianship laws.”

The other service is a life coach who supports apostates in Muslim majority countries.

Mohammed continued, “If we’re able to maintain and grow our two services I’ll be happy. I think both services provide essential support to apostates in Islamic countries in very dangerous situations who have no other resources, no other options, and no other hope.”

One can donate monthly by clicking [here](#). There can see the website [here](#). Again, the GoFundMe campaign is [here](#).

Pastor Paul VanderKlay on the Christian Reformed Church

May 2, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I wanted to explore some of the world of different Christian leaders, small and big. However, I wanted to report less on those and more in their own words. These will be published, slowly, over time. This, I trust, may open dialogue and understanding between various communities. Of course, an interview does not amount to an endorsement, but to the creation of conversation, comprehension, and compassion. Paul VanderKlay is the Pastor of Living Stones Christian Reformed Church. Here we talk about the Christian Reformed Church, community, church services, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are the pastor of Living Stones Christian Reformed Church. One preliminary question. Pastors wear many hats within the church community. Some more demanding than others. What are bigger hats in the service of the Christian Reformed Church community at Living Stones Christian Reformed Church? Also, as a small sub-question, what does “Living Stones” mean within the context of the Christian Reformed Church tradition?

VanderKlay: Great question. Here’s where it comes from.

1 Peter 2:4–10 (NIV)

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” ⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” ⁸ and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. ⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Christians are in some ways “little Christs”. The community of them is supposed to be a “temple” which as anyone would know in the ancient world is the resting place for the god. You can see that in Genesis 1. In the Israel story the big deal was that the Holy Creator God was living in the midst of an unworthy people, without destroying them. The church ties into that history and supposed to embody it. It often fails, but that’s the idea.

So as a pastor my main job is to do what I can to hopefully not stop that from happening. I think that is the right way of thinking about it instead of “making that happen”. Pastors don’t make Christians, they don’t make churches, Christians believe God’s Holy Spirit does that. We most get in the way, not unlike the disciples in the gospels who mostly got in the way.

This involves preaching and teaching and caring for people. These are the most obvious things that someone might see. The less obvious things are stewarding a culture. This is often the most

important thing. It is the small “yes” and “no” to one thing or another in action that actually shapes what a church becomes. It’s not that different from anyone else’s life. We are shaped by what we say “yes” to and what we say “no” to. Churches are of course far more complicated because there are so many more people with histories and roles and power and sin. It’s almost always a mess but we believe that somewhere in this mess there is glory and in that glory God lives in the midst of his people.

Jacobsen: When Christian communities work to build a community, of course, they seem to have, at the heart of it, the image and example of Jesus Christ as depicted in the New Testament of the Bible to guide the construction of their community. How do you work within this framework to build, lead, and maintain the community at Living Stones Christian Reformed Church?

VanderKlay: If you were to read books from the Christian Reformed Church before the 1960s you’d read a lot about how everything in the CRC is a direct expression of what’s in the New Testament. Part of what happened in the 1960s was that this language went out of fashion. What changed? The Second World War.

Before WWII most CRC folks lived in relatively isolated churches in isolated ghettoized communities. We were God’s chosen people living in direct obedience to his Word. The war was a great mixing machine that put CRC people in barracks and trenches and after universities and suburbs with Baptists, and Mormons, and Jews and Catholics and atheists. The CRC was after that point a bit more aware of its own historical and ethnic heritage and the ways that it seemed every group claimed simple, clear application of the New Testament in their community.

It would be nice to imagine that pluralism yields sophistication, but it usually yields another new level of naivety. New ways of imagining faithful application came in from other Christian traditions in American and also a new degree of skepticism.

Traditions mix with ethnicity and local contexts to form the body of Christ which is his church. My father did this in Paterson NJ amidst the children of Dutch immigrants who wished to serve God by serving the black population fleeing the Jim Crow south looking for jobs in the industrial north. This was the context of my formation. Dutch Calvinism with Cold War Paterson as the civil rights movement reverberated through the church. The New Testament becomes “canon” bit in a unique way in each place. The mental maps of Jesus and his church get worked into real time and space in ways that are impossible to reduce or multiply. History is that way. So traditions are maintained, sometimes tweaked, sometimes changed, sometimes abandoned and later restored. It’s thoroughly human without excluding the presence of God.

Living Stones developed on the other coast but in similar ways. The crushing poverty of Paterson is replaced by the disposable suburb of Florin and Meadowview in Sacramento. Old saints die, or stay, or leave, new saints come. Change is constant but continuities persist. I bring the Bible into the conversation and the long narrative thread of the church gathers crystals in yet another unique solution something like rock candy.

Jacobsen: What are the proceedings of normal church services at Living Stones Christian Reformed Church on the main service day? How do you plan and execute special events, e.g. weddings, baptisms, funerals, and so on?

VanderKlay: By temperament I am a creature of repetition. Days and weeks for me are mostly the same if I can help it. On Sundays we gather to study the Bible, to enjoy the company of old

friends and new, to pray, to offer financial sacrifices to God, and to worship which is culturally the strangest thing we do in a secular world. We attempt to inhabit a fandom that goes all the way back to an obscure people living in a portion of the world destined to yield geographical genocide. We believe that the God of the world ceded the planet to a rebellious steward-race to eventually redeem it at great ironic cost. We do what ancients would recognize but moderns abhor. We relate to this king up in the sky imagining he enjoys our sacrifices and offerings whether in cash, check or song.

Because my congregation is small and mostly old I do more funerals than weddings. It might sound strange but I like doing funerals better. Why? Because weddings are often distracted by emotions going in every direction but the right one. Funerals bring a focus that only loss can give. People are ready to settle down and listen at funerals. They are ready to sit and assess and explore how they are spending their ever decreasing number of moments. Things of real value are contemplated and shared. While there are often remarks about someone's work life seldom do we pay attention to money kept or used on diversion or satisfaction-seeking. More often we learn about the time spent with loved ones, the sacrifices given for the welfare of others. Funerals seem to provide holy moments even for those skeptical of the holy. So in my planning for these things, as I said at the beginning, I try not to get in the way. I try to tell the truth which can be difficult at a funeral. The devil's tool at a funeral is nostalgia and vanity. I only do funerals for sinners, which means all of us. This lets me talk about God's generosity even if the stories of human goodness need to be embellished.

Jacobsen: Any community has the problems of a community, whether internal dynamics or the pressure from the wider culture. What are some of the bigger difficulties in the maintenance of a church? What are some of those difficulties from within, e.g. members leaving or financial difficulties, or from the outside, e.g. popular cultural influence at odds with Christian Reformed Church teachings?

VanderKlay: It's no secret that churches in North America are shrinking. Before I talk about this it's important to know that this is the exception to the rule right now in the world. While numbers of Christian worshippers decline in Western Europe and North America they are growing or booming just about everywhere else. It has always been this way in the history of the church. The Lord gives and takes away. We're not dualists really.

There is near endless speculation and anxiety about this in North America? Is it science that makes the Bible unbelievable? Is it affluence that makes us less hungry for God because we can fill our lives with cars and vacations and homes and porn and video games and genetically-selected offspring? Is it that the church has simply lost its way or gone corrupt with power, sex and money? As with most things it's likely "all of the above" and "more than we can know".

The frontier between "church" and "not-church" is always moving and never empty. We're all given 24 hours in a day and need to figure out how to fill them. The last 50 years have exploded with ways to spend our time that most generations could hardly imagine.

The ubiquitous uncertainty of life through most of human history tempted the church of past generations to focus exclusively on next-life destinations. While that's clearly something to talk about the fast transition to modern-80-year-Western-lifestyle-security has left the church a bit flatfooted. The church needs to endure without losing the narrative thread. The Orthodox church has endured Islam and Communism, we'll see what the European churches can do.

We often do our best when we are challenged. Affluence tempts us to sloth. Christianity seems to do best from below, not from positions of privilege and established power.

Church members face all of the difficulties of everyone else, hopefully however they do so less alone. We try to support each other, emotionally or even financially.

Christians believe that the story of humanity will finally have a happy ending. We believe that joy is foundational, not loss, and that heaven and earth will one day be reunited and the struggles we face now will be, as one saint said, like a night in an inconvenient hotel. It's easy to discount "pie in the sky bye and bye" but it sure beats lonely resignation buoyed by some sense of pride about the dark cold end of the universe.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

VanderKlay: It's a privilege to try to share a few thoughts. I hope they were helpful.

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

The Existential Risks and Trauma of Leaving a Cult

May 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott is the Founder of Skeptic Meditations. He speaks from experience in entering and leaving an ashram. Here we talk about existential risks for an individual leaving a cult, views of the world only knowing the cult, leaving psychologically and physically from the cult, places for transition, and some who never get over their trauma.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What bigger existential risks exist for the individual who leaves the cult, immediately?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: The more the group members lived in the ashrams the greater their self-identity was broken and reformed as part of the group. In other words, group members' existence was attached to monastic identity, name, and position within the spiritual-organizational hierarchy.

Cloistered spiritual groups are most undemocratic and unequal. The superior, powerful members are those closest to the leaders. Group members learn quickly how to please and fight their way to maintain or climb up the spiritual-corporate ladder. It's a kind of spiritual-ego formed within the context of the organization.

It is difficult to describe what a member feels and thinks after leaving their relationships within a group that for years or decades destroyed, then reformed and maintained their spiritual-ego or self-world identity. Members who leave the group psychologically, first, before they leave physically, probably have a lower risk of failing to reintegrate into society outside.

When you think about cults, the aim of these groups and the members who join them, is to break down the old self-world identity. Labeled as spiritual training, the aim of groups based on ideological thought-reform leads to abuses of its members: whether political, social, or religious groups.

For religious cult-groups, the aim is to remold members into the image of the God, Guru, or perfection as idealized in the spiritual practices of the group. In cults with an Eastern enlightenment-bent, the path is purportedly divinely designed to bring follower-practitioners to perfection, to realize self as Self, soul, or God or Nirvana.

The practice and progress to the aim are measured by degrees of selfless service and obedience to the spiritual teacher, and distrusting self. Through the aims and ideals of the group's spiritual training, members allow themselves to be destroyed, broken, and in the old self's place a new self is created, fashioned to fit the group.

This is not a secret. It's openly discussed by members that the outside world is dangerous, evil, or deluded and inside the group, close to the master-teacher is spiritual safety and illumination. Psychologically cult groups break the member's sense of self and then reframe follower's self-world identity.

Essentially members surrender their existence (their self-world image) to the authority of someone who claims to know what is best for the disciple-follower. For members who've lived for years and decades inside, psychologically these groups, the damage is irreparable.

Jacobsen: How does someone view the world if the cult or cult-like group is all they have ever known in life?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: Long-time cult-group members fear to leave the group for many reasons. In the SRF ashrams, for example, we were taught that as ordained monastics we were somehow special, were chosen by God and Guru to help with his divine dispensation of SRF teachings and meditation techniques.

Our belief in our specialness made us feel superior and powerful—with the weight and authority of Creator of the Universe behind us, who could ultimately be against us?

Surrender and obedience to external authority become easy when you are told you are special, superior, and forerunners of a new race of spiritual beings destined to raise the consciousness of humanity and the world.

The darker side of our belief in this story is that if we ever left the guru-teacher or broke our vows of loyalty then we were told we would not only risk losing everything spiritually but would possibly have to wander in darkness, suffer, lost in delusion (Maya) for seven future lifetimes (future human incarnations).

That is heavy fear and pressure to stay physically and psychologically with the group and its leader-teacher.

There is a certain degree of an annihilation of self that occurs upon entering, staying, and psychologically leaving the cult doctrine. That is perhaps why many former members who leave cults hold onto the underlying beliefs that led them and kept them in the group in the first place.

We humans have a deep need to create meaning in a seemingly meaningless universe. Our cultures (cults: familial, social, economic, political, philosophical or theological) breed and offer meaning, which we seldom take time to examine carefully.

I think this is why existential philosophers, like Nietzsche, declared God is dead but acknowledged the fact that the natural world was a nightmare of horror tinged with moments of art and beauty.

When a member of the cult group, that pretends to offer the ultimate answers to life and purpose of existence, when that member psychologically or physically leaves the group or ideology that creates for him or her a crisis of existence.

Jacobsen: How can members who are thoroughly entrenched in the doctrine of the cult's worldview leave mentally and then physically?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: If a member of the ashram left or was asked by group leaders to leave the ashram, and yet they didn't psychologically leave behind the SRF monastic ideology, then leaving physically didn't make much if any change in their cultic worldview.

Perhaps, the members who left physically but not psychologically have to struggle with guilt and shame of not being good enough to stay, even if they "chose" to leave.

There are numerous former monks who I talked with after I left, though they physically left the ashram, clung psychologically to the Yogi-cultic doctrines of the teacher Yogananda, SRF, or kept revolving their worldview around devotion to God and Guru and spiritual liberation through yoga meditation.

Some former ashram members told me that their experiences in meditation prove the existence of kundalini (astral energies) awakened in their spine (a Yogic doctrine espoused by SRF and many Eastern-styled meditation groups), as if that is somehow meaningful and real beyond doubt.

When their understanding is these mystical experiences (mystical interpretations of the natural world), which were implanted into our minds in the first place by the external authority, teachings, or teacher, how would they know that is kundalini in his spine?

Didn't some external authority tell him that and give him that distinction and interpretation? He's psychologically trapped in the teacher's ideology, though he left the ashram a decade ago.

Clearly many former cult members have not "left" the cult psychologically. They don't leave behind the underlying premises that brought, kept, and controlled them while they physically lived inside the cultic group. Many continue to believe and practice the underlying teachings or doctrines of the external authority.

My own leaving psychologically unfolded gradually. For years and perhaps a decade or more starting while I lived in the SRF ashram. Then when upon physically leaving the group I at first believed that my reason for leaving was flaws of organized religion, of imperfect humans.

I continued to meditate and believe in the underlying premises (God, guru, meditation powers and energies) espoused by SRF and mystical, spiritual yoga meditation or enlightenment. Though I could not make sense at first of why I failed to interpret my experiences as special or mystical and enlightening as the teacher and group had promised.

Eventually, I saw that what I'd believed in was a false doctrine. That the whole thing was a fraud, and that we'd simply been abused. It really hurts to admit that. But to admit I was a victim of abuse has helped me to process, learn, and get through the trauma.

Jacobsen: Do halfway houses or safe transition houses exist for ex-cult members as with women who were victims of domestic abuse?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: I'm not aware of organized, physical safe houses for victims of cult abuse in the United States. Though there are some online support groups. In U.S. society, I think, pretends there are no victims of abuses.

Self-reliance is sometimes insufficient. In the U.S., there is an underlying premise in society everybody should be able to pick themselves up by their bootstraps and not expect anyone, certainly not society, to take care of us.

Perhaps the heartlessness of self-reliance is one reason why in the U.S. we have so many religious factions, fundamentalists, and cults vying for mindshare. And, why there seems to be no end to the supply of members joining and leaving religions and cults.

So, for the most part, cult members in the U.S. when they leave the group, they pretty much are on their own. Some are fortunate to have supportive family and friends. But, as I noted above, many cult members abandoned or destroyed their former relationships upon entering and obeying the rules of the cult.

However, I do know of a few informal halfway houses for former religious clergy or cult-members to transition back into society.

The Clergy Project, a nonprofit for clergy who no longer believe in the supernatural, provide online resources and sometimes training and funding for former clergy to reintegrate back into society.

There's Recovering From Religion that provides a toll-free hotline, but it is not focused on cults per se, but on people struggling to come out of religion (which as I mentioned above physically leaving a cult group is not the same as psychologically leaving the religion or underlying doctrine of the cult).

I've heard that Leah Remini, producer, and host of the TV documentary series Scientology and the Aftermath, is trying to organize a nonprofit to support Scientology Sea Org (e.g. clergy) who want to leave and to reintegrate into society.

When I left the Self-Realization Fellowship Order, never to return physically, I was fortunate to find the informal support of several members and former monastics of SRF.

Without their material (donations of household items to stock my new apartment) and psychological support (listening and understanding), I may have had a much more challenging reintegration back into society.

Or, if I had left without their support would have felt perhaps totally isolated and alone. (Self-reliance is mostly a myth. We rely on support from others, especially during our crises.)

I sometimes feel alone in my experiences but then I occasionally meet former cult members who I can identify with. But there seems to be a little more public conversation in the mainstream, but mostly alternative media about cult-groups and members who exit cults.

That kind of vulnerability, feeling isolated and alone, is often what cults and their leaders prey on and target in recruits. So whatever we as society can do to support our members to be independently interdependent; to be part of a supportive community not conditioned by conforming to a set ideology is, I believe, extremely important for social progress and for the survival of the natural world of which humans are part.

Jacobsen: Do some never 'get over' their experiences, the trauma for example?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: Yes. It breaks you to be a committed member of a cult or psychologically-controlling group. Members join, knowingly or unknowingly, for the promise of spiritual training, which begins by breaking down the ego, self-identity. There's much trust placed in God, Guru-teacher, and spiritual truth.

When the promises turn out to be false, that breaks members too. As the member's self-identity softens, breaks down, the member submits to the cult's reforming, reshaping into a new self-identity.

The break-down of self at first can often feel exhilarating, elating, ecstatic, liberating. But this breakdown and reshaping of self-identity is at best a waste of time, at worst dangerous. Members may never regain the lost years in the group: time wasted, not spent building useful skills, relationships, family, career, intellect, and so on.

Many former members never really seem to get over their trauma. Many turn inward on themselves: to guilt, shame, or depression, sometimes suicide. Again, the guilt and self-world break-down is part of the conditioning, or spiritual training, underlying membership in cultic groups.

Members blame the victim, even if it's them. The underlying premises are the spiritual teachings and teachers are perfect and if anyone doesn't find that perfection in them then it is the member's fault.

They are not spiritual enough or too blinded by ego-self and so on. Many former members are perhaps damaged for the remainder of their life. Often current and former members have huge trust issues: lack of trust in self and others.

A need for existential meaning and a need to seek answers from external authority. I have been working for years since I left the ashram cult to rebuild self-world identity and regain the relationships that I had abandoned with family and friends.

A huge motivation for my doing this interview with you is to speak out about the harms of such groups, to process my experiences, and hopefully help by telling my story and perspectives.

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

Interview with Amitabh Pal – Director of Communications, Freedom From Religion Foundation

May 9, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Amitabh Pal is the Director of Communications for the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF). Here we talk about his work and views with the FFRF..

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become involved in the secularist movements?

Amitabh Pal: I've been at the intersection of progressive politics and journalism my entire professional life. The separation of state and church has been always of importance to me. (I'm extremely proud of the fact that the three countries I'm from — the United States, India and Germany — are all secular.) We were ardent defenders of secularism at The Progressive magazine, where I was at for a long time. One of the main projects we had during the Bush years, for instance, was calling out his “messianic militarism” and the damage it did the world as a chief cause of the Iraq War. We also had regular exposés of the Religious Right and its harmful influence. Anyone who cares for a better society has to work for secularism, and this is something I've done with zeal.

Jacobsen: How did you become involved in and work at the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Pal: After many years at The Progressive, I was in the mode of transitioning out. I had worked with FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor as the editor of The Progressive's op-ed service (the Progressive Media Project), for which she had written a number of columns. So when I saw an opening at the Freedom From Religion Foundation, an organization I was familiar with and deeply respected, I immediately applied for the position. I was delighted when, after the selection process, I was offered the job.

Jacobsen: Now, as an important footnote to this conversation, you are highly educated, which includes two master's degrees. One in journalism; another in political science, these are important accomplishments. How does this inform your work as the director of communications at FFRF?

Pal: Obviously, the journalism degree impacts and informs all that I accomplish here at FFRF. The writing and editing I engage in were seeded at UNC-Chapel Hill (Go Tar Heels!). The coursework there gave me the skills I'm applying at the job day in and day out. But the political science degree has been very handy, too. The work we do is by its very nature political, and having a good grasp of the underlying dynamics helps me be a better writer and editor. I have a special interest in international issues, and so I've written blogs and press releases dealing with such matters (for example on Secretary of State Mike Pompeo). The more you learn, the more it comes in useful.

Jacobsen: Also, you wrote at the *Progressive* for many years. How did you work there? What did you do? What were the results of your writing and work there? (What did you learn?)

Pal: I was at The Progressive for almost two decades — and it taught me a whole lot. I started off as the editor of the Progressive Media Project, an op-ed service associated with The Progressive that sends out columns on a regular basis to hundreds of newspapers all over the United States and abroad. This prepared me not only to write and edit on a wide range of subjects but also to quickly turn around pieces, qualities that have come in very handy here at FFRF. Then, for more than a decade I was Managing Editor of The Progressive magazine itself. I specialized in doing long-form interviews for the magazine, interviewing such folks as Mikhail Gorbachev and Jimmy Carter, among many others. I wrote a lot of web columns, feature articles and book reviews. And, certainly, I further honed my editing skills. It was an incredible experience at The Progressive.

Jacobsen: You have a Hindu background. You can understand the religion and potentially the mix-up with politics too. The ways in which religion get involved in politics are complicated, but, nonetheless, they differ on a number of metrics and in different nations. Hinduism is prominent in India and mixed up with the Modi leadership.

If you have any knowledge and can compare and contrast between the mix-up of Evangelical Christian and Roman Catholic Christian religion in American politics and Hindu religion in Indian politics, how do these differ? How are these similar? How are these the same?

Pal: I could go on and on about this! This is because I am literally writing a book on the populist majoritarianism of President Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Their attempted dismantling of the secular setup in their countries as a part of their political projects is a big focus of my book. The Religious Right In India is in command right now, just like its counterpart in the United States. The ironic thing is that in spite of its supposed hatred of Islam and Christianity, the Hindu political movement is trying to make Hinduism like these religions by imposing a central dogma and belief on a faith that has historically lacked these features. The result is proving disastrous — both for the religion itself and for India at large. The implications of the world's two largest democracies heading in a calamitous direction should make us all very worried.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion based on the conversation today? Any updates to the communications activities of the FFRF?

Pal: The Freedom From Religion Foundation is experiencing a tremendous growth spurt, and this is reflected on the communications front. We have a new TV interview show, “Freethought Matters,” which is broadcast in the Madison area and is posted on our YouTube channel. Among the people we’ve interviewed are Steven Pinker and New York Times columnist Michelle Goldberg. We have a weekly Facebook Live “Ask an Atheist” feature, which can also be seen on YouTube. We have a pithy “Newsbite” segment discussing the highlight of our week that we post online. Our long-running radio show is going strong. (Check all of this out at www.ffrf.org.) And our endeavors and triumphs in the service of freethought are getting more and more attention from major media entities and local outlets all over the country. Exciting times indeed!

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

Sodfa Daaji on the Urgent Case of Noura Hussein Hammad

May 9, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Sodfa Daaji is the Chairwoman of the Gender Equality Committee and the North Africa Coordinator for the Afrika Youth Movement. Here we talk about Noura Hussein Hammad's urgent case. The hashtag: #JusticeForNoura. Daaji's email if you would like to sign: daajisodfa.pr@gmail.com.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is the baseline description of Hammad's case?

Sodfa Daaji: Noura is a 19 years old Sudanese woman, victim of gender based violence, marital rape, domestic violence and forced child marriage at the age of 15 years old. At first, Noura tried to change her fate by escaping to stay with her aunt in Sinnar city, but her father convinced her to come back at home.

He has promised her that the wedding was called off, but she has found herself married against her will. She has spent her in Khartoum. The first three days she stood and didn't want to give up on her right to say no to any intercourse with her husband. Her refusal brought her husband to call his brother and his cousins and on the 4th day he raped her while they were holding her on the floor.

The next day he tried to rape her and, as stated by Noura during a conversation with the activist and director of SEEMA – the organization that is following directly Noura's case in Sudan – she took a knife and told him “I die or I will die tonight,” while he replied, “Let's see who will die tonight.”

Noura stabbed him twice and escaped to her parent's house. After admitting what she committed, her father took her to the police station.

Jacobsen: What is the likely outcome for Hammad?

Daaji: At this point, in my opinion, we should take in consideration different factors. First of all, the condition of human rights in Sudan. We are talking about a case that came out just few days before her trial, and the main reason is behind the way the government is continuously silencing the freedom of press. Secondly, Sudan is under sharia Law and there is not that much space for the judges for interpretation.

Noura was charged under the article 130, even if in Sudan is recognised the marital rape, but they have not taken in consideration her complete case. Another point that I would like to highlight is the fact that she is a woman. We are pressuring for the way women are perceived in the Sudanese society, and how the rape is justified as a normal act, a sexual intercourse between husband and wife.

The fact that Noura stood for her right as a young girl is not taken in consideration. And, most importantly, what is taken in consideration is the fact that a woman dared to say no, and in some way to break and go against that fate that was written by her parents, and a culture dominated by combined weddings. In Sudan wedding is possible from women's puberty.

Last point is the husband's family: According to Sharia, to resume we can say that "you can pay or you can die". The husband's family is wealthy and they do not need Noura's money to compensate their loss. That is why during the upcoming trial on the 10th of May 2018 they will surely condemn Noura to death penalty.

The lawyers of the husband's family are pressuring for the economic help that Noura's family has received during the years of the wedding. With just this sentence we can see how Noura was and is perceived: an object sold which duty was just to obey to her husband.

Unfortunately, no matter how much we have pressured on the last days, we acknowledge that time is short and in 15 days will be hard for us to save Noura's life. In order to do so we need to reach the Sudanese president, who's bad track record on human rights is not making us positive about her case.

Jacobsen: How can people get the word out or help out?

Daaji: We are trying to make some noise with the aim to be heard by United Nations, Africa Union and African head of states, who are in touch with the Sudanese president. That is why we have an official hashtag #JusticeForNoura and a petition is online:

https://secure.avaaz.org/en/petition/LAWYERS_HUMAN_RIGHTS_ACTIVISTS_SAVE_NORA/?wEvafnb&utm_source=sharetools&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=petition-518899-LAWYERS_HUMAN_RIGHTS_ACTIVISTS_SAVE_NORA&utm_term=Evafnb%2Ben

Anyone is free to join the official FB PAGE

<https://www.facebook.com/Justice-For-Noura-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7-1261677983968203/>

and to join us on twitter @sodfadaaji @ENoMW @AfrikaYM

Last, we want to address a letter to the High Commissioner of OHCHR. That is why, we kindly ask to human's rights organizations to read the letter and to sign it with the name of the organization and the name of a representative of the organization. Individuals as well can join by providing us a short bio, their full name and country of origin.

To receive the letter, feel free to contact me at daajisodfa.pr@gmail.com

I have learned in this last two days that the power is on us, if we just try to work together without borders. We have a voice; we just have to learn how to use it in order to be heard.

Thank you very much for the opportunity, and for taking your time to talk about Noura's case.

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

Interview with Molly Hanson – Editorial Assistant, Freedom From Religion Foundation

May 10, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Molly Hanson is the Freedom From Religion Foundation Editorial Assistant. Hanson is a champion runner among many others things and earned the spot at the University of Edinburgh for a Ph.D. in Anthropology. Here we learn about her and her work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you find the FFRF?

Molly Hanson: During my senior year of college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison I was looking for an internship so that I could get some work experience in the field I was majoring in, journalism.

During my hunt, I was looking the university's job listing page and found that the Freedom From Religion Foundation was looking for a writing assistant. I had never heard of the group until then, but after doing a little bit of background research I was found that it's mission aligned with my personal beliefs and passions and was thrilled to receive the position after applying.

I was offered a full-time job after I graduated that winter as a full-time employee.

Jacobsen: Amit tells me that you are a champion runner. How did you get into this physical competitive activity and begin to excel at it?

Hanson: I don't know if I would call myself a "champion" runner, but I did race track and cross country in college and ended with a successful career and I am continuing to run and race. My parents both ran at relatively high levels in college and my older sister was an All-American in track.

So, I was totally proselytized into it, and because my older sister had excelled I felt pressure to do so as well. Also, I don't do like to do anything half-way that I'm putting energy and passion into, and I can be helplessly competitive.

Jacobsen: As the editorial assistant of the FFRF, what do you for them? Why are these activities important for the fundamental operations of the organization?

Hanson: A good portion of my work involves my work on our Rapid Response Team encouraging our members to take action on state-church issues. I work with members of our legal staff to track legislation involving attacks on abortion and birth control access, voucher schools, Ten Commandments monuments, city council invocations, etc.

I write up action alerts to members explaining how these issues are church-state separation concerns and ask them to take action by contacting their legislators. FFRF is, at its core, a watchdog organization that works to promote state-church separation and I'm sort of a liaison between FFRF, FFRF members, and legislators to help keep our local, state and federal laws secular.

I also assist Amit in writing press releases about church-state violations taking place in communities around the nation and our victories in stopping these violations. This helps to put media pressure on government institutions to keep religion out of the public arena and flexes our

legal muscles to our members and the media, demonstrating what kind of difference freethinkers are making.

Jacobsen: What seem like the positives and negatives of religion?

Hanson: Religion been used to justify slavery, the repression of women's social, economic and political power, violence against women, witch-trials, vilification of the LGBTQ community, violent wars, genocide, the suppression of science, the destruction of cultures, etc. The list is infinite when you have this make-believe, man-made institution that shapes the morals of individuals and legal systems of societies.

I guess the number one negative of religion is that it judges certain ideals of a certain group of individuals to be sacred, makes it blasphemous to even question those certain man-made beliefs, and makes certain ideas and traits evil. The great tragedy is that we're 100% sure we have this life and likely only this life. I think religion has created a system in which certain lives are more valued above and thus given privilege to better lives.

As for the positives, I think humans are drawn to a need for a sense of community and belonging that religion provides. And if it helps someone treat others with more kindness and empathy that is certainly a plus. It can be used as a tool to teach moral lessons; I just think it's a deeply flawed tool.

I also think, although it has caused countless horrors, religion has contributed to beautiful works of art. I thought the Met Gala outfits this year were fire. However, religion has also contributed to the destruction of brilliant works of art and scientific discovery.

Jacobsen: You are a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Edinburgh in Anthropology? Tell me about it!

Hanson: Actually, I'm going to be entering a master's program at the University of Edinburgh in Anthropology and might continue on with a Ph.D. at Edinburgh or return to the United States and continue in a Ph.D. program here focusing on political and legal anthropology with research on matriarchal societies and their religious beliefs.

So, I'd want to research political power structures and sociocultural value systems and how those relate to the perceived power that women have in a society. And more specifically, how male god-centric religions have led to the extinction of matriarchal societies and the power women have been allowed / conceptualizations of power that better serve women.

Because of a lot of what we think of as "religion" are patrifocal belief systems made my men with male, ruler gods, I'm interested in how that has shaped which traits and ideas have been consecrated, which have been regarded as evil, and how that compares to matriarchal societies which may have had belief systems that better served women.

I've always been extremely interested in feminism and religion so I'm very excited for this opportunity to dig into some fundamental questions I have about both topics and their role in human history.

Jacobsen: How does the FFRF provide a bulwark in support of the non-religious and the ordinary religion for what both want and that being the separation of church and state?

Hanson: James Madison said that religion and government will exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together and we believe that is absolutely true. The religious community can

better practice its beliefs and stay true to its sincerely held theology in its own separate sphere, uninfluenced by politics or government funds.

Government better does its job of providing and protecting all of its citizens by using the power of reason and logic. Superstition has no place in the realm of legislation and we work to enforce that and educate on that. By working to keep government and religion separate we are really helping both institutions.

Jacobsen: What seems like an unacknowledged admirable person within the non-religious community? Someone never mentioned but integral.

Hanson: He's dead and has obviously been acknowledged but Thomas Paine was a pretty big deal. I think his atheism has gotten brushed under the rug a bit, but his nontheism was a cornerstone to the arguments made in Common Sense and the Age of Reason, which really ignited the American Revolution and set the foundational ideas of democratic government.

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

Marieme Helie Lucas on the Case of Noura Hussein Hammad

May 10, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Marieme Helie Lucas is an Algerian sociologist, activist, founder of 'Secularism is a Women's Issue,' and founder and former International Coordinator of 'Women Living Under Muslim Laws.' Here we talk about the case of Noura Hammad. Noura has been sentenced to death and has 15 days to appeal the decision.

The hashtag for the campaign: #JusticeForNoura. Email name and country if you would like to sign the petition: daajisodfa.pr@gmail.com.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How come is this inequality in the law for women?

Marieme Helie Lucas: As you know, Scott, in many – but not all – instances women in predominantly Muslim contexts are never considered as coming to adult age; and they are considered, in the law, as forever legal minors – it took a long time everywhere (including in the West, of course) to grant women legal equal rights.

As in Noura's case, we can be given in marriage by our matrimonial tutors or *wali* (most of the time our fathers but otherwise any male guardian in the family); interestingly enough, this *wali* can even be our youngest son: being a male is what is being considered...

It is important to note that many so-called Muslim countries do not hold these conservative views, do not try to hide patriarchal ideology under the guise of religion, and that their national laws grant women citizens a lot more rights, including the right to sign a contract (marriage or commercial) – and in some countries equal rights in marriage.

However, the global trend in the past few decades has been a political tightening by broad alliances ranging from conservative to extreme right forces, which, among other undemocratic provisions, severely curtail women's rights – legally and otherwise.

Jacobsen: Why are women having to resort to extreme measures in self-protection from sexual violence in forced marriages?

Helie Lucas: Certainly because they do not have the protection of the law, but moreover, as can be seen in Noura's case, they do not have the protection of their immediate family either. Religiously sanctioned patriarchy is prevalent everywhere.

So-called honor crimes exist over all the continents (last year, one woman died under the blows of her male partner every three days in France) – even when the law criminalizes such crimes.

Hence the importance of pushing for changes concomitantly – at the same time: at the level of changing laws, of course, but also at the level of changing society, where there is a crucial need for support for women's rights, and for human rights work in general. Right now, funding for women's organizations has drastically fallen, everywhere.

But even where there are organizations for the defense of women, it is difficult for ordinary people to access them. Women are most often left to fend for themselves, and, in desperation,

they usually attempt to their lives; the cases where they physically defend themselves against the aggressor are much fewer.

From age 15, Noura has steadily refused a forced marriage for four years before taking arms against the husband imposed on her against her expressed will, and she only resorted to self-defense after having suffered a first public rape in the name of marital rights and being threatened with a second one.

She is a hero. She deserves to be supported the world over.

Jacobsen: How does the family, community, society, and religion conspire to restrict women?

Helie Lucas: I think I answered that question first. What I want to underline here is that, against all these regressive forces, there are – everywhere, always, I can testify to it, very courageous women’s organisations and progressive individuals, male and female, who stand up for universal human rights at the risk of their liberty and sometimes of their life; they affirm that this human rights stand in no way contravene to their interpretation of their religion; that in no way does it contradict their being deeply rooted in their local culture, nor does it conflict with their national identity.

These voices are rarely heard outside the national context and they need to be heard, in order to confront ideological simplifications of ‘they’ (barbaric ones) and ‘us’ (civilized ones) that still prevail.

The danger in Noura’s case is that it would be used to stigmatize specific countries (‘backward’ Africa) or a religion (‘violent’ Islam) and reinforce racism; this can be avoided by simply supporting the work of Sudanese and African local human rights and women’s rights advocates and organisations, by giving them the visibility and credentials they hardly ever get.

It will also help progressive westerners to overcome their ‘white guilt’. We need them now: they should not avoid supporting Noura for fear of being labeled ‘Islamophobic’ or ‘racist’. Support the existing local women’s rights and human rights work and the young courageous Noura.

One cannot even think that Noura deserves fewer rights than any other human being, just because she is Sudanese and was raised in a Muslim context: this is sheer nonsense... No cultural relativism here, please...

Jacobsen: What is the current state of Hammad’s case?

Helie Lucas: Noura will be delivered a sentence today; she admitted to her crime in self-defence and willingly went to the police station with her father to explain the circumstances; women’s rights organisations which have taken up her defence in Sudan think she will be sentenced to death today, but still hope international pressure will save her life and avoid execution.

She has 15 days to appeal the judgment.

Jacobsen: How can people best help her, and others like her in the future?

Helie Lucas: Support local organisations standing in her defence – follow their advice, they know the context best; write to Noura in the prison; alert your local human rights and women’s rights organisations; send letters to Sudanese authorities; and to the African Union, the UN and special rap on violence against women; speak to the media about the case: 15 days is a very short time to save Noura’s life...

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

The hashtag: #JusticeForNoura. Again, the email if you would like to sign: daajisodfa.pr@gmail.com.

Chat with Bwambale Robert Musubaho on the Kasese Humanist School

May 12, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Robert Bwambale is the founder of the Kasese United Humanist Association (KUHA) with “the goal of promoting Freethought in Uganda.” The association is affiliated with the extremely active Uganda Humanist Association (UHA). In March, the UHA held a conference in Kampala whose theme was Humanism For a Free and Prosperous Africa. The Kasese United Humanist Association is a member organization in the IHEYO Africa Working Group, and has participated in humanist conferences. He is also the director of a few primary schools set up to encourage a humanistic method of learning.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: For those that do not know, what is the school?

Bwambale Robert Musubaho: Kasese Humanist School.

Jacobsen: What are the updates on the development of the education program?

Bwambale: We teach the Uganda curriculum, spice it with vocational skills training in carpentry, tailoring, computing, knitting, humanism and comparative religion. We right now have an ongoing program on critical thinking, music dance and drama, and gardening.

Jacobsen: What are the new developments from the kids there?

Bwambale: Most can now think freely and ask questions, most have curious minds, participate in gardening, outdoor physical education activities. Some are steadily developing a culture of reading books.

Jacobsen: How can people find new ways to donate or help in some manner for these and other school programs for the non-religious?

Bwambale:

By sponsoring some of our needy children.

Sending scholastic items to benefit both learners and staffs.

Contributing to staff salaries and general teachers' welfare.

Holding fundraising drives in communities in aid to Kasese Humanist Schools.

Organizational partnerships or collaborations with our school.

Jacobsen: Have there been threats to the wellbeing of the kids based on the non-religious nature of the education in the religious country?

Bwambale: Yes, some religious fanatics do tarnish our school that it doesn't know god and that it believes in spirits, which actually are fabrications since its belief in religions that propagates spirits existence.

Jacobsen: What have been some of the exciting developments in the kids for their wellbeing?

Bwambale: Our kids have gained a balanced knowledge in whatever they are learning. Several have acquired basic skills in vocational studies.

Many have been in a position to explore the world using the internet, some have managed to get online and create friends, pen pal exchange campaigns through letter writing, many have got gifts and school fees from their sponsors.

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

Activism for Noura Hussein Hammad

May 16, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

A 19-year-old, Noura Hussein Hammad, from Sudan has been sentenced to death for the killing of a man. Hammad killed the man in self-defense while being raped.

The context is a forced marriage while a child/teenager and so forced child marriage, marital rape while being held down by several men, and the killing the forced-marriage husband while being raped by him. Now, she was taken to a Sudanese court and charged with murder.

Getting the word out has been helpful, most countries' governments do not want bad press for their country. Journalists and international/global citizens can place pressure on governments in some instances at certain times.

This may be one of those times, as noted in *Canadian Atheist*, *Cornelius Press*, *Humanist Voices*, *Medium*, and *The Good Men Project*, with Sodfa Daaji, and *Canadian Atheist*, *Cornelius Press*, *Humanist Voices*, *Secularism is a Women's Issue*, *The Good Men Project here*, *here*, and *here* with Marieme Helie Lucas. This story seems to show an unjust and unfair charge.

Hammad's told her father and family about what happened, but the father turned Hammad into the police. Subsequently, the family disowned Hammad. She was charged with premeditated murder, even though she was defending herself against rape in a forced marriage case.

You can [email Sudan's Minister of Justice](#).

In Conversation with Sara Al Iraqiya on Leaving Islam, Global Affairs, and Society

May 16, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Sara Al Iraqiya is a USA-based 2nd generation Iraqi-American social scientist, writer, and activist. Raised under Sunni Islam and a survivor of attempted radicalization in American mosques and centers — she has both lived experience as well as academic experience with Islam. By age 20, after gaining the freedom to live autonomously and exercising her right to protect herself, she left Islam altogether. Sara aims to educate her fellow Americans and lovers of Western civilization on the horrors, inequalities, and injustices that occur in Western-based mosques and Islamic centers. Sara has been published in two languages (and counting). A world traveler, she briefly lived in France, Jordan, and even Cuba in order to complete her Masters of Arts in Global Affairs specializing in Global Culture and Society. Sara Al Iraqiya has been published in Conatus News and Spain's ALDE Group.

Scott Douglas Jacobson: When it comes to those that hold to the title of nonreligious or irreligious, they come from a narrow set of possibilities. Those that grew up in a religion and left. Those that grew up in a fundamentalist religion and liberalized.

Those who never grew up in a religion. Of course, the ones that liberalized eventually leave or form something like an ethical culture, Sunday Assembly, or an Oasis network. Those are types of worship that do not ground themselves in the supernatural, in theology.

When it comes to your own background, having talked a bit off tape, you grew up Muslim and then left the faith. How did that happen?

Sara Al Iraqiya: I did not know if I was Sunni or Shi'ite. I did not even know about the sects of Islam until 2003 because sectarian violence in Iraq made the news here in the United States. I suppose people were curious. So, people would keep asking me if I was Sunni or Shi'ite. I could not answer because my parents never differentiated that to me.

As I got older, I learned I was raised Sunni Muslim.

As a child, I truly believed in God; and with the Islamic curriculum that I was exposed to as a child, it was relatively innocuous. They were sweet stories, heartwarming stories about being nice to people and doing good deeds.

For example, when you find yourself in abundance, give things away to those in need, these are practicable actions with or without a religion. However, as a child, I felt these are such profound words, such great ideas that were given to me from a God that loves me.

I did not have anyone to read to me, so I developed an obsession with books.

I loved the public library. I loved going there. I loved borrowing books from my peers, from anywhere. I loved books. I was obsessed with them. I was so young. I could not read.

So, I would pray.

I would pray to God. I would ask God to help me learn how to read. I would pray so much. I woke up one day. I was reading this book. I thought, “Wow, God gave me this gift. I am reading. God gave me the gift of reading. This is amazing!”

No. What it was, and what I did not realize, I had been practicing so hard. I was playing word games, and watching my older siblings do their homework. Prayer happened to be a component. I could have been meditating, thinking about reading.

For some reason, regarding my ability to read, I attributed it to God and praying to God. I became not only advanced in reading for my age level. Also, advanced in writing for my age level, I completely attributed these things to my prayers being answered.

Basically, I was convinced my petitions to God worked. I was such a youngster. I was such a young, innocent kid. I did not understand that I made that happen. So, there was that.

Growing up, I always look at the world with sheer wonder. I would think, “Wow, I am so lucky. I am so grateful that there is a God that created all of these things. Everything is so beautiful. This world is colorful.”

Full of colors, plants, and animals, I loved to play outside when I was a kid. I loved to play with the little critters that I would meet outside and playing in the grass and stuff. Sometimes, I would find a toad.

I was not scared of spiders. I played with spiders. I loved the world. I loved nature. I was a kid that loved to play outside. It was the early 1990s. That is what we were doing, playing outside. We were not playing with iPads.

Not that there is anything wrong with that. You can play word games on those iPads. That is good too. So, you can teach the kids important skills with iPads. But I wouldn’t trade my childhood for anything. It was nice.

At that time, Islamic curriculum that was given to me was geared towards young children, so everything in that basic curriculum was sweet. It was the “sweet stuff.” Sweet words and sweet stories. Heartwarming stuff.

However, as you get older and advance in the Islamic curriculum, the education becomes more extreme. I inadvertently received a Wahhabi education in the United States at a weekend school in my local mosque.

I had that education in the United States, which is something we should all be concerned about now. We can talk about that in a moment. However, yes, it was moving on up. It was moving on to something more, a little more aggressive and sinister. No more “sweet stuff.”

I was “bad” for integrating with others outside of the mosque. There were many attempts to make me feel that way and to accept it as a truth. That interfaith friendships or even interactions were considered sin.

I was a sinner. I was bad. I remember the other students would get upset with me because I refused to say that I hate gay people. I refused to say that gay people are going to burn in hell.

At this time, I believed in hell. I thought, “That is where all the murderers and evil people go. They go to hell.” However, as I was getting older, the mosque leaders and mosque attendees were telling me homosexuals and transgender people go to hell. Because they defied “God’s Word.”

I said, “What did they do wrong?” They would explain, for example, with transgender people, “They have altered their bodies.” I said, “What if somebody was in a severe accident? And so they got reconstructive surgery to live a normal life?”

“There are many people who get surgery. If they are in an accident, afterwards, they get reconstructive surgery. Isn’t that altering their body? Are they going to go to hell?”

I would get sent to “time out” for asking too many questions.

I eventually learned that you do not ask too many questions in the mosque in these Islamic weekend schools. If you ask questions, then that means you are questioning God’s Word.

They feel as if relaying God’s actual Word to the people. So, asking questions is a big no-no, I would get in trouble for that, when I simply saw this as people claiming this as a god’s word.

Then there was also being told that Christians and Jews are all “people of the book.” They are monotheists. They are fine. However, they do not walk the straight narrow path as you do. Then there would be conflicting passages. There would be another passage in the other side of the Qur’an where it essentially said, “Do not trust the Jews.”

They flat out said, “Do not trust the Jews.” I do not agree with this and never have in my life. I have so many friends who are Jewish or Christian in public school. Atheist friends, friends who worship more than one God. They are so nice to me.

They invite me over. We have a good time. We eat snacks and play games. They have been so nice to me. The mosque leaders would say, “Yes, that is what they do. They are nice to you because they want to bring you in, and they want to bring you into sin.”

“Right now, you are walking on the straight and narrow path, but you will fall off if you keep hanging out with these people. Because when you are alone in a room with a non-Muslim, there is one other presence in that room. That presence is Satan.”

And so as ridiculous as this sounds, it is supposed to sound true to someone who is a “believer.” However, to me, it did not sound right.

I had a heart of a child. I felt sorry for Satan. Because I looked at the story of Satan in the Qur’an. I felt sorry for Satan because he was criticizing God’s work. In the Qur’an, he told God, “This human is weak compared to us. To my race.”

Satan in Islamic lore belongs to a different race, called the *jinn*. Which is an entity you cannot see, but they can see you, it is complicated because different sects are taught different things. However, I could empathize with Satan. He was best friends with God. He was criticizing God’s work like friends do.

“I am supposed to bow down to this human. This human is weak. I am of a different race. I can walk straight through these people.” There was one quote; Satan said, “I can walk straight through them.” So, I felt of compassion for Satan even [Laughing]! Because I was looking at everything through the eyes of a child. I thought, “He was making a criticism.”

I felt that humans are weak compared to the *jinn* because there is a whole chapter in the Quran that explains the *jinn* and how they are. They are creatures with supernatural capabilities. They can travel at will, and essentially teleport. They sounded way cooler than humans. I agreed with Satan on that one.

However, you cannot say that in a mosque. You will get in trouble.

They might even try to do an exorcism on you. That is a whole different story and it is very sad that this practice continues.

So, after causing all that trouble I decided to leave the weekend school.

My parents were shocked about this. They thought that the mosque leaders were going to teach me things like “be nice to people, give your extra food to homeless people instead of throwing it in the garbage, give away your extra clothes to people who do not have warm clothes in the winter.”

They thought they were going to teach that brand of morality. What my parents did not understand, what Muslim American parents do not understand, is that the mosque leaders were not teaching us how to be good people, they were teaching us how to hate.

The curriculum starts from childhood. Step by step. Until you see these teenagers or people in their early 20s who are ready to blow themselves up in public places or shoot up concerts or whatnot, we wonder where these homegrown terrorists come from.

There are many reasons for Islamist radicalization. However, part of the reason is the extreme ideologies being taught in the mosques here in the United States. That is a huge part of it and I stand firmly by this statement.

So, when I finally decided I did not want to study Islam in the mosque, my parents understood and even commended me.

I was studying on my own. Because I had not let go of the idea that there is a God. That God loves me and the world. I started believing that way up until the age of 19. I was watching a YouTube personality. Her name is Cristina Rad.

It was a long time ago. I am putting an age on myself [Laughing]. It was a while back. However, she is Romanian and an ex-Orthodox Christian. So, I was watching her videos. She had the video about the “banana guy.”

She was basically dragging them, making fun of them. She was hilarious. She is making fun of these crazy Christians. I thought, “Oh, this is hilarious. She is making fun of these crazy Christians. Oh my God, these guys are mad.”

“They are so crazy. Oh my God.” Then I think, “Let me see more videos by this girl, she is so funny.” Then I see she is criticizing Islam. It was a record scratch. “What?” [Laughing]. “Wait, what?” [Laughing] “She is criticizing Islam?”

I did not realize up until then. I did not realize how that affected me. I had never seen somebody make fun of Islam before. This got me to the point where I did not think that you could make fun of Islam because it was so drilled in my head that I could not question anything.

The mosque leaders did a good job of that. In many of these Islamic weekend schools, through Islamic curriculum, you will see their manipulation tactics in some of their books and whatnot.

They are experts in brainwashing. Of course, Islam in and of itself, the religion does a good job of indoctrinating people or else there would not be between 1 and 2 billion Muslims in the world.

I am sure if many of the people who are surveyed answer, “Yes, I am a Muslim” out of fear, to be honest. So, that is a side note. That is my social science, nerdy side. When it comes to

research methodologies, I am skeptical. Especially of surveys, the surveys make me the most skeptical [Laughing].

When I was searching for ex-Muslims, I only found ex-Muslims who converted to Christianity at that time.

I did not want to become a Christian. Abrahamic religion did not resonate with me anymore.

It is an esoteric concept. No hate to anybody who joins a church. If that heals you, if that makes you feel you are being a better person by going to church – by all means, go to church. So, long as you are not hurting other people, go ahead and do and believe as you please.

That is what makes Western culture so excellent, I believe. It is that we can do and say as we believe, so long as we are allowed to live and are not hurting other people.

So, that is fine to me. However, I could only find these ex-Muslims who converted to Christianity. It seemed these were all coming out of the same God damn church. I realized, “these are fucking commercials.”

It was a breaking point. I do not know if this is their real story. It might be their real story. If it is, that is cool. I have ex-Muslim friends who became Christians. I am super happy for them, but this is not for me. This is not for me. I do not have anything right now.

I do not have any religion.

So, I am becoming frustrated at this point. Because I am not finding anybody like me. I did not want to convert to Christianity because it is not in my heart. I do not feel it in my heart. I am not going to join a church.

I am not saying I dislike Christians.

I am actually going to church tomorrow with a friend of mine. I am going to be there bright and early. I go to church often with my Christian friends for certain occasions. I respect it and respect them. I respect them because they respect me.

They have never tried to force me into anything. There are some members of churches who have crossed boundaries and have been a bit aggressive towards me and others. Some would say that I made the right choice by leaving Islam, but I need to join a religion, that religion being their brand of Christianity. I stay away from people like this.

So, I wanted to find ex-Muslims out there. It did not hit me that you can leave Islam. The way Islam is taught; it doesn't hit you that you can leave Islam. I know it sounds bizarre. But it doesn't hit you. But you *can* leave Islam.

I did not want to go from one Abrahamic religion to another. Islam is basically Orthodox Judaism with a dash of Jesus. Islam is Orthodox Judaism plus Jesus, only this time Jesus doesn't give a shit about you.

But I am not going after theology. I am going after extremist curriculum and exposing it for what it is.

What does upset me is what is taught in local mosques, in the United States. There are mosques that are teaching extreme ideologies. That is why many of my Muslim friends refuse to step foot in a mosque because they see the way mosques have become. The Muslims I know will not send their children to mosques.

My feelings and opinions about religion are irrelevant. I am talking about what is happening, right here and right now. We have radical mosques.

In this country, people do not realize these are radical mosques. You will get some people who are crazy—they go and shoot up a mosque. This is horrific and deplorable. There are regular peaceful people in many mosques.

I would go there to smell the incense and see the carpet with the ornate designs. When I step into a mosque, it brings back a childhood feeling. It is warm. The smell of the incense. It hits me. It smells so nice.

I refuse to go to a mosque because I do not like wearing a headscarf. So I took that incense and made a car air freshener out of it, it doesn't require to be lit of course. My car smells like a mosque.

Then you also hear a call to prayer. Sometimes, it sounds nice. Sometimes, the imam's voice is annoying as fuck. It is the same trigger for some things. It reminds me of childhood, even though they are chanting about some violent, fucked up shit. It triggers some warm feelings. I hate that it does, but it does because it reminds me of being a kid, if that makes sense.

So, I am searching, searching, searching, searching. I find no other ex-Muslims. Zero. Zero ex-Muslims who decide, "I am done with religion." They become ex-Muslims and become Christians or something. That is all I could find.

Until years went by, the ex-Muslim movement became louder.

They are not bigots. They are simply speaking the truth. There are societal issues going on. They are finally being addressed. The ex-Muslim movement did that most efficiently.

Ex-Muslim atheists are not storming up into mosques and harassing Muslims. If anything, I have been harassed by many Muslims in my life.

However, then I also have many Muslim friends. It is about the personal level. Who a person is.

That is the misconception that people have when it comes to criticizing Islam.

Even ex-Muslims have trouble criticizing Islam, they get disinvited from speaking events. Places will not publish the work of many ex-Muslim writers. They get called bigots.

It causes me to wonder, "How does this make me a bigot at all? Because I am criticizing an ideology I grew up with and I do not believe in anymore?"

The ex-Muslim movement is going strong and it should continue going. I also love the humanitarian work that is going along with it.

We are moving past making fun of that religion; our old religion that we grew up with. We are moving past that, I think, and becoming activists in our own right, whether we realize it or not.

Because it is setting an example for that next generation of young people who may question Islam and will be looking for ex-Muslims out there, and maybe they do not necessarily want to become a Christian or any other sort of theist.

They will find us. They will find our writing; they will find our videos. They will find our talks.

They will see us speaking at their universities. I see that happening in the future. The ex-Muslims, it will not be like the old days, the Dark Ages, which was not too long ago, of being an

ex-Muslim. Of being a secular humanist, being an atheist, being an ex-Muslim and not joining another religion. Now there are people that young ex-Muslims can look up to because many of them find themselves completely lost without families.

They do not know how the world works. They turn to hard drugs. They become alcoholics. What do the imams say? The imams say, "People who leave Islam. They become alcoholics and drug addicts. Why do you think that is?" I want to ask them, "Why do *you* think that is?"

There is absolutely zero compassion there. These people, they turn to things like substances and self-destruction because it is so hard to be ostracized in every direction.

On the other hand, it is warming my heart now. To see, that there is a movement underway. That it is not going to be as hard and as painful as it once was to leave Islam and to leave these customs behind; and to think, to live authentically and to live autonomously and to think with your mind and not with somebody else's noxious ideas.

Scott: What are you doing now in terms of your own professional work? How does your personal philosophy feed into this?

Al Iraqiya: So for my own professional work, I do not to talk about my work life unless it is a completed project or requires speaking about at that time. Otherwise, I do not talk about this publicly because there are many Muslims who have called ex-Muslims at work. Their bosses were called and then told fabricated things about their ex-Muslim employees in an attempt to get them fired.

So, that happens a lot. However, there have been cases where ex-Muslims are being stalked by Muslims on the internet, trying to find out places of work and things like that. One, I heard one story.

They posted online, "Such and such person called my boss and said all these complete lies about me" to warn other ex-Muslims about being open about their workplace. I'd been harassed by that same troll.

So I am not too public about these things.

My writing is easily accessible. I can be myself when I speak or write. Leaving Islam helped to some extent. For example, my quality of work used to plummet during Ramadan because I would feel dizzy and could not produce satisfactory work. I don't have that problem anymore.

Scott: From extensive personal experience and those of ex-Muslims known to me, as a heuristic or rule of thumb for comprehension and compassion, those individuals who criticize religion in a public, direct, and assertive way.

They will undergo some form of harassment, whether at work, in home life, in public, and so on. This will impact their entire life. They should know this if they do plan on becoming writers or activists in some form. It comes with the territory. It is a huge personal safety and comfort sacrifice.

In taking on the important issues that affect all of us with regards to religion, especially the religions or subsects of religion that have a political motive, because often, those in the non-religious community will work towards prevention of the encroachment of religion into public life, especially in Western Europe and even more so in north America.

So, it cannot use the force of state because we do not live in theocratic societies to enforce their religion on others who may speak out about it. However, they can use other social, cultural, and personal harassment means to silence you, mistreat you, and so on.

I and others have left jobs and undergone verbal, emotional, and social abuse, in order to continue doing the activist work we have done. It does not come without costs. Sometimes, it will come at heavy costs.

However, if you view the work as highly important, you will continue in the work, but do not be naïve in the fact that there will be times that will be extraordinarily difficult. You will feel as if alone in your activist work.

Al Iraqiya: Yes, I completely believe that. So, this is why I have been transparent with my employers. I explain to them everything. I explain to them all of my publications. I explain to them groups I belong to and my activism.

So, I find it important to maintain that with employers. However, it is not always so easy. I have heard so many stories. It is not always well-received by employers. People do not want to find any possible complications at their workplace. They are worried they may put other employees at risk. There are all these things to take into account.

I have my Master's in Global Affairs, specialized in Culture and Society. With Global Affairs, the core classes were about the global economy. So, this is my area of expertise. I wanted to get into journalism. I loved writing. I loved the things that I read when I was getting my Master's.

I was thinking, it stinks that not everybody gets to read this stuff. Not everybody has the time or the funds to read all these things. Hell, I barely did. So, let me talk about some academic ideas, let me talk about it in a way that is accessible, that is what I do.

So, with my articles that have been published thus far, I make sure they are accessible. They are readable. There was a time when I was reading a book a week plus articles.

The articles would be twenty, thirty pages long, dense text. I would have to retain all of that for a master's degree. So, there is reading involved. I take everything that I have learned.

But with social science – it is imperative to keep up with it. It is similar to how medical doctors take a board exam. They have to read certain medical journals periodically because things change in the medical field. So, they need to be up to date so they can practice modern medicine. Social scientists absolutely need to do something along these lines. Even data from 2008 is crucially different from data in 2018.

So, I try to keep up to date because social science is ever-changing.

I get supportive messages from Baghdad and Basra! I love that we live in this time where global activism is most attainable.

We talked about this earlier. I speak with ex-Muslim young women. I give them the logistical support and emotional support. They do not have their families anymore. In Middle Eastern culture and many Mediterranean, North African cultures, it is family, family, family. Family is everything.

Then you are taught that you do not trust anybody but your family: family, family, family. When they realize they do not have family anymore, their family literally does not love them; their family hates them. In some cases, their family wants them dead. All of that is crushing.

I wish I could meet up with everybody who sends me a message.

And says, “Could you please meet up with me for coffee? I am based in such and such city. Are you ever in this city? I need to talk to somebody.” I wish I could respond to those messages and meet up with everybody.

I cannot. I’ve met ex-Muslims through a mutual friend. Someone I trust and trust their judgement. I would meet in a public place with them. It is a rewarding experience. I remember I was sitting with an ex-*hijabi* and she ordered a beer. I do not drink beer. I cannot. I do not know why. I cannot drink beer, but I do drink this one Lebanese beer because it’s worth the gastric discomfort.

But otherwise, I do not drink beer for some reason. It hurts my stomach. So, I ordered a glass of wine. She orders a beer. I wish I could show you the grin—it was the most adorable thing.

She is said, “I ordered a beer!” [Laughing]! She was so thrilled about ordering a beer!

She could say it! She could look at the waiter. I remember the waiter was a guy. Looked at him in the eye, ordered a beer, the waiter walks away.

She looks at me. She says, “He’s cute, wasn’t he?” [Laughing]! This is supposed to be girl talk. This is supposed to be so normal, banter, whatever, normal talk.

This is what I mean by emotional support: having a girl friend to talk to about things. It is nice. She would not have been able to say to her mother that she thought the waiter was cute. I mean it is priceless. It is so important. It needs to be done.

Islam itself is gender segregated. So, it is a lot easier in that case for ex-Muslim women to help other ex-Muslim women and ex-Muslim men to help other ex-Muslim men. Because we were completely segregated in every way.

So, the things men have seen and have been exposed to and have been traumatized by will be different than what the women have been exposed to and traumatized by.

Of course I do recommend professional and confidential counseling above all else.

My story, I am telling you, is mild. But there are other stories of people who came from families that are very, aggressive and hateful, very strict. Highly orthodox in a bad way. Hurtful, psychologically damaging to the average person; so, I call those ex-Muslims my superman and my superwoman, the ones who have been through all that. There, they are that beacon of hope for other ex-Muslims out there. Survivors.

Anyway, there is the after care. So, now, you are an ex-Muslim, left Islam. You know how the world works. You feel free. You are empowered. You have a support system.

You have all these friends. However, there might still be that element of sadness. It is always lingering there. So, the next thing that I always to incorporate... laughter.

Humor. Happiness. I believe that is so important. So, when you are ready to laugh, you have got to start laughing. I want to see sad stories diminish.

I would love to see de-radicalization in mosques happen. That is the world I want to live in. Because I see Christianity can and any religion can be this way, but I do not see many ex-Christians facing the things I see ex-Muslims facing.

The documentary *One of Us* about ex-Ultra Orthodox Jews was the closest thing I have seen to ex-Muslim narratives. In some cases, there are stories that paralleled the stories of some ex-Muslims that I know so much. It was a sad and familiar story.

Some of them might be even more traumatic. But I do not want to say anyone's story is more traumatic. There is no fucking oppression Olympics. We are not going to go there with the oppression Olympics.

Everybody has had their own pain. Because somebody else's pain or story is much more dramatic, doesn't make the pain less valid. Ex-Muslims have been historically disempowered. So, I would love to see empowerment in the ex-Muslim community.

I am seeing it happen already, and it makes me so happy. It makes me so excited. I am so happy for the future. It is a revolution, going on before my eyes. Because as I said, ten years ago, I was searching, searching, searching for ex-Muslim atheists. I could not find a damn one.

All of that is changing now. It is fantastic. I am honored to be a part of that.

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

Al Iraqiya: Anytime, Scott.

In Conversation with Vidita Priyadarshini – MA in Political Science Student, Central European University

May 18, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Vidita Priyadarshini is a graduate student in political science at Central European University. Here we talk about current events at Central European University.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is happening at Central European University now?

Vidita Priyadarshini: It started around March last year when the government, who has a super majority, tabled a bill in the Parliament which would make it impossible for our university to operate in this country.

It was random. Nobody saw it coming. They were making regulations about universities that had dual-accreditation. We have accreditation in Hungary and the United States. They decided to make changes and additions to this accreditation process in Hungary.

They tried to hide behind saying, “This is a general rule which is applicable to every university that operates with dual accreditation.” However, the rules were built in a way that only affected one of the many such universities operating in Hungary, and given the political climate, it was obvious that it is part of a concerted attack.

It went through. It became a big issue. A lot of Hungarian civil society was against it. The opposition, which is highly fragmented, treated it as part of their election campaign. We had support from international academia, European, American, and even from the global south – India and Pakistan. The situation mirrored what happened in Turkey and Russia before.

However, despite all this support, and the CEU having met the requirements painstakingly over the last year, they have not signed the agreements. They are trying to keep us in this tricky position, where you cannot decide if you want to stay in this country or move.

They are trying to hit us where it hurts the most. The university is seen as a liberal university and with a mission such as open society, is seen as an enemy of Hungarian prime-minister’s concept of ‘illiberal democracy.’

The background of the university is that it was founded by George Soros in 1991 to be one of the centres of academic excellence in this region after the fall of communism. So, for him, George Soros and this liberal university represents everything against him.

They were trying to figure out ways to take us down, any perception of opposition was considered harmful. Even though the CEU never gets involved in Hungarian politics directly, it is constantly projected as a major threat. When that didn’t work, they tried subtle ways. For example, through intimidation of NGOs.

They project George Soros as some mastermind who controls everyone. Our university is not controlled by George Soros. That is the narrative that they want to push.

Jacobsen: What has been some of the reaction to Budapest, within Hungary, and within Central Europe itself, with regards to this back-and-forth between, on the one side, a liberal democracy stance, and, on the other side, a more conservative or even ultra-conservative stance?

Priyadarshini: In Budapest, we were surprised last year. People who do not normally take part in political debates took part in protests. We were going around, we were organizing. We were talking to a lot of people. We were surprised when one of the bigger protests had 80,000 in a city of only 2,000,000. All age groups, it was surprising to me.

One possibility, as I am told by my Hungarian friends is that they might not care that much. The debate might be irrelevant to them – whether to be a liberal democracy or an illiberal democracy, but they agree education should not be attacked. A lot of people probably hated this while harbouring anti-Soros sentiments. Probably, the bottom line was that it is taking opportunities away from Hungarians.

I do not know about the countryside, but in Budapest the sentiment was strongly in support of the university because they felt Hungarians do not have a good education system in general; and that this should not be politicized so much.

They believe educational spaces should not be politicized. You may have opinions about that [politicization of universities], but that seems to be the opinion here. In Central and Eastern Europe, as with everywhere, there is a rise of the Right.

At the same time, there was a shock about this because the Right also might disagree with these policies. With the debates in the European parliament, we saw that there was some pressure on the European Peoples' Party to push the Hungarian government to not let this legislation through.

However, he has been powering through it in general. The fate of the university remains to be seen as the government continuously refuses to sign the agreement after all new requirements have been met. One can only hope for the best.

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

On Tanzanian Youth and Fundamentalist Religion with Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam): Founder, Jicho Jipya/Think Anew Tanzania

May 19, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam) founded Jichojipya (meaning with new eye) to "Think Anew". We have talked before about freethought in Tanzania. Here we continue the discussion, other conversations [here](#), [here](#).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I want to talk about the youth. How are they doing regarding religion? Is it an impediment to women's social progress, for example?

Nsajigwa: Young people, the youth are molded right from home into religion from early age. Yes, modern education is provided at schools, but it is regarded as "elimu dunia" or literally "earthly education."

It is second in importance to that given by religion's faith institutions ("kipaimara" – Sacrament of Confirmation for Christianity-RC and "Madrassa for Islam), which is seen as "value-based & building" and, thus, primary.

However, forces of secularism do produce dissenters – a few within in spite of religious socialization (indoctrination) from an early age.

Religion comes with a value system, particularly what is expected of woman – what to be and to do (and what not to). Basically, wishing a woman to only play her traditional role as a "good wife", and later as a childbearing and rearing mother.

Jacobsen: How do seriously do they take religious beliefs?

Nsajigwa: They take it very seriously out of socialization that starts early at home. Though forces of modernity, secularization has had the effect of reducing religiosity in some way. Yet, it hasn't been a guarantee. In fact, it is a paradox of African modernity!

Jacobsen: Is there a way to inoculate the youth against fundamentalist religion?

Nsajigwa: Yes, education that is enlightening, beyond passing examinations, is the Key. Education that encourages (i.e. does not inhibit) curiosity and questioning – an asking attitude from the young ones. Education by exposure, via traveling to meet different tastes and human values elsewhere.

Education by studying in an impartial manner and with neutrality, example the subject of comparative religions. The teaching that religion is a cultural phenomenon. Instill, inspire, and nurture book reading habit to be a culture by itself.

To develop a skeptical attitude as well as a questioning one instead of accepting things by faith, develop rationalism based on empiricism, teach (rather than having a phobia for) philosophy itself and not through the eyes of theology, bring awareness that there is an alternative life stance to that of religion and supernaturalism.

That one can be ethical, good, and even humanistic without a religion.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time.

Nsajigwa: Thanks back to you.

Prof. Imam Syed Soharwardy on the Current State of Affairs for Religion and Irreligion in Canada

May 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Prof. Imam Soharwardy is a Sunni scholar and a shaykh of the Suhrawardi Sufi order, as well as the chairman of the Al-Madinah Calgary Islamic Assembly, founder of Muslims Against Terrorism (MAT), and the founder and president of the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada. He founded MAT in Calgary in January 1998. He is also the founder of Islamic Supreme Council of Canada (ISCC).

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

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to the current state of affairs regarding religion in Canada, are things improving in terms of tolerance for the religious to the irreligious and the irreligious to the religious?

Imam Syed Soharwardy: It is very slow, but, definitely, it is in the right direction. People are having a better understanding of each other. But definitely, we are not there, where we can say, "We have a Canadian community with a broader perspective."

However, we can say we understand different religions and faith groups. Definitely, there is a rise in anti-immigrant, anti-ethnic, and anti-Muslim sentiment. But there are more dialogues now.

I attend more interfaith dialogues across the country than 5 years or 10 years ago. Definitely, it is going in a positive direction, but the direction has been quite slow.

Jacobsen: I note some small super minority movements within the religious and the non-religious communities. That super minority movement in either community does not have, not necessarily explicitly but tacitly, a respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights statement about freedom of belief and freedom of religion.

In other words, some will want to eliminate religion. Others will want to eliminate the non-religious. That seems to violate the two principles of freedom of religion and freedom of belief.

Do you notice this super minority of either community?

Soharwardy: I completely agree with you. There are sentiments in faith and non-faith communities. There is an element, which is quite vocal and visible and, sometimes, in some cases damaging the relationship among various groups of people.

I completely agree with you. Those people, a minority, of course, do exist in the faith groups as well as in the non-faith groups. I come across many people who do not believe in any religion.

They hate religion. They do not tolerate any teachings of any religion. Similarly, there are people in faith communities who follow a certain religion. They have no respect or no tolerance for atheists or agnostics or man-made faith people.

They think they are evil. Similarly, I have emails from people who say, “Secular religion is man-made. You guys are worshipping that does not exist.” That kind of intolerance does exist. It is quite vocal.

It is quite visible. It damages to the good relationships to the faith and non-faith groups, and within the faith and non-faith groups.

Jacobsen: As an individual, and as an independent writer and journalist, I cannot speak for an entire community or for a community of which I am not a part. However, I can say, “I am sorry for those particular instances where you have gotten emails or communications that, more or less, are intended to harm or cause offense.”

At the same time, one important aspect to keep in mind for all members of the community of conscience: even though, every community has their extremists. The important part, and I think we agree on this, is not to allow the extremists to hijack the mainstream of the movement or the community or be the spokespeople of the community itself.

Soharwardy: Absolutely, they have no right to represent the whole faith group or non-faith group. The majority of non-faith people – and I have been involved with many atheist and agnostic groups – respect me as a person of faith.

Even though, they do not believe in any religion. We do have some dialogue. We have some good discussion. But it is very friendly. It is a cordial discussion and civilized. However, there are elements in religious and non-religious groups who do not know how to talk.

They cannot talk in a civil discussion with the opponent group. That definitely bothers me. I absolutely, and from my congregation, know that such people do not represent their own groups, whether an atheist or a religious group.

Faith groups also, they can be very intolerant towards other faiths. That intolerance can be quite visible and obvious.

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

In Conversation with Justin Trottier – Executive Director, Canadian Centre for Men and Families

May 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Justin Trottier is Executive Director of the Canadian Centre for Men and Families, a men's health and social service facility. The Centre is an open, inclusive and space serving as a hub for counselling, legal aid, fathering programs and trauma support groups. He is Founder of the Canadian Association for Equality, a registered educational charity that seeks to integrate boys and men into our efforts to advance gender equality. Justin has played a leadership role in a variety of humanist, secularist and skeptic organizations, appearing frequently in the media advocating for church-state separation, fundamental freedoms and humanist ethics.

There is the crowdsourced funding campaign for their men's shelter campaign [here](#).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let us start, like a superhero origin story, from the beginning. What was early family background in regards to religion in brief?

Justin Trottier: I was raised in what I would describe as a secular, liberal, Jewish household. Religion was not something emphasized. But I recall, at an early age, having a default presumption that there must be some divine presence in the universe.

Somehow, I came to accept that. I espoused the belief and was raised steeped in that. However, it was not a religious thing. It was a belief in God. Through my teenage years, I became more intrigued by the scientific worldview.

That led me on the path of exploration, which culminated in atheism. I went through different stages. I was questioning things and then became a skeptic, and agnostic. I am still those, but also an atheist too.

By the time I was an adult, I was convinced, very likely, that there was not a God. I have not moved beyond that since that time.

Jacobsen: At the University of Toronto, you founded the secular student alliance there. What was the inspiration for that? Some people will have a mentor at the university, which will help them form a group. Did you have one?

Trottier: Not really, I co-founded the group with a young woman named Jenne Fides. She preceded me because she formed a small discussion group at Trinity College, which is one of the colleges at the University of Toronto.

Trinity College is Anglican by tradition. It is unusual to have an atheist club and to be given facilities to host their meetings. I saw this advertising for this atheist club. I did not see something like this at the university.

I was busy. I was running other student clubs at the time. I had not yet gotten around to an atheist or even a humanist group. When I saw Jenny beat me to it [Laughing], I connected with her. We rebranded this college-based atheist club and turned that into a university-wide secular society.

That is what we made at the U of T, a secular alliance. It would transform into a national charity in its own right and become very active across the country.

Jacobsen: You also opened the Secular Freethought Centre. The one trendline is providing some space for secular people to have a community. So, not only with the founding of the U of T Secular Student Alliance but also the Secular Freethought Centre, the first community center for secular humanists.

Does that amount to one of your intents there with regards to founding organizations like those?

Trottier: You said it quite well. The idea was to provide space – both metaphorically and physically, or have space where non-believers could gather and discuss their position on things. They could enjoy each other's company and also challenge each other.

A lot of the events we had did not bring in speakers to tell us what we already knew.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Trottier: It was to tell us what the frontiers of science were, about the universe. That can be challenging. We had debates that pitted people from different points of view into dialogue with one another. It was to have dialogue and deepen our understanding of things based out of a safe place where atheists would be welcome.

There would be no dogmas. Nothing taboo, that could not be discussed or debated. That was the principle behind it.

Jacobsen: With reflection and the distance of quite a bit of time, what were some of the topics, even with that principle of open dialogue, at the time that were 'hot button' issues – as they say?

Trottier: That is a good question. Some of the events that got the most interest were the frontiers of science events. We had some interesting events by professors and researchers doing cutting-edge work.

Jacobsen: That is cool.

Trottier: Sometimes, it was so cutting-edge that they did not even publish their work yet. Not so much controversial, it seemed to bring out a lot of people. We had a couple of debates. One was on human rights. Are they a convenient fiction or objectively real?

That was from a York University professor who gave that talk. That got a lot of people out. That was one of the more challenging talks for us. I think most of the room came in thinking human rights were real. That there was not a lot of complicated issues around it.

The speaker really challenged us and provoked us to think more critically about our assumptions in those areas. There were a number of talks in those areas.

Jacobsen: The Secular Freethought Centre became Centre for Inquiry Canada. How did that happen?

Trottier: It only lasted for about a summer. It was a little bit messy. Let me back up and be a bit personal, I was a bit at the centre of this for a time. When I graduated from the University of Toronto that summer, I was hired by the Centre for Inquiry to be its campus organizer because of the work I had done at the Canadian Universities.

At the same time, we were given a generous contribution from a local humanist philanthropist in order to begin renting. There were some strings attached to it. He was an older gentleman. He wanted to leave a legacy. He wanted to know that he had opened the first centre for humanists, secularists, and atheists.

There was a local group that had tried to do this for years but had not been successful. They did not succeed. We quickly took him up on this offer. We opened this facility. I was able to continue my campus organizing work. We called it the Secular Freethought Centre. When the Centre for Inquiry had hired me a couple months previously, they wanted in on the action.

We were able to broker a deal between the donor and some other local humanist groups, the Centre for Inquiry, and me to rebrand this as Centre for Inquiry for an office in Canada, Centre for Inquiry Toronto.

It would go on to become a national headquarters for the Centre for Inquiry. I would be hired to serve as its national executive director. [Laughing] I do not know if anyone cares about that history. But you asked the question.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] I care. There are a bunch of branches throughout the country. As an educational organization at the national level, the knowledge of this foundation seems important.

Now, the Westboro Baptist Church, the pastor Fred Phelps is/was notoriously anti-gay. I would assume anti-LGBTQ+ and so on. You hired Nathan Phelps. The son of that pastor, but an estranged son, he headed up a branch of Centre for Inquiry Canada.

Why did you reach out to Nathan?

Trottier: That was one of the proudest things that I did at CFI. It was to recruit Nathan Phelps. He found us. He left the family many years ago. If I remember the story, when he was 18, he flew the coup. He made his way to Canada.

He was a taxi driver. It was in BC somewhere. He happened to have, as one of his passengers in his taxi, a young journalist, probably similar age to yourself, in fact, Scott. They got to talking. The student realized that he really had a story on his hands. He had the son of Fred Phelps driving a taxi in Canada.

He broke this story. It turned out Nathan Phelps was the opposite of his father. He was an atheist, an LGBT supporter, and would become a champion of gay rights issues. This reporter was a member of CAFÉ.

Whether he invited Nathan to contact me or suggested I reach out to him, he was the linchpin in all that. He goes by Nate. I will call him that. He became a volunteer and a branch director and an Alberta member to run our operations.

Jacobsen: How did this relate to Annual Blasphemy Day?

Trottier: This was separate. However, Nate was one of the champion spokespersons for it. That is true. Blasphemy Day was the culmination of one of a few different trajectories that had to do with CFI's response to censorship. One was the Danish cartoon controversy.

I am sure you know well about it. The other one was a little bit more local. It had to do with some Canadian politics around Canadian Human Rights Commissions. At the time, they were claiming a right to, a little bit simplistic but, not offend religious sensibilities.

There were some well-known cases in Canada, where some journalists produced content that was deemed offensive to Muslims. Those few Muslims who were offended – it wasn't very many, but there were a few – and then complained to the Human Rights Commissions in a couple provinces in Canada.

The Commissions investigated these articles because these were offensive. There were the Canadian angle and the international angle with the cartoons. For some of us, enough was enough; we thought about bringing this day to protect blasphemy, which we call International Blasphemy Rights Day.

I was not involved with them that much anymore, but I was involved in that movement. I was making sure that the Canadian issues were integrated into the founding of those events.

Jacobsen: Also, another form of activism was an atheist bus campaign. It even got some coverage on, the Steve Paikin show, TVO. What was the inspiration for that particular campaign? With respect to the atheist bus campaign, what was the reaction to it? What has been the long-term outcome of that?

Trottier: I was quite prominent in reaching to the media and getting our campaigns covered in the media. You didn't seem to have to do very much. There was an appetite. We were lucky. They do not have an atheist organization that they can go to together to get that perspective.

Once CFI came on the scene, we became the go-to naturally. It was a constant interest from the media in all activities. We thought, "What is a big splash campaign that we can do to take this interest, which was largely reactive?"

You cover it and then they come to us. How can we lead a campaign around issues important to us and then mobilize the media to convey that message? At the same time, there was the bus campaign happening in the UK with the British Humanist Association.

We thought that might be the right mix to bring that campaign to Canada and then bringing a Canadian mix. It is running ads in various cities. It was the same ad as in the UK, but then it was turned into a conversation around humanist ethics.

"There is probably no God so stop worrying and enjoy your life."

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Trottier: We talked about the difference between a humanist and a religious ethical and meaning system. We did a number of events and initiatives around that. That was one big advertising campaign: borrowing the theme and the brand from the UK.

That got so much attention. We had more big advertising campaigns. One was completely created by CFI Canada called the Extraordinary Claims Campaign. It was more a homage to Carl Sagan rather than to atheism and humanism.

We had a tagline with it. Our website had dozens of different "extraordinary claims" and giving people evidence for or against the claim. You asked me what spiralled out of the atheist bus campaign. That was one follow-up.

We wanted to do one on skepticism. We also put a couple billboard ads up. We looked at how people practically lived their lives as a humanist. We had some billboards that featured some real live humanists asking them what was important in their lives.

We had hundreds of testimonials on another page from atheist and nonbelievers and getting them to ask what they get their meaning from. It was, in a sense, humanizing humanism.

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

In Conversation with Dr. Leo Igwe on the Responsibility of Recognition

May 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Leo Igwe is the founder of the Nigerian Humanist Movement and former Western and Southern African representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. He is among the most prominent African non-religious people from the African continent. When he speaks, many people listen in a serious way. He holds a Ph.D. from the Bayreuth International School of African Studies at the University of Bayreuth in Germany, having earned a graduate degree in Philosophy from the University of Calabar in Nigeria. Here we talk about Nigerian and African humanism, the responsibilities of recognition, aims for the humanist movement, and a recent TED talk.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are one of the most active Nigerian, and African for that matter, activists known to me. For many others, you have left a positive impression and impact, and show no signs of slowing down. What does this widespread recognition as an important voice mean to you?

Dr. Leo Igwe: The widespread recognition means more responsibility and more work. It obligates me to exert more efforts and sustain the momentum to further humanist ideals and values. It entails devising new and more potent strategies to make humanism flourish, and mainstream the rights and interests of nonreligious persons. The positive impression is a sign of a growing understanding or better, an enhanced realization of the importance of humanism; an indication that a long forgotten, long overlooked need for a positive non-religious outlook is now being fulfilled. In a country such as Nigeria, religion has an overwhelming influence. So it can be very difficult for humanist activists to make any significant impact because such an impression chips away on the rock of overbearing religions. Thus the recognition is a welcome development, a sign of hope that should propel me and other activists out there to do more and consolidate on the gains, the hard-won progress that the humanist movement has so far recorded.

Jacobsen: What does this also mean in terms of additional responsibilities from the recognition by peers and youth?

Igwe: It means striving to ensure that humanism takes its rightful place on the table of religions, philosophies or life stances, and that humanists and other non-religious people can live their lives and go about their everyday business with less and less fear. It means working to end persecution and discrimination against non-religious persons in the region. It motivates me to work for a secular Nigeria.

In Nigeria, those who identify as having no religion are in the minority; they are not reckoned with. Non-religious persons suffer systemic marginalization. For too long, persons without religion have been identified as a silent and sometimes, a non-existing minority. The maltreatment is unacceptable and I want to ensure that this situation changes and that the voice of humanism is heard when issues that affect the public are discussed.

In the coming years, I want to work to ensure that Nigerians grow up understanding that religion is an option, and knowing that they can leave religion; that they can criticize religion. I want to

make sure that people in Nigeria are aware that humanism and atheism as options that they can explore and embrace.

Jacobsen: What are your current aims for the humanist movement of Nigeria, which you founded?

Igwe: I have two main objectives for the humanist movement. First is to strengthen the capacity of the movement to fulfill its role of providing a sense of community to non-religious persons. Active humanists are still few and far apart, but the challenge of organizing humanism, of growing and managing the humanist community is huge. The humanist movement needs to be positioned to meet these challenges. It needs mechanisms to robustly address the needs and interests of humanists. So I plan to identify such structures, locally and internationally, wherever they exist and put them at the disposal of the movement.

Second, I want to position the movement to meet the needs of the society. Some mistakenly think that humanism is exclusively for humanists. This is not the case. The humanist/freethought movement does not exist only for humanists but for the society as a whole. Religion and superstition negatively affect the religious and the superstitious. So the humanist movement should be enabled to support victims of religious extremism and irrational beliefs whether they are believers or nonbelievers. My goal is to capacitate the movement so that it can fulfill its obligation to humanists including defending the rights to freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and working to end harmful religious and superstitious practices.

Jacobsen: In a recent, and popular TED talk, you posited a positive life stance with humanism. One that even in spite of the difficulties in the past into the present for many Africans poses a positive future. How did you get the opportunity to present at TED?

Igwe: TED officials contacted me. They asked me to draft a talk on humanism and I did. The talk went through several revisions and very rigorous editing processes and rehearsals before it was finally accepted.

Jacobsen: How does humanism present a better future compared to other philosophies?

Igwe: Humanism presents a better future because it has humanity as its main reference. Humanism emphasizes human abilities and potentialities; that humans can overcome its problems and difficulties in this world. Unlike philosophies, especially those with supernatural resonance, humanism's future is not an otherworldly infrastructure. It is this-world bound. Humanism stresses a future that is attainable and realizable in time and space. The future that it presents may be ideal but not completely a form of fantasy that only the disincarnated savour. It is not a strictly imagined idea that transcends reality, bereft of any trappings of the worldly. The future is not a post-mortem heritage that people can only enjoy and behold after they are dead. It is a future that is achievable in this life, in the here and now.

Jacobsen: In terms of the outcomes and responses to the TED talk, what has been the feedback?

Igwe: The responses have been encouraging. The talk has been viewed over seven hundred thousand times. I have received a couple of messages from those who listened and were inspired by the talk. I guess that the positive feedbacks, which the talk has so far elicited was mainly because such a perspective is a rarity in African discourses. I hope this is going to change and that there will be more TED and non-TED talks that make a strong case for humanism and freethought in Africa.

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

Updates from the Executive Director of the British Columbia Humanist Association

May 30, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Ian Bushfield, M.Sc., is the Executive Director of the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA). The BCHA has been working to have humanist marriages on the same plane as other marriages in the province. Here we talk about recent updates from the view of the BCHA.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: It has been several months since the last conversation. Let us jump into it. What have been the general trends in British Columbia for the humanist population?

Ian Bushfield: I can only speak broadly, as we don't get a lot of regular data on the religious and nonreligious make-up of British Columbia. What we do know is that over the past few decades, BC has become increasingly secular where most metrics show a majority of people in the province identify as having no religion and as few as one-in-ten regularly attend religious services.

Within the BC Humanist Association, we've continued to see growth throughout 2017 and 2018. Some of our biggest growths in membership and support have come in the past year and we're really excited to continue that trend through 2018.

Jacobsen: What have been some of the developments in 2018, so far, for the British Columbia Humanist Association?

Bushfield: It's been interesting for us to watch and start to interact with the new BC Government over the past few months.

Some of it has been promising, like their commitment and consultation around rebuilding the province's Human Rights Commission, while other issues have been a bit more disappointing, like the continued funding of religious independent schools, possible expansion of faith-based care facilities in Comox and lack of movement on permitting Humanist marriages.

Overall, I think we're still optimistic that having accomplished much of its election platform in its first year that we'll be able to start to work with the Government on these and other issues that many Humanists are passionate about.

Jacobsen: What have been some of the more prominent campaigns ongoing into 2018?

Bushfield: What we're really looking forward to hearing, and this could be any day now, is the Supreme Court of Canada's decision in the Trinity Western University law school case. We intervened at the Court to argue that organizations shouldn't be able to claim religious exemptions under Canadian law. If the Court adopts our arguments that will be a big defence in Canadian law against the excesses we're seeing in the USA following Hobby Lobby.

We are also continuing to follow a number of issues such as access to reproductive healthcare and medical assistance in dying and the pushback by religious fundamentalists to improved sexual and gender education in BC schools.

Jacobsen: What are the expectations for projects and developments for the BCHA within the province for the rest of 2018 and into 2019?

Bushfield: We're looking at three big campaigns this year.

First, we want to dive headfirst into challenging the nearly half-a-billion-dollar giveaway BC provides to private schools. The overwhelming majority of these schools are faith-based and many proudly mix creation in their science classrooms. Overall, these schools segregate students by class and religion, which is antithetical to Humanist values.

Second, we're starting to do some work on looking at how BC municipalities treat religious property tax exemptions. They have some latitude in how they treat these exemptions and we know that not all towns simply give a blanket exemption to all churches. We're curious as to what different approaches are out there and have already seen some who provide no exemptions to churches!

Finally, BC is in the midst of an overdose crisis and our governments are starting to take some needed action on this file. We want to make sure the approach we're taking is based on the best available evidence and respects people's (non-)religious freedoms.

Jacobsen: What are some concerns in the coming months of 2018 for the non-religious in the province?

Bushfield: In addition to what I've already spoken about, we're watching a couple things.

First, the Government is taking some desperately needed steps to tackle the province's housing crisis. Toward this end, they've committed to working with non-profits, including faith groups, to develop new affordable housing units. We've heard in the past that these developments have put vulnerable people at risk of religious coercion.

While we understand the urgency of getting units built, this shouldn't come at the cost of violating the human rights of the nonreligious, religious minorities or the LGBTQ+ community.

Second, the government will be tabling a bill to create a new Human Rights Commission in the fall. This can be an important institution that acts to proactively protect human rights in the province, including secularism. The devil is going to be in the details so we'll have to keep our eye on what comes forward.

Jacobsen: What are some concerns in the coming months of 2018 for the non-religious in the nation?

Bushfield: Last year, I saw the federal government table legislation to finally repeal Canada's blasphemy law. Unfortunately, that bill has been stalled in the Senate for months now.

We need to continue pressing the government and Senators to move the bill forward and ensure its passage this fall. There's always a small chance that the government will opt to prorogue Parliament over the summer and that could mean we have to start from square one again.

While we're on the Senate, the chamber has also created a committee to study Canadian charity law. The BCHA is working with the Canadian Secular Alliance to speak against the current privileged position that religious groups receive under Canadian law.

Between this and the government's expected response to an expert report on loosening the rules around charities' political activities, we have a rare opportunity to remake Canada's charity laws.

Jacobsen: You had a debate, recently. How did you get involved in it? What was the background and topic of the discussion/debate? How do you think it turned out in the end?

Bushfield: This was a really great opportunity that was extended to me by people with Apologetics Canada. Rather than a debate, what myself and Dr. Andy Bannister had was a cordial dialogue on whether Humanism or Christianity provided a better foundation for human rights.

While Dr. Bannister has far more academic training than me in philosophy and apologetics, I tried to present a layman case for the understanding that morality and therefore our contemporary human rights are the result of a cultural evolutionary process and something we can continually build upon.

Dr. Bannister argued that there needs to be some fundamental basis for moral transactions but I couched it in the simple and largely universal approach of the Golden Rule.

In the end, I had a lot more fun than I expected and I encourage people to check out the dialogue on our YouTube channel if they're curious.

Link to debate here:

Q&A here:

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Bushfield: More than anything else, I really want to spend more time talking about the fundamentals of Humanism this year. These campaigns are all obviously important as they aim to make a real difference in the lives of people in BC and across Canada but it's important to understand why we're taking these positions. Humanism is pro-human but it isn't anti-religious. We need to talk more about the things we stand for – human rights, democracy, peace – and not just the things we're opposed to.

I'm increasingly worried that as a movement we've possibly spent too much time on the latter and that's made some of our spaces less welcoming than we'd want. I think there's an appetite for the secular, inclusive and progressive message that Humanism can offer and I'm eager to talk more about that.

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

In Conversation with Karrar Al Asfoor on Atheism: Co-Founder, Atheist Alliance – Middle-East and North Africa & United Atheists of Europe

June 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is the status of religion in Iraq?

Karrar Al Asfoor: Religion controls every aspect of life in Iraq, from the simple cashier in a small shop to the largest governmental organization to my house, to the children playing in the streets, to the cafe talks, whatever you do there you will be in touch with religion.

Iraq is considered one of the most important Shia majority countries with Najaf and Karbala cities that are considered to be the holiest Shia cities. The whole calendar is filled with religious festivals that take place in every part of the country.

Jacobsen: How much political and legal power does religion enforce in Iraq?

Asfoor: Taking into consideration that the government is run by religious organizations and Islamic parties with religious militias who have much more power than the security forces, and people needing a fatwa from the grand mufti for everything; I would say that religion is the dominant political power in the country.

Jacobsen: You co-founded an organization with Nacer Ameri. What is the organization? Why co-found it? What is its title, mission, and purpose?

Asfoor: First, let me clarify that it is not yet an officially registered organization, it is an Idea in its early phases. It is much like a social fraternity with goals to bring the European atheist community to work together with the ex-Muslim community for a secular world. Its name is United Atheists of Europe.

It is clear that we rely on unifying the efforts of atheists across the European continent but are not limited to this, because the world has become a small village and whatever happens in one part of the world would affect other parts.

We will use the space of possible freedom here and have that to make an impact in the Islamic world. In terms of “missions,” we have two generally. The first one is to protect secularism in Europe, which faces the risk of Islamism. The second is to have the effective means to empower atheists in the Islamic world pushing things into secularism there.

And as mentioned earlier, our purpose is a secular world, but that is not achievable at the moment because there are political agendas controlling our world. They have the resources and the larger media outlets.

We only have our brains so we need to face them smartly with an innovative workaround, inspired by the Illuminati, which existed during the enlightenment era. Nacer and I started this social fraternity.

Jacobsen: How does religion in Europe represent a better version with more moderation, tolerance, diversity, and real secularism?

Asfoor: During my stay in Europe until now, religion has never intervened with my freedom or personal choices. For example, I could be arrested if I drink alcohol in some cities in Iraq compared to over the counter alcohol bottles here in Europe.

That's a huge difference, and here I feel more comfortable with the idea that my head will still be connected to my body if I criticize religion.

Jacobsen: Does Islam permit secularism in a fundamentalist reading or interpretation of the scripture?

Asfoor: There is no secularism in Islam or other religions. Religions are based on the divine command theory of ethics while secularism is based on the rational ethical theories (like Utilitarianism). They are totally different axiological worldviews, despite the fact some interpretations permit secularism and some reformers actually advocate for it ignoring the huge contradictions between the original scripture and the new interpretation.

But taking in consideration that people vary in their thinking, psychological elements, and social field factors, I think interpretations and reformers hold a key role in the social transformation and our existence (we ex-Muslim atheists) is so much important to them while the opposite is true.

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

Asfoor: I am honored to participate in this interview with you, thanks a lot Scott.

Interview with the Co-Founder of the United Atheists of Europe Nacer Amari

June 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Regarding geography, culture, and language, where does family background reside?

Nacer Amari: Although, the Tunisian southern region is where most citizens adhere to the religion. Its customs, traditions, and social norms. I grew up in a Berber family with Arab culture where parents are illiterate and not religious.

Jacobsen: How did this influence personal development?

Amari: Usually, it has a negative impact on the child's personality, but I consider myself to be lucky compared to the children where I grew up, even though my parents were illiterate and managed to raise me without being affected by religion.

Jacobsen: When did you first identify as an atheist?

Amari: I started to have doubts about religion during the high school. I noticed that my colleagues in the high school were praying, but my family's members were not. This is when I started thinking about the purpose of prayers and religion and the existence of God in general. Then I completely lost my faith in God during the 10th class identifying myself as an atheist.

Jacobsen: You co-founded united atheists of Europe. Why found it? How big is it? What are your aims and concrete goals for the upcoming years?

Amari: Karrar Al Asfoor and I founded this social fraternity when we noticed that there is a need to unify the efforts of atheists across Europe. It is to bring the European atheists to work together with the ex-Muslim community for a secular world.

In the meantime, it is considered a small-sized social fraternity, but it's open for every atheist who is interested to join. Our future goals are to have the effective means to challenge religions and protecting secularism in Europe and to empower atheists in the Islamic world pushing it into secularism there.

Jacobsen: In Tunisia, you are banned from eating during Ramadan. Why? How are people quietly and openly protesting it?

Amari: The old Tunisian constitution did not prohibit eating during Ramadan, but there was a ban from the Ministry of Interior requiring restaurants and cafes to obtain touristic permits to be able to serve food and drinks during Ramadan with the windows covered.

The constitution has been updated after the revolution with a new chapter, which is called "the good ethics chapter" giving the ban legal status.

Jacobsen: What is the purported purpose and reasoning behind Ramadan?

Amari: The practice of fasting performed by Muslims every year for 14 centuries is a phenomenon of ancient religious rites that has preserved its existence to this day and is not commensurate with any logical scientific explanation.

This is a holy month *par excellence* for Muslims. It is one of the five pillars of Islam, as they believe that the revelation of the Qur'an was a "night of fate" this month, also the only month of which the name appears in the Koran.

They considered it the "month of charity" because, when it ends, the faithful must pay alms.

Jacobsen: What is the religious climate in Tunisia? How is freedom to criticize religion there?

Amari: The talk about religious aspect in Tunisia is the talk of a conflict that has existed between religious and political since independence, on the face of social-political, but in its depth is political-religious.

After the revolution the Islamists seized the power, the religious climate became very scary, where have been many assassinations, terror attacks, the rise of terrorism, and atonement to date.

The freedom to criticize religion in Tunisia is complicated, because in the new constitution, there is a contradiction in the laws, where we find in the first chapter mentioned that "Islam is the religion of the state."

However, in chapter six," The State protects the religion (Islam), guarantees the freedom of belief, conscience and the exercise of the cults."

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

In Conversation with Ismail Mohamed of “The Black Ducks”

June 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you, e.g. geography, culture, language, religion, and so on?

Ismail Mohamed: I was born in 1983 and travelled with my family to Jordan at the age of five. Luckily, my father was not a religious man; that is, he did not practice religious rituals. This bothered me because all my friends had their parents' religions and practised the rituals of Islam permanently.

He does not. I was born in Alexandria, Egypt. I lived in Jordan for a long time and returned with my family to Egypt after 9/11. I remember in these days in Jordan how many talked about bin Laden as a Muslim hero.

My uncle helped to raise me. He was devout. He took me with him to the mosque constantly and made me memorize the Koran. I was not able to read and memorize the Koran. This was causing me some frustration among classmates because everyone was good at reading the Koran well and memorizing it.

In my adolescence, I was living a conflict between religious commitment, and my love for music and listening to music and songs. I remember in this period. I was very attracted to the melodies and songs of Michael Jackson, but his reputation was bad among people in my community.

People accuse him of likening women (this is a charge and a stigma in our societies). It was not easy to express my admiration for all the people. I was walking in the Jordanian capital looking for any picture of Michael Jackson just to watch from afar.

The best thing that happened to me in this period was to encourage my parents to read books, encyclopedias, reading about electricity, physics, and chemistry. I loved going to the library and reading about how electricity works and reading about how sexual organs work. I could get information from books. It is great and helped me a lot in understanding life better.

Unfortunately, I only learned the Arabic language at this time in my life. My father was not a person with a university education. He knew that science was wonderful. He encouraged me to read continuously and with the advent of the Internet. He encouraged me to go online and remember that I went.

Jacobsen: You are Egyptian. What is the climate for atheists and religious people there? Is it more favourable for the atheists or for the religious?

Mohamed: I am an Egyptian living in Egypt since the events of 9/11. Being a Muslim and a straight man means that you live in the perfect place for you. Egypt, like any Muslim country, is good for conservative Muslims and heterosexuals.

It is not a good place for atheists. I am not gay, but I have gay friends who live in very difficult circumstances. Almost all of them live a double life. The community may be married to another sex or show that they love the opposite sex, but in fact, they are gay or lesbian.

Jacobsen: How does Egypt tend to treat atheists in social and professional life?

Mohamed: No one can declare his atheism and remain in the same social and professional life. This is almost impossible. This can be announced to some people close to him and will remain secret to everyone.

But if his declaration is strong, the society will not have mercy on him, whether he is a university professor or whatever. Therefore, the majority of those who declared atheism are now social outcasts.

Some of them resort to changing their homes or jobs or hiding, or working through the Internet as I did after my declaration of atheism in one of the satellite channels. I then had to leave my city and go to live in the city for fear on my life and the life of my family, religious persecution and fear of persecution is very difficult and turns life into a great hell.

Jacobsen: What are the laws regarding atheists in Egypt? Does this violate human rights of non-believers?

Mohamed: There are no laws that criminalize atheism in Egypt. If you are an atheist, you do not violate the law. But if you talk about the reasons for atheism or explain religion as you understood it and make you an atheist, you may be imprisoned for contempt of religions. This violates the human rights of freedom of belief and expression.

Jacobsen: What was the show *The Black Ducks*?

Mohamed: It is a media platform where non-believers were given the opportunity to talk about their experience with religion; an information platform that also propagates the principles of secularism and acceptance of the other.

The program's guests were not only non-believers, but also minority believers such as Christians, Baha'is, and Shi'a Muslims from Sunni Muslim communities and Sunni Muslims. Shiite communities, and a group of thinkers and writers from different countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

I have recorded more than 300 episodes so far. The program has also been the first to give the opportunity to many homosexuals who are forgotten. They can talk about their experience. Their suffering in the Middle East, also the program aims to encourage non-believers and oppressed life and deliver a message to them is that they are not alone, but we are with them.

Jacobsen: What is going on with the show now? What happens on the show in its more prominent moments?

Mohamed: I was forced to leave the city and go to another city with a very small population. I was able to continue broadcasting from there. However, I was apprehended by security and stopped for a while and returned to my city.

Now, I broadcast my programs with sound instead of audio and video to avoid any trouble that may occur. I was invited to participate in a conference on secularism in London last year. I got a visa to travel, but the security authorities prevented me from travelling for unknown reasons. I received a prize from the conference with Richard Dawkins and others.

Jacobsen: Of course, people have the right to believe or follow a religion as they wish, according to the UN Charter, which narrows the problem to rights violations against atheists with death penalties or against the ordinary religion with the fundamentalists

enforcing their views on both of non-religious and the ordinary religious, How can both groups work to combat the encroachment of the fundamentalist religious to protect human rights and acquire justice in the many cases of rights violations?

Mohamed: This is a wonderful question. Unfortunately, to this day, there is an overlap (almost all the countries of the Middle East and North Africa) between what is religious and what is related to life, people, and society. There are many laws based on religion such as personal status laws in Egypt for example (such as marriage and inheritance), and some other laws.

A large proportion of ordinary Muslims do not care about this and do not feel threatened by this overlap between religion and politics or between religion and state and the system of life, while the unbelievers are difficult to hear because most are oppressed and afraid to speak freely because of the laws of contempt of religions that can imprison them at any time. It happened with many thinkers and writers, and some may be killed.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Mohamed: We are one world and one planet. Western societies are created, produced, and manufactured by the creativity of their children who enjoy freedom after separating what is religious from what is related to life.

I believe that individuals and institutions from all Western countries should support our transformation of secularism and separation of religion and law. We need your support. Islam is a very old religion.

I think it needs to evolve and change many of its interpretations. Western societies and governments can put pressure on Islamic religious institutions to change their concepts.

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

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