

CANADIAN  
ATHEIST  
SET VII



SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

# In-Sight Publishing

# Canadian Atheist: Set VII

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**Scott**

# On the Low-Income Population Health and Critical Thinking on Medical Care

June 4, 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.*

*Here we talk about the research that helps the low income and the critical thinking stance to take on pseudo-medicines or medicine purporting to help but does not in the end.*

In 2017, I had the chance to talk with a leading medical research, distinguished professor Gordon Guyatt. He specializes in evidence-based medicine. I wanted to talk about some important research and some practical tips for the public.

Tips for the public to avoid snake oil and bogus remedies. We started on the research and then moved onto the practical tips. When I asked about the research, I focused on the research with the most potential to improve health outcomes for the low income.

On low-income Canadians, Guyatt stated, “The best way to improve the health of low-income folks is to decrease income gradients and that would have far more impact than any particular health interventions.”

That is, if society could stop or reduce smoking, then this would improve the health outcomes of the entire population. Lifetime smokers have seven fewer years of life than non-smokers. That is significant. Who would not pay for another 2,000-3,000 days of life, especially near the end of life?

It is a “far bigger gradient that can come from any particular health interventions. So if we can persuade everyone to stop smoking, that would have an enormous impact on health. While medical innovations have made a big impact on both quality and quantity, there are other things like income gradients, like health habits – in particular, smoking – that have a bigger impact,” Guyatt explained.

As a provincial, national, and, indeed, international expert in evidence-based medicine, this became an important point to convey to me. In particular, the clarity comes from the expertise, knowledge, years in the field, and reading the research.

“Medical treatment has made a big impact on various areas, including cardiovascular disease and treatments and cancer. Those were made because those were the biggest sources of morbidity and mortality in society. That is where I see the biggest continuing potential: certainly, within the area of cancer, our understanding biology has advanced enormously,” Guyatt said.

He states that there will be a steady intake of new preventions and therapies. Many fatal cancers will be chronic diseases in the future. This has been happening. He predicts this will continue into the future. When I shifted the conversation to the critical thinking part. I wanted some simple tips.





# Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam) on the Creation of Community

June 5, 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 on the creation of a community for the non-religious.*

**Jacobsen:** I want to focus less on pointing the finger in this 4<sup>th</sup> session. I look to the production of the community rather than the direction of flaws in other communities.

**The non-religious communities, in so far as I can tell, have flaws as with any other community. How do you plan to build the non-religious community alongside, and even with, the religious community in Tanzania?**

**Nsajigwa:** Could you recall the "Brook farm" experiment of the Transcendentalists, as well as the "Walden pond" experience of Thoreau in 1840s to 1850s USA? Both were inspired by the teachings of Transcendentalists – Ralph Waldo Emerson and others. They had Thoreau retreat back to nature to practiced right there, self-reliance.

Well, we had our own Tanzanian similar-like experience here, inspired by the teachings of Ushirika – Communitarianism back then. Thus I initiated a "back to the land" move for the unemployed youth in urban centers to go farming, including myself. That was in the mid-1990s.

We went back to the farm in Mbozi very near to the Kimwondo – a meteorite stone, and stayed there 1995 to 1998. Due to heavy "El Nino" rain and a complete lack of any support from the Government (despite their promises for same) we had to abandon the project but out of it came cultural tourism that became lifetime career for some freethinkers.

If we had support by then who knows? Maybe, you could have today a well-established freethinker institution and community in Africa, emerging right from the grassroots...! anyway even the Brook farm and the Walden pond experiments both had to be dissolved but their ideas and ideals linger still.

One of our member of that Youth-hood move is a "Thoreau Anarchist" ... still living by farming nearby there, still don't own a cellphone thus living without one, refusing to visit urban centers only when necessary, doing (building) everything by himself...!

And yes the non-religious are fallible too, I know from experience of building same in Africa, East African part. As of the moment, I am surprised by arguments just on definitions of who & what is a Humanist here. The latter-day generation of nonbeliever potential activists seems stuck just on that...So you hear...I am this not that...Agnostic not Atheist, Apatheist not Atheist, Atheist not Humanist, Pantheist not Atheist, Freethinker not Atheist etc.

As a long time veteran Pioneer freethinker activist, I find this mind-boggling. Does it matter...? as long as you are an independent-minded, skeptic and can question even your own religion that is, you are a brainchild of enlightenment. Those other labels are but personal temperaments. And one can be multiple of those anyway, depending on the circumstances.

Thus in Africa, it's important to build by teaching (as I have always done) correctly this philosophy & worldview & life stance. We don't need yet more tribalism, this time of nonbelievers each thinking his label is what this philosophy is.

Likewise building by doing & living by examples of one's own positive life as a mirror of the Happy Humanist who is Ethical, Humanistic, Rationalist, Responsible, tolerant...tolerant to others viewpoints, only to counter when such becomes inhuman, dangerous...give respect for all...eclecticism...just insist on rationalism, and scepticism to claims, outside likewise inside religion. Of interfaith...Africa had been observed by great thinker late Ali A Mazrui as "Triple heritage melting pot" ...Jichojiya deals with that reality on the ground.

Jichojiya is more of "Pro" rather than "against" movement...Pro IHEU AD 2002 Declaration (of which I translated into Swahili being the first time its available in an African language – and one with large speakers and readers), Pro-African Freedom charter before and an African human rights charter now, Pro George Ayittey's Indigenist renaissance Cheetah teachings, Pro Paul Kurtz Eupraxsophy teachings for building communities and institutions for people living without religion, Pro UN 1948 Human rights charter all in agreement by people in and outside religions like me...Pro secularism...keep religion out of state & governance, our country being secular thanks to our founder who happened to be a good student of John Stuart Mills on subject "liberty".

I am for individuality (liberty) within cooperatism, each one help one, Ushirika – "SisikwaSisi", work together for the common good, let 100 flowers blossom to make a beautiful garden, Humanism should rule, whether religious (John Dewey to Julian Huxley), ethical (Felix Adler) or secular (Paul Kurtz)...in all cases man is the centre..! on How (plan) to build...its a nascent movement so building here is from the scratch, grassroots has I have always done throughout my experience above – Mbozi Sisikwasisi project and now for Jichojiya Think Anew.

**Jacobsen: Have there been interbelief panels with religions and the non-religious community?**

**Nsajigwa:** Non-religious as a movement is nascent here, except before it was the "back to the land" SisikwaSisi youth movement that became like the Brook Farm and Walden pond transcendentalist adventure. Now, it's Jichojiya-Think Anew.

There have been conferences of interfaith but the voices of nonbelievers are just not there, they are not even thought to exist, except with (aside from) the elder Kingunge Ngombale Mwiri as an individual exception. He was assumed a "Marxist", or "communist" by the way, no one ever knew him to be a freethinker until that Jichojiya interview with him.

However, we live with others most of whom are religious, some very religious. It's our African "triple heritage" package, again as one African great thinker Ali A Mazrui had postulated.

**Jacobsen: Have you worked on the creation of schools and clubs and associations outside of Jichojiya to build the non-religious community?**

**Nsajigwa:** No but one thing needs to be highlighted here. Our curriculum syllabus in Tanzania is secular to the point of teaching and even broadcasting "Zamadamu"- theory of evolution already...!

So to be fair the secular education already provided by the state is a good beginning here, but there is that socialization, indoctrination, religion-based from childhood I explained elsewhere

about, that one is taken to be primary to the secular education one would get at school. As for ourselves we freethinkers few here in our particular case, despite having such plans before and even now, it is an expensive venture, money capital is needed for that.

As for the clubs yes, circles of book reading philosophy in general, freethinking humanism in particular, doing this since the 1990s when back then a Secondary school teacher, to being a youth activist for social change, to become a pioneer of humanist life stance here from 2002 on. I am an autodidact and have influenced many youths basing on that, as I explained before, a library is my sanctuary.

More so I helped the emergence of a non-religious community in Uganda, was right there from the very beginning of planting seeds done by the IHEU President elder Levi Frigel. Me helping out being his guide as he traveled in places to explain what IHEU and Humanism are about, helping behind the scene too. And for the cause of freethinking humanism elsewhere in Africa, have traveled also to Malawi, Kenya and recently Nigeria.

**Jacobsen: What may be some next steps in the development of said communities?**

**Nsajigwa:** For Tanzania and much of Africa its to “unearth” the in the closet Freethinkers nonbelievers and connect them into a circle, body, and institution to work for actualizing Humanist life stance idealism – free world that is secular, tolerant, rational, commensurate with the 21<sup>st</sup> century human ethical sympathy and empathy, liberty to all, muted irrationality, superstitions and fundamentalism beliefs – whether theological or ideological...

In practice, resources and funds for building what great thinker Paul Kurtz termed as Eupraxsophy institutions, centers, what we tried to build during the phase of our Youth-hood SisikwaSisi “Brook farm” to “Walden pond” back to the land adventurism...!

**Jacobsen: We can fix more within the community rather than work to point to flaws in other communities. What do the non-religious communities do wrong? Why are these problems? How can these be solved or ameliorated as problems? I mean in the global non-religious community and the local Tanzanian community.**

**Nsajigwa:** Yes, we can fix by showing the alternative...we are part of the solution, globally and locally...in our African case two cases here one, the non-religious needs to get organized, not each living on his own, and in the closet. Here is the imperative need for a good & exemplary Leadership from the Pioneers.

Thus it's important, as Roslyn Mould of Ghana had rightly pointed out elsewhere, to get the right people leading...and help them on the work to build a movement and a community. In Europe well there is already high level of Liberty & bills of right & rule of law...but here in Africa we live in illiberal societies, with triple tyranny of culture, religion and politics all demanding conformity making it just too hard to be an independent thinker let alone (dangerous being a) freethinker nonbeliever.

Nevertheless, time has come now to “unearth” and organize these extraordinary individuals – what W E B Du Bois termed as the “talented 10th” of every age in every society since the time of Socrates, before and after, into a global community that lives to keep that elenchus habit, that had produced modernity itself as we know it today.

Let us organize ourselves into Eupraxsophy as a community beyond lonesome stoic endurance. For Tanzania front, the emerging of Jichojipya is exactly to facilitate that. We wish to make

figure Socrates and subject philosophy qua philosophy get known to the populace. We were able to unearth the late elder Kingunge Ngombale Mwiru as an independent thinker and as a freethinker.

We shall keep doing that, including keep inspiring (we don't convert though, live and let live...!) others who are independent thinkers and freethinkers on the closet, to realize they are not alone, that there are others like them and that man is a social animal, they need to come together to meet the like-minded, see how they can help one another, each other in this drama of circle of nonbeing to life being and back to nonbeing, while living in between as realists, without religion, or if in it, then be sceptic doubting one, Thomases within it, rationalists as Mutazilites in Islam or Obierikas of African tradition. Religions being but cultural phenomena, thus man-made.

That a possibility to live a Happy and ethical life of usawa, ubinadamu na Utu wema – Swahili for Humanism, without a religion or any supernatural beliefs. Man is the center, from philosopher Protagoras of ancient past to Tanzanian founder father of the Nation (and its secularism principles) late J K Nyerere.

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

**Nsajigwa:** Thanks back to you too, one more time.

# Interview with Professor Anthony Pinn – Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities, Rice University

June 6, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Professor Anthony Pinn** is the Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities at Rice University. He earned his B.A. from Columbia University, and M.Div. and Ph.D. in the study of religion from Harvard University. He is an author, humanist, and public speaker. Also, and this is in no way a complete listing of titles or accomplishments, Pinn is the Founding Director of the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning (CERCL) at Rice University.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What was early life like for you, e.g. geography, culture, language, and religion/irreligion?

**Professor Anthony B. Pinn:** I grew up in Buffalo, New York, and in a fairly religious family (particularly my mother's side of the family). Church was a major cultural and social force in my early years – so much so that I moved into ministry at a relative young age. We'd moved from a Baptist church to an independent church that eventually affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church denomination, and it was within that denomination I received ordination and worked as a youth pastor through much of my years in school – high school, college, and some of graduate school.

**Jacobsen:** When did the humanist ethic and aesthetic first come to you? What was the first explicit mention of yourself as a humanist?

**Pinn:** I grew into humanism as my theology and religious sensibilities did not line up with my experience and the conditions of life in a more general sense. This process started while I was a college student at Columbia University, and it was completed during my early years in the PhD program at Harvard University. My theology didn't address the circumstances of collective life — e.g., racism, class discrimination and so on. Rather, my theology and religious setting required surrender of these existential questions and a somewhat blind adherence to doctrine. With time, that approach created a dissonance that I couldn't maintain. I had to either comfort myself as a safeguard of the "Tradition", or I would have to leave theism (because the problem was larger than my church and denomination). I decided to leave theism.

I can't recall the first time I was called a humanism, or labelled myself a humanist.

**Jacobsen:** How did these inform your research work and educational pursuits and attainments over time? Some from the most prestigious and authoritative post-secondary institutions in the world.

**Pinn:** My interests in religion as both academic subject and personal concern motivated my early study of religion. However, I came to realize only my academic study of religion – as a cultural force in the world – could be justified. Much of my work now involves an effort to better understand the nature and meaning of humanism.

**Jacobsen: What is the importance of having the moral authority and community solidarity in times of strife, tribulation, trial, moral ambiguity, political instability, economic uncertainty, and fundamentalist (religion, Islamism and Christian Dominionism, and non-religion, e.g., ethnic nationalism and supremacism)?**

**Pinn:** I'm not certain I understand the question. Moral authority is subjective and community solidarity is conditional. I would say, however, that community remains important across various challenges. There is a need for connection, for the presence of the likeminded, who confirm one's life choices and understand one's life challenges. Religion serves to accomplish this for some, but humanism also serves this function as well.

**Jacobsen: What seems like the next steps for the non-religious movements in North America over the 2018/2019 period?**

**Pinn:** There is no one answer to that question in that there is no consensus related to concerns or context for non-religious "movements" in North America. The next steps? That depends on what these various organizations and the "movements" they constitute under and as their goals and objectives. I'm not certain there is consistent related to goals and objectives. I, however, would argue that non-religious movements will only be relevant moving forward IF they concern themselves with various dimensions of social justice work.

**Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?**

**Pinn:** Nothing comes to mind.

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

# Canadian Science Prodigy Wins at Prestigious International Competition

June 9, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

A science prodigy in Grade 11 from Waterloo, Ontario, named Sajeed Kohli received the top honours in the Global Healthcare Challenge.

Kohli attends the Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School in Waterloo. He is the 2018 Sanofi Biogenius Canada national champion. Recently, he was the national champion and won the grand prize for the Global Healthcare Challenge.

He won the award at the “prestigious International BioGENEius Challenge in Boston.” It is considered among the preeminent student biotechnology competitions all over the world.

The competition focuses on healthcare and medical biotechnology. With an emphasis on the production of discovery inventions, Kohli was one among 14 finalists from Canada, Germany, and the United States.

The grand prize came with a cash award of \$7,500. Kohli earned recognition for excellence with the research initiative entitled “Recruiting Endogenous Proteins for Site Specific Transport: A Novel Workflow for Gene Carrier Design.”

He had important mentorship, which is crucial for the young gifted and talented – unnurtured gifts are small tragedies. The mentor was, and all should be mentioned for their important often volunteer work throughout the country, Dr. Pu Chen.

Chen is a Canada Research Chair in Biomanufacturing at the University of Waterloo. Chen wanted to develop a cost-effective medication in order to reduce the side effects of cancer treatment.

One that could “selectively target malignant cells. His project could potentially impact the hundreds of thousands of Canadian patients with cancer, the leading cause of death in Canada,” the reportage explained.

Below is a quote about Kohli:

**Sajeed has truly distinguished himself, both as the winner of the 2018 Sanofi Biogenius Canada competition, and now with this well-deserved international recognition. His research and drive to innovate is a true symbol of the depth and calibre of scientific talent in Canada,” said Niven Al-Khoury, President of Sanofi Canada. “Sanofi strongly believes in empowering our country’s next generation of innovators. For almost 25 years, we have been proud to support a program that pairs promising young researchers with mentors who will help them realize their greatest potential and showcase their work on the national and international stage. Congratulations, Sajeed, on this wonderful accomplishment.**



# Ad Infinitum: Christianity Not Under Attack or “On Trial”

June 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to *CBC News*, there has been an infant custody court case. One involving a stuffed lion, purportedly Jesus Christ as lawyer, glossolalia or speaking in tongues, and asserted religious zealots in British Columbia.

One couple considered religious zealots rejected legal assistance in a court case. They informed the witnesses to the case: Jesus Christ is their lawyer. Where Christ asked questions via the voice of one of the parents, so in context, Christ – via the parent, purportedly – fought for the custody of the parent.

The mother wanted to rename the child “Jesus JoyoftheLord.” The couple lost the court battle. Social workers balance child safety and parental beliefs, often. This case highlighted it. The couple spoke to the court room through a stuffed lion, who they purported was the lawyer, Christ (their alleged Lord and Saviour).

The Justice Diane MacDonald said, “This is a difficult case... The parents obviously love their child and wish to raise her in a home with their Christian values.”

AJ and DK, or the couple’s initialisms within the court case, had a trouble history. They moved from community to community. They alienated people. They did this through “efforts to purge churches of ‘evil influences.’”

“The stakes are high because a continuing custody order paves the way to adoption. The case is not the first time religion has reared its head in a child custody dispute,” *CBC News* reported, “In 2015, a pair of devout Jehovah’s Witnesses were ordered not to talk about religion in front of their four-year-old granddaughter.”

In addition in 2009, the “top court” in Canada considered and then dismissed the case of a Jehovah’s Witnesses Manitoba girl. She claimed rights were violated because of a forced blood transfusion as a minor.

“The Ministry of Children and Family Development got involved with AJ and DK in 2016 after AJ told a facilitator at a lunch program that DK had choked her and “believes sexual relations between children should be encouraged,” *CBC News* explained.

The mother later denied the disclosure. AJ was pregnant at the time. Their baby was born on November 1 of 2016, where a paramedic helped them. AJ refused any medical procedures, even vaccinations.

There were also issues “expressed about AJ’s mental health and DK’s potential for violence. A specialist was assigned to work with the family, and the baby was placed in voluntary care with foster parents.”

The child began to lose weight between 1 and 2 months old, so the child was taken from the home. AJ did not feed the child breast milk and the child was losing weight. One pastor sought a restraining order against them.

In West Kelowna, the couple were charged with criminal disturbance of another church.

The court case decision (the one they lost) described, “DK co-operated with the arrest but AJ ‘rolled around on the ground’ and did not co-operate... The parents allegedly wanted to cleanse the Church of evil influences.”

This did not mean something with the parents’ freedom of religion at all, according to the *CBC News* reportage. The director of the child, family and community services originally argued the parents were unfit for parenting or caretaking of the child.

The parents put forth the argument that they were being persecuted for their “deeply held Christian beliefs.” The justice’s review of the case “was limited to errors of law.”

MacDonald (the justice) noted, “...he, himself, was a Christian and did not have any issue with their Christian family values... I restate that this hearing is not about the parent’s freedom of religion.”

She, the justice, continued to talk about Christianity not being on trial; and the parents’ belief in some purported revelation in God or the use of speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, are not on trial. Same with the home birthing or the denial of use of vaccinations. Those were not on trial.

What was on trial according to MacDonald? Nothing, the issue was the best interests of the child. The justice, in the case of a potential adoption, had the hope that the ministry may consider in searching for an extended member of their family for the child.

# Christianity Today Reports on Age Gap in Religion Around the World

June 13, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Christianity Today* reported on the recent Pew Research report. The report from the Pew Research Center indicated a “gap” in the age between the believers and the non-believers.

That is to say, on one binary face value metric – old and young, the old seem more religious than the young. They identify as more religious and take part in more of the standard suggested practices of religion.

The secularization of the world seems like a concern for the religions of the world, especially the largest ones’ leadership. It would seem to mean wanes in power and influence and potential new followers. In the United States, Western Europe, and Latin America, the young adults appear far less religious than the older generations.

The Pew Research Center looked into 106 countries in the new report with about 58 nations having “little or no age gap in religious commitment.” Of the remainder, 46 of them at least, the adults under the age of 40 showed a significantly lower level of religious commitment or considering religion important than their older or over 40 counterparts.

*Christianity Today* explained, “Particularly religious countries with higher population growth tend to maintain religious belief and commitment between young and old generations. Pew found that over the past decade these highly religious countries outpaced their less religious counterparts due to high fertility rates and disproportionately young populations, factors often tied to their level of development.”

In the international analysis, the economic and social environment in a country affected the level of religiosity, in both the developing countries and the advanced industrial economies. With North America and Western Europe, the most secularization appears to have taken place.

Those parts of the world show a “pretty stark” difference in the formal religious affiliation of the young and the old. It becomes “two to five times wider than the global age gap. Canada has the biggest generational religious divide in the world. The difference between Canadian young adults and their elders who affiliate with a particular religion is 28 percentage points.”

That makes Canada an outlier in the religious affiliation gap between the young and the old. Other countries were included in the analysis and worth mention in the *Christianity Today* article.

“Other top countries for gaps in religious affiliation include Denmark (26 percentage points), South Korea (24 percentage points), Australia (23 percentage points), and Norway and Sweden (both 20 percentage points),” the reportage stated.

The US young adult population identify the role of religion in their lives as twice as important as the Canadian young adult population. I do not know how this maps onto the forms of the informal non-religious seen in Canada with the – what the literature calls – SBNRs or the “spiritual but not religious” people.

SBNRs seem to, at times, engage in informal activities outside of a formal religious context with religious overtones, or simply sub-texts, to them. In contrast to the Americas and Europe in general, Africa and the Middle East show different contrasts in religious affiliation by age.

The Middle East and Africa do not show much difference in religious affiliation between generations. Religious commitment remains strongest there.

“Two majority Christian countries represent the biggest exceptions to the religious age gap seen around the globe,” *Christianity Today* explained, “In Ghana, a relatively stable country in West Africa, and Georgia, a former Soviet republic, today’s young people are more likely than older generations to say religion is ‘very important’ in their lives, the report stated.”

If you compare the under 40 Ghanaians and the over 40 Ghanaians, the numbers emerge as 91% to 85%, respectively. In Chad, Liberia, and Rwanda, the young “claim their religious affiliation, attend services, and commit to daily prayer at higher rates than their parents and grandparents.”

A common theme in these countries comes from the threat of violent conflict. If a violent conflict is present, people seem more religious. The “existential insecurity” seems to correlate, positively, with more religiosity. If more risk to life and limb, then more religion.

“In predominantly Christian countries, it’s whether they consider religion a priority; the greatest generational discrepancies emerge over the question of religion’s importance in their lives,” *Christianity Today* explained, “In predominantly Muslim countries, it’s a question of mosque attendance. Even in countries where religiosity remains steady across age groups, young people still tend to be less likely to pray daily.”

The countries with the majority of citizens adhering to or identifying as Christian show the highest levels of decrease in religiosity. It shows in the other main Abrahamic faith, Islam, but not as severe in terms of the decrease.

The reportage said, “As noted, the countries with the greatest percentage of people who say religion is “very important” in their lives—mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Central America—are also among the fastest-growing countries in the world.”

It continued to note. The Pew Research Center Report explained a negative correlation between the level of commitment to religion and the markers for the economic and social development of a country. That is, education levels, GDP, and income equality negatively associated with or negatively correlate with religious commitment. If poorer, less educated, with higher income inequality, then the countries’ citizens will adhere more to a faith.

The one outlier in this is the United States of America. Unique in its high level of development *and* high religiosity.

As noted in the article, out of the 102 nations analyzed by the Pew Research Center, only the United States showed higher levels of daily prayer. In fact, it had above-average levels of prayer. In conclusion, it was higher in other measures of its citizens’ level of religious commitment too.

External to the United States as an outlier example, religion correlates with poverty, lack of education, and greater divides between the poor and the rich.

Moral of the story, and to policymakers: if someone wants to increase religiosity or religious commitment, they would construct policy to increase income inequality, decrease educational access and success, and increase the quantity of the poor; if someone wants to decrease religious

commitment, and so increase secularization, they would become policy architects oriented to increase educational achievement, attainment, and completion, and decrease income inequality and the quantity of the citizenry below or in the poverty lines.

# Interview with Rev. Tim Bowman – Minister, Gladwin Heights Church

June 13, 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. Rev. Tim Bowman is the Minister of Gladwin Heights Church. Here we talk about the Gladwin Heights Church, community, church services, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What was early life like for you, especially regarding religion and irreligion in peers and family? As you were born in Guelph, Ontario in 1977 and raised in Calgary, Alberta. You earned degrees in English and Psychology with a Master of Divinity degree from the Vancouver School of Theology. This seems to indicate an early life influence as well – potentially not, but probably so.

**Rev. Tim Bowman:** My father grew up in the steel town of Hamilton, Ontario; my mother was a farm girl from southern Ontario. She had a large extended family; I saw a lot of my aunts and uncles, grandparents and cousins at every holiday. My fondest memories are of Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas at my grandfather's farm and later at an aunt and uncle's, large meals with dozens of people, board games and snowmobiling and sleeping on floors and couches. Pretty much everyone attended church.

My father studied engineering and got into oil and gas work, and so we moved quite a lot when I was a child, including to Saudi Arabia and Italy. Finally we settled down in Calgary when I was in Grade Three. My father taught Sunday School at our local church for a few years, and my mother was the assistant office administrator for a long time.

Given our frequent moves, family and belonging were important to me, and I felt like I belonged at our church. I noticed how my mother went above and beyond her job description to set up and clean up after every event. I began to volunteer with the Sunday School and to attend the youth group. So many people clearly found joy, purpose and belonging there – how could I not want to be a part of it?

As I made friends in Junior High and then High School, I noticed that few of them talked about their faith, but at the same time I was never made to feel out of place because of it.

**Jacobsen:** When did you first become Christian or a follower of Christ in an explicit way? Often, in conversation with Christians, the conversions come from upbringing or adolescence/late life experience of God – using their terminology.

**Bowman:** My friend in Guelph invited me to a fairly evangelical children's / youth group (similar to Scouts). I continued to attend that group's meetings and go to its summer camps for a few years after moving to Calgary. The emphasis tended to be on believing the right things and avoiding sin so I could get into heaven. As I got older, I began to drift away from church

somewhat – partly as the search for individuality that all adolescents experience, and partly because that message began to lose its appeal.

Of course, if I'd listened closer to what was said at my family church on Sundays, I might have heard a different message.

University was when things really changed for me. I tried out one or two of the Christian groups on campus, but they always seemed to be lacking something. A shared faith was a reason for gathering, maybe reading the bible and then having pizza and watching a movie, but that felt a little hollow. I sought out the United Church campus chaplain, and he suggested the Student Christian Movement.

The first SCM meeting I attended was a planning session to host the national gathering of the SCM, so it was more jumping in the deep end rather than dipping my toe in the water, but the more I saw of these folks, the more I liked. Here was a faith that really made a difference in how they lived. They advocated for gay rights, they attended environmental rallies...this was a faith with purpose and meaning and relevance. It was also small and tight-knit enough that it felt like a home among the large and impersonal campus crowds.

When I graduated with Arts degrees in English and Psychology, and decided that overseas English teaching wasn't for me, I asked, "What's next?". I decided to actually start listening to the voices in the back of my head (as well as the voices of my parents, chaplain, and minister). I asked my congregation to help me consider whether I was called to ministry, and attended the open house at the Vancouver School of Theology. I began to pay attention to my spiritual life, and to follow my father's example in experiencing the divine in nature.

At around the time I encountered the SCM, I was also given a book by Marcus Borg. Borg's demonstration that Christianity is at least as much about meaningful and ethical life in this world, as about life in the next world, also struck a chord with me.

**Jacobsen: Gladwin Heights United Church is the place where you preach, teach, and build Christian community. Who was the founder? Why the title Gladwin Heights United Church as the name of the church? What are the positives and negatives of working in and building a church community in Canada?**

**Bowman:** In 1979, the Fraser Presbytery of the United Church noted new housing developments in Abbotsford-Matsqui. A new church would be needed to serve all of these new residents. Trinity Memorial United Church provided much of the funding and human resources to establish the new congregation, which was named Gladwin Heights after the neighbourhood it was situated in.

It turned that many of the new residents were immigrants from Christian-minority countries, so the church has not been quite as full as was expected. This diversity is both a challenge and blessing of ministry in the Canadian context: whereas previously many people attended church simply because it was the thing to do, cultural and demographic shifts mean that people no longer attend simply as a cultural norm, which translates into smaller congregations. At the same time however, it means that people are here because they really want to be.

Canada has a complicated history with First Nations people, and the Church is part of that history. As First Nations are becoming increasingly visible and assertive, we have engaged more deeply and intentionally. Trying to heal old wounds, deeply embedded in Canadian society, is not easy, but it is also faithful and life-giving.

**Jacobsen: What is the particular denomination of the church? How does this differ from other churches? Also, why focus on ecotheology and process theology within this work or calling for you?**

**Bowman:** The United Church of Canada was born from the union of the Methodists, Congregationalists, and most of the Presbyterian churches in Canada in 1925. These denominations saw the need to coordinate their efforts to serve northern and Prairie areas where the need for clergy to serve the growing population often outstripped the supply. Throughout the years other denominations and local churches, for example the Evangelical United Brethren, have joined as well. At one point we envisioned becoming the national church of Canada. As the religious landscape changes, we are again looking more and more to collaboration with other denominations to serve God's people.

Each of the founding denominations have contributed to the personality, or perhaps DNA, of the United Church. From the Methodists we inherit a concern for justice, from the Presbyterians a concern for ordered worship, and from the Congregationalists a tendency to allow individual congregations as much local decision-making power as possible while still remaining a united church across the nation.

The vast size and diversity of Canada, including the desire for local autonomy, means that each region and indeed congregation can be different, but one can make a few general statements. We tend to have a strong streak of social justice and activism, as well as a liberal, non-literal approach to theology. For example, while some denominations are currently debating whether to ordain openly LGBTQ people as ministers, we decided in the affirmative back in 1988. My favourite nickname for the United Church is "the NDP at prayer." But then, I mostly vote NDP, so I consider this a compliment! Again however, the United Church can be very diverse; not all of us vote NDP.

Perhaps this is why ecotheology and process theology interest me. Whereas some ancient theologies stressed the power and glory of God, meaning that God existed in splendid isolation from the world and remained unaffected by it, I am more attracted to theologies that understand God in relationship to the world and everything within it. This implies that God is affected by, involved with, grows along with, and interpenetrates the world, because if you are not affected by anything someone says or does, how can you claim to be in relationship with them? Process theology envisions a God that operates by persuasion and invitation rather than by compulsion. The stories in Scripture that I find most fascinating are those that seem to show God and/or Jesus learning or changing their minds in response to encounters with human beings. This is a God that truly loves the world.

**Jacobsen: What does an average Sunday service look like at the church? How do you, as a pastor, prepare the sermon? What tends to be the topics taught or spoken about at the church? Final question, what seems like the bigger problems and trends for the Christian church in Canada into the coming decade, i.e., the 2020s?**

**Bowman:** I think of a worship service as having three movements, if I as a musical amateur may use that term. First, we gather with God and each other (to be with each other is to be with God). We invite each other, we pray that we may be aware of God's presence, and confess the truth about ourselves and our world – unburdening ourselves of that which separates us from God. Then we read the scriptures and reflect in a sermon on how the living Word of God is speaking



to us today. Lastly, we respond to the Word in action: through prayer, through offerings for the work of the church in the world, and by going out into God's world as God's people.

My music director and I choose scriptures and hymns two weeks in advance, so I get an advance look at the scriptures for a given Sunday. At that time I choose one text which might reward further study, and do enough reading and thinking to get an idea of what I might want to say about it.

Then it mostly sits in the back of my head until the following week. At the beginning of the week I pull it out again and begin to study it in depth. Eventually I have enough understanding of the text, enough ideas and information circling around in my head, that one or more will collide with a situation in the life of congregation members, the church as a whole, or in the world.

When that 'aha!' moment occurs, I get a sense of what the Word might be for us in the intersection of that passage and our lives. To get my thoughts in order, I then try to map out my ideas in the following outline: 1) What is the need or problem in the Bible's original context that the text describes or is responding to? 2) What is the analogous need or problem in our world today? 3) What is the good news of God's activity in response to that original problem? 4) What is the analogous good news of God's activity for today's problems?

Ideally, then, the topic of a sermon emerges from themes found in one of the prescribed scripture texts for a given Sunday, in conversation with needs or events in our world today. At the risk of fulfilling the stereotype that Christians are obsessed with talking about sex, I recently preached on two Bible passages which are often used to condemn homosexuality; I argued that this not the only way to read such texts. Previously I preached on the Biblical idea that the love of God can "overcome the world," and pointed to the example of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s teachings on nonviolence.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Rev. Bowman.

**Bowman:** My pleasure. Thank you for the opportunity to communicate with people who see things differently than I do. Our world needs more of that.

## Interview with Usama al-Binni – Administrator, Arab Atheist Network & Editor, Arab Atheists Magazine

June 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Usama al-Binni is an Administrator of the Arab Atheist Network, the Editor of the Arab Atheists Magazine. Here we explore his story and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** You grew up in Jordan to a moderately religious family. What did your parents do? How did this influence your faith? How did your faith develop over time?

**Usama al-Binni:** Both parents were school teachers, my father was a religious education teacher and a graduate of al-Azhar University. He taught at the same high-school where I went and was supposedly the epitome of piety for being his son. I wasn't that pious though. I tried to hold on to my faith during my late teen years, but to no avail. I was interested in philosophy and science and was fortunate enough to have a couple of friends willing to debate. I ended up going into physics and in part because of that struggle as I saw in physics there place where many age-old philosophical questions being answered. Back when I started questioning my faith in the late 1990s I had access only to scant blasphemous content, and I left Islam gradually and not without pain.

**Jacobsen:** How did this atheism develop over time?

**al-Binni:** By early 2000s I felt Islam was finally behind me, that criticizing Islam was a transitional phase and immersed myself in other concerns living as an agnostic who became an anti-theist during infrequent debates. I did have a brief stint frequenting debate forums on the internet, but was doing so under a pseudonym as I was still living in Jordan. Discovering online Arab ex-Muslim communities on Facebook around 2014 changed things completely for me, as I felt that unlike the solitary struggle I had to go through, there is a widespread movement online of people coming together, and while many stayed anonymous, they were all very vocal and explicit about criticizing religion and they were a community. I felt I belonged. I felt a responsibility to join the movement. It started with a local group in East Tennessee of American atheists, which I discovered through a MeetUp group, and then moved on to a Facebook group called Arab Atheists Forum and Network, where I became very active, and soon enough I was approached by the admins to join them, and I did. I have had the privilege to know many wonderful and intelligent people who share a lot with me.

**Jacobsen:** Now, how did this lead to the work with the Arab Atheists Magazine?

**al-Binni:** One project of that group which attracted me especially was the Arab Atheists Magazine, the continuity of the project over years and its diversity drew me in and with my academic background I felt I could contribute to that effort, both in terms of content and organization, and that's one of my main concentrations now, although there are other ongoing projects as well. I believe that being openly atheist and an academic gives me some advantage over those who cannot use their real name and face, and living in the US gives me great latitude to do many things people back in the Middle East can't do.

**Jacobsen:** What are some of the important provisions for others with an online space as opposed to an offline space to express their atheism?

**al-Binni:** It's a world of difference. I lived for about 10 years as a closeted ex-Muslims back in Jordan and was very careful about who I divulge the secret to. Most people over there would be deeply intolerant of anyone who criticized religion in any way, especially if the criticism is overtly one directed from someone who says they've left the faith. I once mistakenly talked about my thoughts to someone I had thought was a friend, but he ended up (maybe half-jokingly) threatening me with the punishment of apostasy upon me. I became after that extra careful about what I say and to whom I say it. And while Jordan is considered by many to be a bastion of religious moderation, one needs to remember that abu-Musab az-Zarqawi, the famed al-Qaida terrorist, came from Jordan. In late 2015 a Jordanian writer who shared a cartoon on his Facebook page, and ended up being shot by a Muslim extremist on the steps of the court house right after a hearing where he was being tried for blasphemy for sharing the cartoon! And there are numerous examples from many Arab countries where being openly critical of religion can bring countless troubles. Being online, and especially in communities like our Facebook group, Arab Atheists Network and Forum, it is possible to be with like-minded people, use pseudonyms and at the same time debate Muslims without fear of physical harm if one carefully guards their real identity. This is a world of difference from the openness I have experienced in the US. Here, I have met people face to face, seen how they exercise their civil rights to counter religious rhetoric but also to participate in a life far closer to normal than an ex-Muslim would dream of in a majority-Muslim country. I don't say the US is a perfect haven for atheists, but it is a world of difference from what I've known back in Jordan and what I see online from fellow ex-Muslims in the Muslim world. It is perhaps this dual life I live as an openly atheist ex-Muslim in the US compared to what I see online that gives me hope and a desire to work with the people back there to improve their living situation.

**Jacobsen: What tend to be the foci of the Arab Atheist Magazine?**

**al-Binni:** The Magazine emerged in late 2012 as a means of distilling the thought of Arab atheists at this important juncture in their history, where, for the first time since the dawn of Islam, there is an actual community of ex-Muslims coming together and forming a community. This has never happened before. The Magazine, and other forms of discourse we have, are meant to capture that, as a mirror for our identity and a record for whoever comes after us. We cover everything that has to do with Arab atheism, although atheism here is a rather broad category encompassing a wide range of religious dissent and persuasions. We publish both original and translated works that focus on religious criticism, but also includes attempts to go beyond that limited bubble into a vision of an alternatives to religion. We published original novels, poetry, studies conducted by researchers who collaborated with us, cartoons (the one that resulted in the murder of the Jordanian writer was drawn by an artist who regularly publishes with us), we have our in-house painter who creates paintings especially for the Magazine. The Magazine is closely linked to the Network Forum on Facebook and there is a continuity between the two entities, both in the people who run the two and in the content.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved in and support the Arab atheist diaspora?**

**al-Binni:** The situation for Arab atheists living outside the Muslim world is complicated. Many tend to leave the faith early in life, maybe as teenagers. Extricating one's life from religion is a redefinition of identity, and as teenagers still dependent on their families and living usually within an Islamic community means one is risking being banished from one's home while vulnerable and without means of support. Ex-Muslims of North America and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (and many other such organizations) are doing wonderful work helping ex-

Muslims, young and old, find a community of people who understand them and can provide support. These organizations deserve all the support they can get, it is often the case that they have to assist ex-Muslims facing persecution in a Muslim country an need to get out, they help ex-Muslims fleeing potential violence from their communities in the US and Europe. But perhaps, getting the word out, letting people know what ex-Muslims and atheists are facing and start viewing them as a legitimate minority with a voice that needs to be heard, a faceless minority that is being oppressed and not even recognized.

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

# **Breaking News: United States Withdraws from the United Nations Human Rights Council**

**June 19, 2018**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

According to *Arab News*, the United States Ambassador for the United Nations Human Rights Council, Nikki Haley, announced the withdrawal of the United States from the UN Human Rights Council.

Haley declared, “We take this step because our commitment does not allow us to remain a part of a hypocritical and self-serving organization that makes a mockery of human rights.”

*NBC News* reported in more depth stating that the US withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council due to continued bias against Israel, from the vantage of the US Ambassador.

Haley declared the UN body hypocritical and self-serving. “For too long, the Human Rights Council has been a protector of human rights abusers, and a cesspool of political bias... Therefore, as we said we would do a year ago, if we did not see any progress, the United States is officially withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council,” Haley said.

The top UN human rights official, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, criticized the American administration for its zero tolerance policy for immigration. The withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council came one day later.

Al Hussein explained, “The thought that any State would seek to deter parents by inflicting such abuse on children is unconscionable.”

Benjamin Netanyahu approved of Haley’s move on behalf of the Trump administration. He said, “Instead of dealing with regimes that systematically violate human rights, the UNHRC obsessively focuses on Israel, the one genuine democracy in the Middle East.”

More rundown in the links.

# MP Alice Wong Argues Against Supreme Court Decision on TWU

June 20, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to *Richmond News*, the Richmond Centre MP Alice Wong argued against the Supreme Court of Canada decision on Trinity Western University's proposed law school.

The recent TWU decision created a landmark decision in the SCC. The decision was 7-2 against the proposed law school. In particular, the decision "upholds the right of law societies to deny accreditation to a proposed law school at the evangelical Christian Trinity Western University, which opened a new, satellite campus in Richmond in 2015."

Wong argued the decision made Canadian society more intolerance, and less free and inclusive. Two, at least, values in Canada came to a head. One for the freedom of (and from) religion. The other for the promotion of, through a variety of mechanisms, equality.

Values in society remain valid in the individual universe of discourse. As these values come to the real world contexts or environments, the values conflict to some degree. The conflict or the rub between the values, two or more, create the decisions in the courts based on the best judgment of the SCC and other legal authorities at the time.

"TWU requires students sign a covenant allowing sexual intimacy only between a man and a woman who are married," the article stated, "As such, the Law Society of B.C. previously voted (28-21) to deny accreditation of the proposed TWU law school because the covenant amounts to discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people."

Wong argued from the angle of a violation of the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. That is, the decision to deny the Evangelical university's law school created the basis for 'breaking' the *Charter*.

The judges on the SCC took the position of Section One of the *Charter*. This became the foundation for the denial of the law school. That is, the denial of the accreditation amounted to a reasonable limitation on the university's rights.

This became the rub, the balance, between the public interest of the law societies and the rights of the university. In the individual universes of discourse, the public interest and the freedom of (and from) religion equate to valid values.

At the same time, when these conflict in highest court consideration, the comprises come to the fore. In this particular case, the SCC decided 7-2 to support the "public-interest objectives of the law societies."

The judges stated, "It is inimical to the integrity of the legal profession to limit access on the basis of personal characteristics... This is especially so in light of the societal trust enjoyed by the legal profession."

Of course, with the 7-2 decision, two judges supported the law school position rather than the law societies' position.

Wong stated the decision against the law school amounted to a “profound interference with religious freedom” that will “ultimately diminish student choice and continues the trend towards a monolithic culture where one has to subscribe to specific beliefs.”

Wong argued the LGBTQ choice in the post-secondary world would not diminish, even if the decision by the SCC had gone the other way, 2-7 in other words. She stated the students are not compelled to attend a post-secondary institution.

Because TWU is a private institution, Wong considered the private funding of this particular post-secondary institution important as a factor. That is, the university is private, receives tax credits as a religious institute, and acquired public infrastructure dollars and research funding.

“In April, Wong also took aim at the Canada Summer Jobs program attestation of legally-enshrined rights for applicants, arguing it violated the rights of those who don’t agree with, for example, the right of a woman to have an abortion,” *Richmond News* noted.

The main concern from Wong comes from the other regulated professions being affected by the June 15 SCC decision.

The executive director of the proposed TWU law school, Earl Phillips, stated, “All Canadians should be troubled by today’s decision that sets a precedent for how the courts will interpret and apply charter rights and equality rights going forward.”

TWU made the original proposition for the law school during 2012. Approval was acquired through the Federation of Law Societies of Canada and the BC Ministry of Advanced Education; nonetheless, the BC Ministry of Advanced Education withdrew the approval at a later time.

# Interview with Carline Klijnman – Editor-in-Chief, Topical Magazine

June 22, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Carline Klijnman** is the Editor-in-Chief of the upcoming Topical Magazine. *Here we talk about personal and professional background and the publication.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** You have been involved in journalistic and writing work. What is your story regarding topics of interest and building the relevant interests and skills in journalism and writing?

**Carline Klijnman:** The key to building relevant interests is keeping abreast of trending topics and ensuring that relevant interpretations are afforded to them. I have always found articles more riveting when a writer is willing to think outside of the box. Indeed, I think that there are too many run-off-the-mill analyses when it comes to exploring prevailing issues in, say, politics. Conversely, and worryingly, unconventional analyses are more often than not typically exclusive to academic circles. This must be changed. I think it's important that one of the things we do is look beyond the tralatitious circles of discourse and look to, for example, academia. I would say If there's an article that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it yourself. As for skills in journalism, I have looked to many of my colleagues for advice while learning the necessary skills myself when possible. It's been a lengthy learning process, and at times very piecemeal, especially when aiming to create articles that are one-of-a-kind.

**Jacobsen:** You are starting a new project, Topical Magazine. What inspired the name and topics to cover in the magazine?

**Klijnman:** The name of the magazine was floated by my colleague and founder of the magazine, Benjamin David, who rightly noted that we needed a name that is reflective of the kind of articles we publish. After all, the magazine only publishes pieces that are gripping and are, as our name suggests, topical.

Topical's talented writers, many being academics, address contemporary themes with a philosophical perspective. Areas covered include culture, lifestyle, science and technology. We decided on this purview given their popularity in most demographics. We want to offer something for everyone. Pieces are fresh, thought-provoking and fundamental to understanding an increasingly changing world.

**Jacobsen:** Who is the intended audience?

**Klijnman:** I believe we offer something for everyone. That includes more well-read people and those who only read occasionally. Many publications are incredibly niche in terms of their readership – underpinned by a political or philosophical commitment. Topical Magazine works hard to be as inclusive as possible.

**Jacobsen:** What kind of articles will be featured on the site when the magazine goes live?

**Klijnman:** We have some very inviting articles on our site that will appeal to many people. For example, we have a piece on romance that is willing to argue that we need to do away with romantic ideals if we are to delight in the best of relationships while disposing of the oppressive



and delusional. We also have exciting pieces on ways in which science can boost our creativity and how technology will transform us all by 2030.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the contributions side with editing or writing?**

**Klijnman:** We are always looking to having people join our budding team, especially new writers. We are looking for people who care about science, culture, technology and lifestyle and have what it takes to offer new perspectives in accessible ways. We encourage prospective contributors and editors to contact us via our website here.

**Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?**

**Klijnman:** We know readers have become suspicious of the media, and rightly so. Too many platforms have shown themselves short-sighted, failing to deliver the stories you need in the right way.

Topical Magazine aims to give our readers balance and objectivity. We make sure what you read is well-researched, far-sighted and free of subterfuge. Ensuring we have a rigorous vetting procedure, I am convinced our writers are second to none. Moreover, In the coming year Topical will be a game changer. Seminal discussions, such as those in religion and politics, will broaden with unique analyses, and our vision and hard work guarantees our team and areas of focus continue expanding.

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

# UN Special Rapporteur Speaks on Right to Housing in Canada

June 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur, Leilani Farha, from a housing watchdog from the UN spoke on the federal Liberals' failures in rights to housing.

The rights to housing remain human rights. Farha sent a letter. The housing strategy did not, according to Farha, recognize the right to housing for Canadians. This comes in the analysis of the 10-year program enshrined in legislation to likely enter into the law.

The program comes to \$40-billion. The *Globe and Mail* article stated, "A Liberal point man on the housing file told the Commons last week that the government didn't want to declare a right that creates a belief that people can 'prosecute their way into housing' and that they need landlords, not lawyers."

However, Farha viewed the government as discriminatory and patronizing. She continued to note the creation of a rights-based housing strategy without formal enshrinement of housing as a human right cannot be done.

Farha, who also leads Canada Without Poverty, opined, "At a time when human rights are so fragile around the world, with populist governments reacting against the multilateral human rights system, I would think the government of Canada — which stands apart — would do everything it could to embrace human rights... Instead of embracing the recommendation and the right to housing, the government seems to be recoiling from it."

Jean-Yves Duclos, who is in charge of the initiative and the Social Development Minister, described the plan of the federal Liberals as on to recognize and incrementally found the rights to access to affordable housing for every Canadian citizen.

The *Globe and Mail* continued, "The Liberals have promised to introduce legislation to make it difficult for any successive government to back out of the plan to help provinces and territories set long-term goals, instead of wondering how much they might receive year by year."

The purpose of the letter from Farha remains the pressure on the federal government while it works on the bill throughout the summer. This would formulate a federal watchdog as well. One watchdog to monitor the progression of the housing strategy in addition to the identification of problems with housing rights for Canadians.

The frame of housing as a right gives recourse through tribunals.

As explained in the reportage, "Characterizing housing as a human right is meant to provide recourse, usually through tribunals, to anyone wrongfully denied a home for reasons such as ethnicity, religion, or gender identity, and to allow for watchdogs to conduct reviews to remove systemic barriers to housing."

The Duclos parliamentary secretary on housing, Adam Vaughn, stated, "It's never been proposed as a charter amendment, or as a court to correct individual grievances... It's about building a housing system that realizes peoples right (to) housing (through) progressive measures."

Karen Vecchio, a critic and Conservative, stated that the efforts of the federal Liberal government will not work so well on the various barriers to affordable housing, as a supply concern. The red tape, for instance, prevents builders too much at the municipal level.

Vecchio argues for opened avenues for rental housing or home ownership rather than housing as a right. The NDP, earlier in 2018, failed to have the right to housing placed in the Canadian Bill of Rights.

One housing critic, Sheri Benson, stated, “How are we going to hold a government to account for a 10-year strategy if you don’t really have good legislation... There’s no way the public can hold the government to account if it (the legislation) doesn’t have teeth, if it doesn’t acknowledge that people have a right to housing.”

Farha voted in the confidence of the federal Liberals’ national housing based on the reveal in November 2017. However, this was based on the recognition of the right to housing to be in the legislation as well.

Now, with the letter and the use – even abuse – of the tacit support of Farha by the government when they were questioned on the national housing strategy and the right to housing, Farha “urged the government to stop using her words as a stamp of approval.”

# The World Sikh Organization (WSO) Founding President Speaks on Human Rights

June 26, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The World Sikh Organization (WSO) founder spoke about human rights in *The Straight*.

According to the article, the WSO supports the human rights of all Canadians without regard to any status in life. Gian Singh Sandhu, the founding president, stated that the WSO has taken court cases on behalf of Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim communities.

The WSO worked as an intervenor for the Supreme Court of Canada court case with TWU. Apparently, a convicted terrorist asserted the WSO paid the legal bills for the court case of the terrorist.

The man, Jaspal Atwal, claimed the WSO paid the legal fees. He stated this came following being acquitted for the beating of lawyer Ujjal Dosanjh in 1985. Sandhu made the counter-claim the assertions of Atwal were false.

Sandhu stated, “The WSO never paid his legal fees... I was president of the organization from 1984 to 1989, so I can tell you very clearly we did not pay any of his costs... I have no idea. I have no idea.” (The final portion in response to the claim as to why Atwal would make the claim.)

Even with the allegations against the WSO, or more about the WSO, Sandhu respected the right for Atwal to “tell his side of the story.” However, Sandhu viewed this as not extending to the implication of organizations.

Sandhu has been on record condemning violence. Atwal, in the 1980s, was found guilty of attempted murder of a visiting Punjabi cabinet minister. He earned a 20-year prison sentence for the murder. His parole was 5-and-half years in prison.

Atwal was photographed with Sophie Gregoire-Trudeau in Mumbai; while also, he was on the guest list for a dinner with the Trudeau family at the Canadian High Commission in Delhi. Atwal, for a short time, became a famous Sikh in Canada.

“Trudeau’s national security adviser later told journalists that ‘rogue elements’ within the Indian government disseminated misleading information to discredit Canadian institutions.

Sandhu’s memoir,” The reportage stated, “*An Uncommon Road: How Canadian Sikhs Struggled Out of the Fringes and Into the Mainstream*, explained in detail how the Sikh community was frequently smeared in the media and by some Conservative politicians in the 1980s and early 1990s.”

The smearing of Sikhs by a sector of Conservative politicians for two decades. Sandhu targeted one important topic of the media. The “emerging motif,” in his words, of the independence of Khalistan and the term “extremist,” as an epithet or invective, merged together: conflated ideas.

Sandhu explained, “Many non-Sikhs seemed to regard support for an independent Sikh nation as a classic ipso facto: ‘If one is for Khalistan, then one is necessarily an extremist,’ a logical

fallacy that often went unchecked and inflicted enormous damage on our community and our cause.”

The text emphasizes the tenets of the Sikh faith and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Sandhu supports, in a strong fashion, both the *Charter* and the tenets of the Sikh faith. Sandhu concluded, “The charter really tells me what being a Sikh is all about.”

# The Proposed Repeal of the Ontario Sexual Education Curriculum

June 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*The Toronto Star* reported that the proposed sexual education changes by the Progressive Conservatives would harm kids.

Sexual education mattered to some but not all voters in Ontario. The repeal of the current sexual education curriculum was one of many foci for Doug Ford and his party. Ford won the vote in Ontario.

The reportage stated, “Doug Ford isn’t a particularly religious man of course, but he wants to display his alleged toughness and his links to ‘the people,’ and striking at a curriculum that has been lied about, and held up as a symbol of the elites at their worst, is perfect optics. Bluster and bombast in one well-rehearsed sound bite.”

Charles McVety sent a social media post – a “tweet,” so-called, on Twitter – that said, “Premier Doug Ford Majority Government. Praise God who heard our prayers and delivered victory for the sake of our children.”

Let us leave aside the efficacy of prayer or the existence of God asserted in the tweet, please. The main claim comes from the tacit assertion of the repeal of the current sexual education curriculum helping children rather than harming them. Does this work as a claim?

In short: does the repeal support the best interests of the child?

McVety stood and stands against the modern evidence-based sexual education curriculum in Ontario. He is the President of the Canada Christian College. He was the first guest on the televised leaders’ debate.

“Then there is the former Tory candidate Tanya Granic Allen. She stated last week that, ‘parents expect the repeal of the Wynne sex-ed by September.’ By ‘parents’ she means the small number of hardliners in her organization,” the article opined.

Allen was fired as a Progressive Conservative candidate based on some comments. She was present at the celebration party for Ford.

Also, the National President of Campaign Life Coalition, Jim Hughes, said, “We remain optimistic that Premier Doug Ford will uphold his campaign promises to repeal and replace Kathleen Wynne’s radical sex-ed curriculum as an ‘early priority’ in his administration.”

Others working in opposition to the sexual education curriculum are other pro-life groups including the Roman Catholic Church. Although, the laity and Catholic hierarchs differ in views on the subject of, for example, abortion.

I do not want to misrepresent. Differences exist in those groups opposed to modern evidence-based sexual education curriculum. It seems as if pro-life groups and individuals in authority formed coalitions with the movement for repeal by Ford.

“The infamous clergy sexual abuse crisis within Catholicism, which is still to be fully exposed, was dependent on children being ignorant of sex, unable to name sexual acts, and on the fog of

confusion and fear around sexuality that Catholicism has long enforced in its teaching and formation,” the article stated.

The Catholic hierarchs founded, defended, and kept secret the sexual abuse in their own churches, unfortunately. It harmed and harms their image, followers, and claims to full legitimate moral authority on various issues now.

The issue with the removal of the sexual education curriculum in Ontario would not be in the best interests of the child. Why? It removes education for a child. In particular, the move would repeal the knowledge and information for children needed to make informed personal sexual choices, whether they want to or not, and in what ways they deem safe and healthy.

The article continued, “Children deserve better than to be play things in the soiled hands of single-issue fanatics and ill-informed politicians. The curriculum is balanced and appropriate, parents were consulted, groups dealing with abuse and child health contributed, and no single bureaucrat was responsible for it.” [Emphasis added.]

Is it evidence-based rather than faith-based (which, by technical definition, means without evidence)? Yes.

Is it based on consultation with the public? Yes.

Does this mean the health and wellbeing of the kids are ensured and protected? Yes, for the most part, adolescents and kids can still make mistakes, though.

Last question, does this mean the repeal would be non-evidence-based or faith-based, rejecting the implemented consultation of the Ontario public, and reduce the knowledge and capacity for kids to make informed sexual choices (against the best interests of the child)? Yes.

For the best interests of the children, their mental and physical wellbeing associated with sexual health in other words. They deserve a proper, evidence-based sexual education curriculum built in coordination and consultation with relevant parties in the province, which is the current curriculum. To remove or repeal it, it will harm kids; in turn, it will harm families, communities, and a sector of the next generation in Ontario. Those who make these choices knowingly will be the ones to live with the consequences in reality and on their consciences.

# The Shift in the Canadian Oil and Gas Industry

June 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to *Hellenic Shipping News Worldwide*, there is an ongoing shift in the business of Canadian oil and gas if the national industry wants to remain competitive.

A report released by PetroLMI of Energy Safety Canada described the need for new skills for the upcoming jobs in the international competition of the oil and gas industry. The future seems more inclined towards green energy and renewable ones.

Until then, “A Workforce in Transition: Oil and Gas Skills of the Future” talked about the shift in skills and occupations within the Canadian industrial work base in the energy sector.

Both federal and provincial governments have been proposing a series of changes to regulation with integration or adoption of the automation and data analytics technologies coming online.

When I worked in a Learning Analytics Research Group, the research remained based in education and the improvement in student performance. Some incorporated the new technology and software tools found in narrow artificial intelligence developed with machine learning and neural networks models.

Automation tied to these programs could improve various inefficiencies at different levels of process, of operations. Into the future, especially with the price and energy production performance of renewables outpacing standard hydrocarbon – or 20th century – energy sources, I would like to see these new technologies applied to make the full transition to renewables.

Even if nuclear, and if a breakdown, we would talk about half-lives of tens of thousands of years, which amounts to new forms of waste and pollution to people around the world only as far back as the 19th century.

There are new manufacturing technologies for oil and gas now, though. With the shifts in the extant economy here, the Vice President of Communications and PetroLMI for Energy Safety Canada, Carol Howes, stated, “This report examines where the exciting opportunities lie for new and interesting careers, and those occupations that will be on the decline, if not eliminated, because of these changes to the oil and gas business.”

I agree with Howes. However, the scope seems to narrow. The decline and potential elimination will be much of the oil and gas industry in the medium and long-term projections. People shifting into these new oil and gas jobs should predict the need to retrain and switch once more out of the oil and gas industry even if climate change is not a concern for them and only narrow economic self-interest is the concern, which is valid.

The jobs not associated with oil and gas will be more linked to the oil and gas industry in the near future.

As the reportage stated, “Occupations not traditionally considered oil and gas jobs will be more in demand – those such as data management and analytics specialists, instrumentation technologists and software engineers. Increasing numbers of natural science professionals and environmental service workers will also be required.”



There will be a dual-skillset necessary to compete in the global oil and gas industry. First, the need for mechanical skills and then also the digital skills associated with those new technologies and especially the analytics.

The article continued, “New government regulations governing major energy project approvals will require a greater need for expertise in Indigenous traditional knowledge, public health specialists, biologists and economic development specialists, says the report.”

All important and complex facets of the emergence of new transitional industries. The need for public support becomes more important as the risks become better known by a wider range of people, more citizens.

With the climate strategy from the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, there will be work for the reduction of carbon dioxide and methane emissions. That will translate into needed jobs for the future.

Meanwhile, communications and consulting abilities will be heavily relied on to earn and maintain public support for these projects “measurement, mitigation and reporting” about them.

There will be the incremental increase of photovoltaic, wind, geothermal, and other energy technologies as the economies of the developed world especially and the rest of the world eventually transition into renewable energy markets.

“The adoption of automation and data analytics technologies is already improving Canada’s oil and gas industry’s productivity, safety and profitability,” the article stated, “As a greater number of tasks are automated, however, more of the workforce will need to be digitally literate as well as more innovative and creative in looking for productivity improvements.”

With more analytics in the market, the more data scientists will be needed. In that, we should be training these individuals in increasing numbers, now, especially in oil and gas powerhouses such as the province of Alberta.

At the same time, we should start to work on the training for the upcoming and ongoing employment of alternative energy sources in the newer economies and industries of, for example, renewable resources.

Howe concluded, “With all of this change comes both challenges and exciting opportunities for Canadians working in the oil and gas industry and for those who are looking to become part of it,” said Howes, “Like other industries, the oil and gas industry is adapting and evolving and its workforce will need to do so also.”

## Interview with Shif Gadamsetti – Former President, SAMRU; Support Staff, Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse

June 30, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Shif Gadamsetti is the Former President of the Students' Association of Mount Royal University, Support Staff for the Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse, Former Chair of the Board of the Canadian Alliance of Students' Associations and a Member of its Alumni Council. Here we look into her life, work, and views.*

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

**Shif Gadamsetti:** I was raised by both my parents, people I would consider traditional Christians, and quite involved with the church during my upbringing. We regularly attended Sunday service, and I was actively involved in my teen years through the youth group, outreach, teaching Sunday School and with the church's worship team. My family immigrated to Canada from India in 2001, and settled in Calgary almost immediately. There was a certain gap in terms of finding cultural community to bridge with once we had moved. We only had one extended family in the city, and our primary social network was through the church, which did not have a significantly diverse cultural congregation at the time.

**Jacobsen:** How did this influence you? Did this impact the professional trajectory as a kid growing into a young woman?

**Gadamsetti:** I had often sought out positions of leadership throughout my youth, and I believe that I learned a lot from seeking leadership opportunities through my church. It allowed me to be socially involved with peers my own age, as my parents were quite restrictive and traditional, likely influenced by their position as immigrants. It was a safe place for them to allow me to integrate with Canadian culture while still maintaining engagement with our religious roots.

**Jacobsen:** As a nurse who works in the operating theatre or operating room, what tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

**Gadamsetti:** I work with an interdisciplinary team – we always have at least one other nurse, an anesthesiologist, a surgeon, and other physicians, who either assist or residents that participate in our surgical cases. My responsibilities include a pre-operative assessment, including looking for any potential risks that could compromise the surgery – these range from substance use, underlying health conditions, something as simple as the patient ingesting food or drink prior to the surgery (which could complicate their intubation and present a choking hazard if they were to vomit), etc. During these cases, I either “circulate” (the nurse who is not sterile) and assist the surgeon and scrub nurse with opening tools, maintaining sterility, documentation, and monitoring of supplies needed during the case. If I am scrubbing in on the case, my primary role is to assist the surgeon with their procedure, which can range from anticipating their needs, positioning, preparing tools such as sutures or drills to be used, and tracking any of the materials used to ensure that we maintain the integrity of the procedure and don't accidentally leave something in a patient, for example.

**Jacobsen: What is the motivation to work for women's rights through the Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse organization as a support staff?**

**Gadamsetti:** I have always been interested in learning more and supporting areas of gender-based barriers, and violence. I personally am very motivated in this position because sexual violence is a nuanced issue, and there is much that goes into understanding why sexual violence is perpetuated (often long-standing histories including lack of education, ancillary mental health and relationship issues, etc), and how to best support victims of sexualized violence. There is so much that broader communities don't understand, it is often considered a taboo topic, communities feel unequipped to have conversations that wholly support the victim, and the work is difficult – not everyone is cut out to handle such matters, which I do not fault them for. There's a very difficult way to gauge my responsibilities – a "good" day includes having a collaborative team, a client that feels supported, autonomous, and well managed for both the social and administrative work that goes into processing a case, but it's never really a good day because my clients have been victims of sexual assault. Someday, I hope to involve myself in broader-based approaches to sexual violence prevention and support, including policy development and education, but I also know that I need to understand where our clients come from and what they need. I've learned so much and challenged many assumptions, despite how much work I've put into understanding the issue, and I'm very grateful to have the opportunity.

**Jacobsen: As the president at the Students' Association of Mount Royal University (SAMRU), what are the benefits and difficulties of the work there?**

**Gadamsetti:** I am now completed my term as President with SAMRU, but I would vouch for the endless possibilities that come with the role. It's an incredible honor to be elected and serve students to represent their best interests, the experience with leadership, management, and so many other valuable skills is never-ending, and the connections you build with other student leaders and people across your networks are ones that last a lifetime. A lot of us would agree that we have a common vision and work so hard to achieve those results through internal and external advocacy. I learned a lot about myself and what I was capable of throughout my time there.

**Jacobsen: What tend to be the issues for women on postsecondary campuses in Canada? What is being done to help solve them?**

**Gadamsetti:** I wouldn't want to generalize – but perhaps, the ones that most students face are common across women as well – financial precarity, employment, etc. I would, however, point out that the common issues amongst students are exacerbated by gender-based barriers – sexualized violence can sometimes be a prevalent issue amongst women on campus for a variety of reasons – lack of education around consent in an environment where young people are discovering and establishing boundaries, lack of institutional policy and supports available to help those who experience it, a lack of consent culture, perpetuation of toxic behaviours that develop into patterns that are harder to address when they become systemic or cultural. There's also the insidious types of issues that women face – increased violence and risk to their safety, those who are marginalized amongst their different intersectional identities, be it race, sexuality, etc, are often the most unsupported. Employment trends continue to show gender-based barriers in their patterns, and addressing these issues culturally can also take a long time. Any root problem that sees women as less qualified, less equal, subservient, will perpetuate patterns of discrimination and violence, including sexualized violence.

I believe that institutions need to become bolder and take hard-line stances on the matter, while demonstrating their commitment to resolving these issues with comprehensive policies that support all students' safety, regardless of how these opportunities might seem risky to the institution's reputation. The largest barrier to addressing sexualized violence on campus in the past 10 years has been the inability for those in leadership to admit there's a problem, admit they are part of the problem, and rally behind an overhauling of support systems. Culture is important – when a zero tolerance stance without allowing loopholes or technicalities to exist is implemented, those perpetuating violence might think twice, and evaluate their own behavior before choosing to victimize someone in that way. At the same time, being transparent about problems and choosing to address issues by prioritizing victims over the institution as a whole would complement the approach well. It takes a community to implement real change, and once that change occurs, institutions need to ensure that proper support systems are in place for those seeking help and are continually funded, aren't tokenized, and can meaningfully support the community long-term. It really does require a multifaceted approach.

**Jacobsen: If a senior in high school or a first-year woman student in postsecondary education wants to become involved in student politics, how can they start? Who should they contact? What should they bear in mind about the potential responsibilities that they will be taking on?**

**Gadamsetti:** The best place to start is likely your own students' association. It's a great place to learn more about what your interests might be as you transition to university, meet new people, find the niche spaces you feel comfortable in, and familiarize yourself with student politics, and the "politics" of the institution as well. Student association spaces have always provided me with great insight into what students care about, need, celebrate, and champion. I started getting involved with my faculty club, and branched out to others that suited my interests. You might not be interested in running for a position as a student executive after it's all said and done, but I guarantee you that it will enrich and support your university experience like no other.

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

# Interview with Professor Mir Faizal – Adjunct Professor, Physics & Astronomy, University of Lethbridge

July 10, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Professor Mir Faizal is an Adjunct Professor in Physics and Astronomy at the University of Lethbridge. I wrote an article for Science, Technology & Philosophy, which gained the attention of one of the people related to the work in the article. It happened to be professor Faizal. He reached out in appreciation for the publication and the accuracy of the reportage on the research. I then returned with a request for an interview because... physics and astronomy. I love the field. Here we talk about some of the work.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What is the relation between the structure of spacetime and gravity?

**Professor Mir Faizal:** A geometry can be flat like the geometry of a piece of paper, or a curved geometry, like the geometry of a ball. According to general relativity, the geometry of our spacetime is a curved geometry. In fact, gravity is caused by this curvature of spacetime. This is the main difference between gravity and other forces in nature. Other forces (like electromagnetism, weak or strong nuclear forces) act in spacetime, and gravity is the spacetime.

**Jacobsen:** What is a singularity?

**Faizal:** It is possible for the gravitational field to become infinite at a point. As gravity is the structure of spacetime, these points cannot be analyzed as points in spacetime, and laws of physics cannot be applied to such points. The occurrence of singularities is predicted from the equations describing the general theory of relativity. They occur at the center of black holes, and at the start of the universe. So, it seems problematic that our universe is described by elegant laws of physics, which cannot be applied to the beginning of our universe.

**Jacobsen:** Are these singularities physical or just mathematical artifacts?

**Faizal:** There are theorems by Penrose and Hawking called the Penrose-Hawking singularity theorems, which state that classically the singularities are an intrinsic feature of general relativity, and not just mathematical artifacts. By classical, I mean if we do not consider quantum effects into consideration.

**Jacobsen:** What happens if quantum effects are taken into consideration?

**Faizal:** It has been argued that we need a full theory of quantum gravity to understand how quantum effects will change the structure of spacetime, and the physics of singularities. However, we still do not have a full quantum theory of gravity, but only various proposals for quantum gravity. All the past work on removal of singularities has been done using these different proposals for quantum gravity (such as the string theory and loop quantum gravity), so all of the past work depends on the specifics of a particular proposal. However, we approached the problem from a different point of view.

**Jacobsen:** What was new in your approach?

**Faizal:** We looked at the mathematical ingredients used to derive the Penrose-Hawking singularity theorems, and tried to obtain a quantum version of such theorems. These theorems were derived using an equation the Raychaudhuri equation, and we derived a quantum version of this equation. Then we used it to obtain quantum versions of the Penrose-Hawking singularity theorems. Thus, we could demonstrate from our quantum no-singularity theorems that the quantum effects would prevent the occurrence of singularities, just like Penrose and Hawking demonstrated that classical effects would lead to the occurrence of singularities using classical singularity theorems. Our results did not depend on the specifics of a particular model, like the past work done in this field.

**Jacobsen: What is the significance of this work?**

**Faizal:** The universe (and even the multiverse), should be described by consistent laws of physics. There should be no inconsistency in nature, and it is this belief in consistency, which is at the heart of a scientific worldview. Every time, we observe that some experimental data is not being explained by a certain physical law describing a physical system, we propose there to be a better more elegant law behind that system (of which the existing law is an approximation). Thus, if the motion of mercury was being described by Newton's laws, it was not because there was an inconsistency in nature, but because gravity was described by Einstein's equation, of which Newton's laws were an approximation. However, if the beginning of the universe could not be described by consistent physical laws, then the whole philosophy of science would view would break down. So, the absence of singularities, means the presence of consistency, at all points in the universe (including its beginning), which in turn means that scientific worldview is a consistent worldview.

**Jacobsen: Does this work have implications for the existence of God?**

**Faizal:** It depends on how you define God, as the word 'God' has been defined in various ways (many of those definitions are contradict each other). So, if you define God as the as a supernatural being, who keeps breaking the laws of physics by performing miracles, and use the occurrence of singularity to argue for the existence of such a being (by performing a miracle at the point of the big bang), then such an argument is broken. This, in fact, is still a god of gaps, with the big bang being a big gap. On the other hand, if you define God as the most fundamental aspect of existence from which all existence (including elegant laws of mathematics describing nature) emerges, then such a God exists by definition. What we could say about the nature of such a fundamental form of existence, in rather a poetic way, is that there is no inconsistency in the creation of God. However, the definition of God as a supernatural being who performs miracles by breaking laws of physics is inconsistent with this statement about the absence of inconsistency in nature, as miracles are by definition inconsistent with the laws of physics.

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

# On Freedom of Expression and Free Speech with Faisal Saeed Al Mutar

July 17, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Faisal Saeed Al Mutar founded the Global Secular Humanist Movement and Ideas Beyond Borders. He is an Iraqi refugee, satirist, and human rights activist. He is also a columnist for Free Inquiry. Here, we continue a series together.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** When it comes to social media, many people are being banned from across the spectrum. These can be people we agree with. These can be people we disagree with.

**However,** I note people tend to be in support of the banning of people they do not agree with, but not in support of banning of people they agree with. This seems inconsistent with freedom of expression or what is more narrowly termed free speech.

**What are your thoughts on this? What are your observations about this?**

**Faisal Saeed Al Mutar:** What is happening, there is a distinction, which is important for people to know, between the First Amendment and freedom of expression. The First Amendment is about protecting individuals from government censorship, while freedom of expression is more of a culture that tolerates different opinions.

and also there are hate speech laws in some countries in Europe who doesn't follow the American tradition of the first amendment and they arrest people for what they refer to as hate speech.

Hate speech laws happen in multiple countries in the world including countries in the free world. In Germany, for example, Holocaust denial is viewed as hate speech. Therefore, people who propagate these ideas get prosecuted.

In the UK, there was a case where a comedian got his girlfriend to do a Nazi salute. it is going to the court. There is government persecution and what is referred to free speech or freedom of expression.

In the US, "hate speech" in many cases is legal if it doesn't call for direct incitement of violence.

For platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ – not many people use it, and YouTube, which are the major ones, they are private companies, but at the same time, they became platforms for many people around the world to spread their ideas and discuss them with other people.

These platforms have been constrained by very, in my opinion, vague terms and conditions. Up until today, many people do not know the specifics of the terms and conditions. There has been, in my opinion, different standards applied to different people about what can be considered hateful speech.

Somebody can make the argument that Ayatollah Khamenei, who is the Ayatollah for Iran at the moment, is involved in hate speech because he spreads many conspiracy theories against the Jews and other bad ideas, but he is available on Twitter.

Even though in his country, he does not allow people to access Twitter, but he and others in the regime can access it. Same with other extremist groups. What is happening is that some of the people who can be considered within the spectrum of the Far Right in Europe or the United States, they are having their accounts shut down.

There is a relevant double standard ongoing. Many critics of Islam who are not alt-Right, but who liberal Muslims or ex-Muslims. Their work is also being censored due to not supporting it or some people being offended.

Some people do not understand that free speech is in some ways a one-way street. What some people find offensive cannot be offensive to other people, many of these social media companies who were invented by IT and software people.

There are so many ethical questions that they are dealing with, which I do not think they are dealing with in a reasonable manner. Freedom of expression is not about the people that we agree with.

If we agree on something, we do not need any sort of laws or policies, or a culture, to protect us. It is exactly what I am talking about with opinion. If you do not support unpopular opinions, no matter how offensive they may be, you are naturally not supporting free speech.

Unless, there is a direct incitement to violence, where you can say, "These people in this group, certain ethnic group, need to be killed right now at this venue or at this place." That is different as it is incitement to violence. But in my opinion, what can and cannot be offensive can be very subjective.

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



# Interview with Obaid Omer on Religion and Heretics Corner

July 21, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Obaid Omer** was born in India. He grew up in Canada. He left Islam in his teenage years. Now, he fights for free speech and secularism. He is the co-host of the Heretics Corner, which highlights issues dealing with apostasy. Here we learn about his life and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** As you were born in India and grew up in Canada, how did religion enter personal life from within that familial and dual-national cultural context?

**Obaid Omer:** My family moved to Canada at the end of 1975 when I was 6. My father specifically moved us to a neighborhood that hadn't started to be ghettoized as a South Asian neighborhood, he wanted us to assimilate. My parents, while devout, were not fundamentalist about their faith. They made sure we learned to read the Quran, how to do our prayers and learn about the faith. One of my clearest memories from when we first moved to Canada is; one night we were visited by men from the mosque. I let them in, my dad invited them to sit and offered them food and drink. Within a short amount of time, maybe 15 minutes, my father was throwing them out the door, my brother and I were shocked. My father then sat my brother and me down and said "What those men did was wrong. They came here to tell me how to be a good Muslim and that is between me and my God. It is up to your mother and me to teach you and your sister about the faith and once you are an adult it is up to you how you practice it, no one else has a right to tell you how to do it." This showed me to question authority.

Growing up we were not made to pray 5 times a day but it was small things that we would continuously have to be aware of. A big thing was eating halal, to a point. We wouldn't eat pork and even as young as 8 when buying snacks we had to look to make sure it had no pork in it or that it wasn't cooked in lard. In second grade my teacher announced that on Friday she would bring in hotdogs and cook us hot dogs. I went to speak to her to let her know I couldn't eat pork, she sent a letter home to my parents to let them know she was cooking all beef hot dogs. My parents allowed it even though it wasn't halal. It was this tightrope that made it hard to navigate, we were told to assimilate but there were things that we were denied to allow us to fully do so. Being 11 years old and ensuring that the bread you brought home that had no lard in it. I was in a liberal Muslim family but even then there were parts of childhood that we had to forego to ensure we practiced these rules.

**Jacobsen:** What were the inconsistencies in the sciences and the explanations provided by the religion that eventually lead to your leaving Islam?

**Omer:** I was always curious and would question just about everything. At 11 the Carl Sagan series Cosmos aired, watching that opened my mind to a new way of questioning. The way Sagan talked about the scientific method and his embracing of curiosity awoke something in me. It was later that year when I learned about our sun burning out in 5 billion years and couldn't reconcile it with what I had been told about the day of judgment. I asked my parents about this discrepancy and got back a platitude about how they were one and the same, I couldn't accept that. From then on the more, I learned the more I came to realize that Islam was wrong. Learning about evolution destroyed the creation myth, Hearing the story from my grandmother about the

sun setting a puddle of mud was another nail in the coffin. It was all these flaws and errors in what was supposed to be perfect that lead me to see the falsehood in it. By 16 I stopped believing.

Science and reason are the best tools to demonstrate the false claims made by revelation, but I think we need to be careful, science and reason cannot be the replacement for religion, they were never designed to be a philosophy by which you live your life. You need science to remove the veil but you need to offer that which faith offers as well. The only way I can really explain this is by looking at the account of Genesis and the fall. The knowledge that was denied Adam and Eve was not the knowledge of science. They were told specifically to not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God had no problem talking about “science” he boasted about his creation and demanded adulation, adoration, and obedience as his due for his work.

What we were denied was how to think and not what to think but also a sense of purpose and identity.

I respect and admire science immensely I am not trying to undermine the contributions science has made to human flourishing, I’m just saying that it needs to be a balanced approach and with science explaining how the heavens go and something else, I’m not sure what, explaining how to go to heaven, metaphorically speaking.

**Jacobsen: How do free speech and secularism provide protections from religious fundamentalism and literalism?**

**Omer:** Free speech and secularism are the two most important values if you want to build a free society, with free speech being a first among equals. Without the ability to speak out you cannot let people know if you are being oppressed and you can never know the mind of those who you are in opposition to. You cannot say a society has true free expression without it being secular if you are not free to practice no religion or to practice any religion.

Conversely, you cannot create a secular society without free expression.

My hope is not to have a world that sees religion destroyed and banished from the public sphere never to be spoken of again. I would be ecstatic if everyone around the world decides that belief in a deity was not necessary and that there is more under Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of by that philosophy. Without trying to sound condescending, I would much rather people were able to come to the realization that faith was how we discovered the world in our infancy and now it is time put away childish things.

I try not to make it about me being opposed to faith or to a specific faith, even though I can go on rants about it, I would rather support free expression and secularism. This might seem like the same thing but there is a difference in the approaches. If I support free speech and secularism I am pushing forward the ideas that I believe are needed to build a stable and cohesive society. If I spend all my time fighting religion I could end up losing myself in that fight and end up creating a society that treats the faithful the way they have treated non-believers and those that believed differently and still do in the case of Islam. I see some trends of this and it gets me worried.

I saw the comments that people had made when China announced the forced re-education of the Uyghurs. There was a lot of people spouting vitriol about that is how Muslims should be treated and that is the only way to deal with them. I would much rather deal with a religious person who is willing to practice their faith and allow others to follow theirs or none at all and allowing a

free and open exchange of ideas than I would an atheist who wants to forcibly ban religion or send people off for re-education.

The problem lately has been that even the most seemingly benign comment, “What a nice sunny day”, for example, can now become highly politically charged. Someone somewhere will be offended on behalf of those who have a rare and unfortunate condition that causes them pain when exposed to sunlight.

5 years ago I would have said that states and religious fundamentalists were the greatest threat to free speech but lately, we seem to want to police ourselves and even those who are against censorship are scared to speak their mind and be shunned by their tribe. We spent a long time fighting for the right to live according to our conscience and we should willingly give it away. I hope that we will be able to come back to a path where we are able to have a rational and open dialogue without relying on vitriol spewed back and forth all the time.

If we aren’t willing to fight for the values that brought us all our other most cherished values than who will be left to fight for liberty and freedom.

**Jacobsen: As the co-host of Heretics Corner, what are some of the main issues for apostates? What countries tend to be the worse violators of freedom of religion and belief for those who leave the faith?**

**Omer:** Two other ex-Muslims and I started Heretics Corner to be an outlet for apostates from any faith to discuss their struggles and what they have had to cope with and how they overcame all that. We are hoping that by sharing these stories it will give some help to others who are struggling with the same issues. While all their stories are different, there is one thread that ties them together, and that is the initial fear of being cut off from family and friends and support system. For most people, even those living in liberal Western democracies, you can find yourself completely cut off from those that were closest to you. We spoke to one Saudi ex-Muslim who left in the middle of the night and came to the US and had to start over in a new country with no one and has now rebuilt her life and is doing well but she has paid a heavy price for living free.

Right now it is Muslim majority countries that are the biggest threat to freedom from and of religion. This was the focus of our first episode with guests. We had on Yasmine Mohammed and Jimmy Bagnash on to discuss the work they are doing with Free Hearts Free Minds, an organization that Yasmine started to help atheists in Muslim majority countries. Jimmy offers atheist living there life coaching and gives them some skills they can use to not be so overwhelmed by having to live your life secretly and hiding who you are. The testimonials on their website from the people they have helped shows how much this is needed.

This goes back to free speech and secularism, countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan have to stop making atheism a terrorist offense or a crime against the society. The voices in those countries, that are being silenced for asking for the same freedoms we enjoy should be the ones that are the most protected and the most supported.

I hope Heretics Corner can help bring a lot of stories of people leaving their faith behind and becoming complete again, and maybe we can be a light at the end of the tunnel for some people.

I do see some semi-hopeful trends though, ex-Muslims are starting to be talked about within mosques and Muslim communities, not always with calls for our deaths but as a problem to be addressed. Religious and community leaders from the Muslim populations, especially in the West are afraid that more and more people leave Islam and are trying to have some sort of

discourse. I think this is also starting to happen in the Middle East, Maryam Namazie famously said that there is a tsunami of ex-Muslims coming and I think she is right. There had been a Win Gallup poll a few years back that showed Saudi Arabia had 19% of its population who described themselves as atheist or questioning with 5% living openly an atheist.

**Jacobsen: What tends to be the more touching stories of leaving fundamentalist religion and restarting a personal life that you have come across?**

**Omer:** The stories that I find the most heartbreaking are when people talk about how they are cut off from their family. The Saudi ex-Muslim I had mentioned earlier, when she talked about how her only contact with her mother was to get horrible insults and death threats from her was incredibly sad to hear, and you could feel the regret she had that she was cut off from one of the people who is supposed to be the most protective and accepting of you. I have heard so many stories of people being cut off from family and the way these stories are told so matter of factly but with so much emotion behind the words I can't help but want to reach out and provide some comfort but it just seems like something that is impossible to heal.

I had heard Megan Phelps-Roper talk about how she was cut off from her family and how she would love to be able to talk to them, and when she talked about not being able to go to her grandfather's funeral, and how she knew him not as some hate-spewing religious zealot but as kind living person she thought of as gramps, it made me well-up.

I hope that we can reach a point where some of the faithful do not hold their love for their faith more important than the love for their family.

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

# Interview with Karen Garst – Founder, Faithless Feminist

July 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Karen Garst is the Founder of Faithless Feminist. Here we talk about some of her views. If you are interested in contributing, please contact her here.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How did you come into the secular activist and non-religious world?

**Karen Garst:** In June 2014, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a 5-4 decision in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*. They ruled that Hobby Lobby, a closely held for-profit corporation, did not have to provide certain forms of birth control to its female employees because of its religious views.

This opinion was based upon the provisions of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act that allowed alternative means to further a law's interest, in this case the provisions of the Affordable Care Act.

I became livid. I came of age before *Roe v. Wade*, the U.S. Supreme Court decision that made abortion legal. I couldn't believe we were still fighting for women's reproductive rights.

I decided to write my first book, which was entitled *Women Beyond Belief: Discovering Life without Religion*. This anthology contains essays of 22 women who tell their personal stories of leaving religion.

I also became involved in the secular world: I was on secular podcasts to promote the book, attended local meetings and national conventions, and did several book tours. My husband and I left a pretty liberal "church" community in 2004 when it committed securities fraud and closed.

For me, reading the books of Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Bishop John Shelby Spong of the Jesus Seminar convinced me, I should not believe in the Bible in the 1990s.

**Jacobsen:** Regarding your own writings, you have been active in the inclusion of women's voices in the discussions on Christian theology, Islamic theology, evolution and intelligent design, and sex and gender in the non-religious community.

**How do you go about gathering those voices not seen as often in the public non-religious community?**

**Garst:** For my second book, *Women v. Religion: The Case Against Faith... and for Freedom*, I wanted to do as wide a variety of topics on how religion oppresses women as possible.

I had met several of the authors at the Women in Secularism Conference in 2014. Because I had been on secular podcasts for the first book, I heard of other women atheists.

I had also read several books written by my essayists. Sometimes, I would contact one person. Then they would recommend someone else. It took time to connect with all 13 authors.

However, I am honored to have them in the book. None of this would have been feasible without the internet.

**Jacobsen:** Also, you have written about the indoctrination of children into religion. In particular, the ways in which this may lead to fewer children entering into the atheist community as adults who become women. How is Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) part of the problem, potentially a major one?

**Garst:** Alexis Record had written a review for my first book unbeknownst to me. When I reached out to her, I realized she would be a perfect writer for my next book. She spent 12 years suffering under ACE.

ACE is not education. It is not accelerated. Students sit in front of a computer all day and read things like “Mama’s roles: helper, cook, cleans house, washed and irons clothes.” Of course, they quote Colossians 3:18, which says, “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”

It is about as sexist as a textbook could be. ACE is Christian indoctrination on steroids. Absolutely, it is a major problem. Leaving religion for people who have received such a heavy dose of dogma such as ACE is a tough row to hoe, it is much harder than what I went through; although, I, too, was indoctrinated by many of the same ideas.

**Jacobsen:** What is taught in these ACEs?

**Garst:** In addition to the examples above, students learn to obey regardless of the command. One of the cartoons shows a young girl saying, “I am glad. I obeyed,” with her mother responding, “Yes, obedience always makes us happy.”<sup>[1]</sup>

For girls who grow up learning this, it becomes hard to say, “No,” to something a man demands of them. Women can get in abusive relationships. They do not know the way out of it. As Alexis, in a post she wrote for my blog, said, “Indoctrination tells a child what to think not how to think.”<sup>[2]</sup>

History is taught with a biblical lens. They teach that language, for example, started with Adam and Eve and was a gift from God. I can only imagine how biased the science curriculum is or if they even have that.

**Jacobsen:** In the women’s side of the aisle of the non-religious and atheist movements, what tend to be their views, even anecdotally from personal experience, of the New Atheist movement and, what may best be termed, the New Mythologist movement – emergent in the 2000s in the former and 2010s in the latter?

By which I mean, there is a growing movement comprised of the same demographics as the New Atheists without a title. Their demographic is mostly 18-to-35-year-old Caucasian males from North America and Western Europe who want to reconcile the modern world with their familial and cultural Christian heritage – so there are figures using the mythologies around these old Abrahamic faiths, with a sprinkling of others – to do it.

Since these amount to secular perspectives for a religious life, and with religious emphasis on myths as insights into human nature, I call them the New Mythologists.

**Shorthand:** New Atheists are to the 2000s as the New Mythologists are to the 2010s. Both have young white guys as their major demographic. There is a curious convergence of political emphasis ongoing there.

**Garst:** I got involved with the atheist movement not long after the controversy called “Elevorgate.”[3] There was an attempt to include feminism and other social issues along with atheism in a movement called “Atheism Plus” that developed after this event.

However, it was short-lived. Personally, I have met both men and women in the movement who are very well known. To a person, they have been helpful to me in all of my endeavors.

Peter Boghossian, who wrote *The Manual for Creating Atheists*, teaches at Portland State University and has been a great mentor for me. I am now 68, so don’t need to worry about getting propositioned at a conference!

**Jacobsen: Why do these movements, fundamentally, attract more Caucasian men aged-18-to-35 from North America and Western Europe?**

**Garst:** I think, initially, the New Atheism movement started with scientists and philosophers – Richards Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. However, there is a long history of women and atheism.

Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, wrote a fabulous book on early women atheists: *Women without Superstition: No Gods – No Masters*.

One of my heroes is Elizabeth Cady Stanton from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But as in all other cases, women need to get active, write books, author blogs, and host podcasts, and so on, to get their voice out there.

When I attended MythCon sponsored by Mythicist Milwaukee last fall, the audience was composed of exactly those men you have enumerated. However, there were speakers such as Sargon of Akkad and others whose base is mostly male. I’m not sure their conferences prior to that were so male-centered.

I am speaking at their conference this fall in a debate with Karen Straughan who is a Men’s Rights Activist (MRA). The topic is “Have women achieved gender equality in the U.S.?” In my research, I have gone down the rabbit hole and studied 4chan and MGTOW.

To say that I have been stunned by what I have read is an understatement. I have a 27-year-old son who would NEVER spend his time on these sites. He is a young entrepreneur who is a well-adjusted millennial.

**Jacobsen: What have been the reported abuses of power by male atheists as a community, so an unhealthy trend, and among the most prominent voices?**

**Garst:** I understand that for some accusations. There is evidence that this has occurred. But New Atheism or any other movement is going to have all types of people in it. Thus, it is not surprising that some would be called on the carpet for issues in this time of the “#MeToo” movement.

I have had a long career and have been lucky to never have been sexually harassed. But it is way too prevalent in our society today. To me, it is amazing this #MeToo movement didn’t occur in the 60’s to the extent that is happening now.

Of course, there were no social media then and if the mainstream press didn’t pick up on it; no one knew about it.

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

## Footnotes

[1] Record, A. (2017). Exposing Accelerated Christian Education. Retrieved from <https://faithlessfeminist.com/blog-posts/exposing-accelerated-christian-education/>.

[2] Ibid.

[3] RationalWiki. (2018, March 29). Elevatorgate. Retrieved from <https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Elevatorgate>.



# Interview with Andy Steiger – Pastor, Young Adult Ministries, Northview Community Church & Director, Apologetics Canada

July 26, 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. Pastor Andy Steiger is the Pastor of Northview Community Church and the Director of Apologetics Canada. Here we talk about his life and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** With respect to personal and family background, what was it?

**Pastor Andy Steiger:** I am from the United States. I was born in Redding, California. My parents separated when I was around 4 years of age. My mom moved to Portland, Oregon with me, my three sisters and our dog named Fluffy. I lived in Portland, Oregon until I was 19. Then I moved to Canada to go to college.

With regards to religious background, my mom became a Christian later in her life. I committed my life to Christ at age 17.

**Jacobsen:** Can you relate your personal experience of becoming a Christian? I know there are different backgrounds and experiences for how those people develop their faith. For some, it can be a one-time experience. For others, it is over the long-term. They grapple with issues of daily life or theology and then convert.

**Steiger:** When we moved to Oregon, my mom started to take us to church. I, as a child and into adulthood, believed that God existed and that there is more to the universe. The question for me was who God was and if I cared to know God.

Even though I went to church it didn't mean a whole lot at first. That changed when I was around 17-years-old. That was when I really wanted to know who this God was. I began to look into it. For me, the question about becoming a Christian was more of an intellectual question.

Ultimately, this journey led me to Jesus. One of the important things to me becoming a Christian and going into ministry was this: if I really believe God existed, I should act on that belief. Ultimately, this propelled me to become a Christian and to go into ministry.

**Jacobsen:** Your favourite scriptures is John 17:3. Why?

**Steiger:** It's a prayer from Jesus. Specifically, it reminds us that eternal life is found in relationship with God. This is a re-occurring theme throughout Scripture from the Old Testament to the New Testament, that the meaning of life and the purpose of all this is to be in relationship. You can see that with the *shema* found in Deuteronomy chapter 6.

Throughout the Gospels, when Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment – the Jewish equivalent to the meaning of life – his answer is consistently to quote Deuteronomy 6 and

Leviticus 19, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus’ answer is relational the whole way through. In the prayer, Jesus is reiterating the truth of eternal life. I think it is significant that eternal life is connected to relationship. People often have this misunderstanding of heaven. I often hear heaven spoken of as some kind of monochromatic nightmare, where you are floating around on clouds, playing harps and singing the halleluiahs chorus forever and ever.

**Jacobsen: [Laughing].**

**Steiger:** That sounds more like hell than paradise to me.

**Jacobsen: [Laughing].**

**Steiger:** But that’s a wrong understanding of heaven. Jesus describes heaven in relational terms. On that note, a person can experience, at some level, both heaven or hell here on Earth with regards to your relational status. We’ve all experienced the bliss of friendship and darkness of loneliness.

**Jacobsen: How does the relational aspect of that connect with the relational aspect of having a spouse and having children?**

**Steiger:** From what we see, the idea that people are made in the image of God, which you find in Genesis chapter 1 verses 26 and 27, is a significant idea in Christianity.

These verses raise a significant question, “What does God look like?” In Christianity, that answer is unique, in that God looks like a family: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the trinity. The point being, God is relational.

God lives in right relationship within Himself. God’s nature becomes the standard of right relationship, which ultimately is the foundation of morality, as morality is a relational term. What you see then, especially in a triune or relational God, is that there is this understanding of sacrificial love as found in a family.

You get this also from St. Richard of Victor. He argues that God must be three persons to be a perfect being. God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Richard argues that a Triune God is a greater God. If God is only one person, God would need to have created people in order to know what love is. That becomes problematic in that God would be incomplete without us. However, if God is Triune: three persons in one essence, or soul, then God embodies love within His nature.

Richard argues that God must be more than one and even two persons to account for the fullness of love. For example, with two persons you have love but it’s an infatuated love that has no need for anyone else.

The family understanding comes in here. There is a third understanding of love, according to which a relationship is concerned with more than just each other, such as in a family when a husband and a wife’s love sacrificially include children.

In one sense, children have a pragmatic place in the society. On the other hand, having children is sacrificial. It requires your time. It requires your money. It is a challenge. It is interesting that two people who would be in love with one another would live sacrificially together and create life.

From a Christian understanding of the Trinity, there is this understanding that it is love that welcomes others and brings forth life. It is relational in nature. That love is outward- and not inward-focused.

**Jacobsen: With respect to the pastoral position as well as the young adult ministries at Northview Community Church as well as being the director of Apologetics Canada, what are some of the responsibilities that come with this? How do you build a community at a church and also within a larger association including Apologetics Canada?**

**Steiger:** It is a unique combination of ministries with the young adult pastoral work and the work with Apologetics Canada. They work well together because, with Apologetics Canada, our goal, first and foremost, is to help Christians strengthen their relationship with God.

I see apologetics more as discipleship than as evangelistic, which may come as a surprise for some readers. My desire is to help people through answering their questions and doubts that everyone wrestles with. I deal a lot with university students.

The questions university students deal with are everything from philosophical, scientific arguments and everything in between. My desire is to help young adults grow in their relationship with God and in their relationship with one another.

Everything we do is done through that matrix. You can see that this all follows from this understanding of what it means to be a human being and what is a human being made for, and what is life all about. We, as Christians, understand human beings are created for the purpose of relationship and our desire is to see that purpose fulfilled through Christ.

In fact, this is the Christian understanding of church. When we come to church it is an opportunity to be in relationship with God and also with each other.

**Jacobsen: Final question, and as a director of Apologetics Canada, you have a broader view on this, probably. That is, it is a question a little bit peripheral, but I see this in commentary and writings from people who not only are part of the global Christian church but also the Western European and North American church.**

**The issues, within the church, of more women and less men with congregation numbers, taking part in activities of worship (e.g., coming to Sunday sermons, Bible study groups, college theological classes, and so on), and so on. Does this reflect your own experience, of a decline of men in the church?**

**Steiger:** Yes, however I see a much broader issue. I would argue we are seeing a decline of men being involved in social gatherings in general. Men tend to be quite busy, quite insular. I think it is easy for men to get caught up in work or whatever else. We tend not to spend time with other men.

I think it is a challenge, whether you are a Christian or not, and I believe it is partly to do with our culture. Men tend to like to do things that are more individualistic, such as playing video games to working on their car.

It is a real challenge for men, where they need to make a concerted effort to participate in the things that are community-driven. Also, you read books like *Bowling Alone* and *Alone Together*. They demonstrate that this is something happening in our society.

We see this in women as well. But it is not nearly to the same degree as men. Yes, it is true in church as well. It is a challenge we men need to face. It is a Challenge to get people to value community and participate in that community. Yet, when they do they are glad they did.

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

# Recent Surveys on the Religious and the Non-Religious

July 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to Dr. Phil Zuckerman in *Psychology Today*, there were two surveys published examining the beliefs and attitudes of the religious and the secular.

Both examined the level of suspicion and unwelcome behavior of the religious towards those who are different from them. That is, anyone non-religious and the perception and behavior with them.

As it turns out – though only two – with these studies, the secular people were more open and accepting of those from different countries, ethnicities, races, and religions. Tribalism and ethnocentrism were correlated with religiosity.

The universalist and cosmopolitan attitudes and behaviors were more related to the secular people.

Zuckerman states, “In this study, Americans were asked how they feel about census predictions indicating that by the year 2043, Latinos, Asian Americans, and other peoples of color will constitute a combined majority of the population, with whites being in the minority.”

Half of the Evangelicals stated that this would be a negative development. 4/10 mainline Protestants viewed this as a negative. Then only 3/10 of the Roman Catholics said the same.

The people without a religious affiliation were the ones to see this as pretty much not a negative development at all. They viewed this as more or less acceptable. It was only about 2 out of 10 to 1 out of 4. Not many compared to the others, especially the Evangelicals.

“The second new survey comes from Europe. In this 2018 Pew study, it was found that religious Europeans are considerably more ethnocentric, more nationalistic, more anti-immigrant, and more suspicious of Jews and Muslims than secular Europeans,” Zuckerman explained.

Indeed, more than half of the Christians who attend church consider their culture superior to others while just shy of half those who do not attend say the same thing. Only 25% of secular people consider their culture superior – intriguing as there is a decrease in the trend in each category but significant double-digit numbers in each at the same time.

In terms of other prominent world religions, 30% of the Christians who attend church were unwilling to accept Muslims into their families. It was only 11% of the secular individuals who were unwilling.

Most European nations’ Christians want the number of immigrants to be lower. That differs significantly from the secular counterparts in those same countries. Although, with the different cultures and religious demographic trends, there may be different interpretations of that data. Not sure.

Apparently, to one potential implicit concern about only two studies referenced here, those replicate or mimic the responses in surveys or social psychological studies over several decades.

That is, the tribalism increases with the greater levels of religiosity. Religion promotes tribalism, in short. It can be good for group solidarity and bad for the latent potential of bigotry and prejudice – covert and overt.

Bob Altemeyer observes – according to Zuckerman – that the amount someone goes to church indicates an increased probability of prejudice against “a variety of others.” American psychologist of religion Ralph Wood echoes this sentiment or observation.

Zuckerman continues, “... a massive meta-analysis conducted in 2009 by Duke University professor Deborah Hall—who analyzed 55 separate studies teasing out at the relationship between religion and racism—found, strongly religious Americans exhibit the highest levels of racism, while atheist and agnostics exhibit the lowest levels.”

Zuckerman provides some cautionary notes about surveys. The surveys are statistical devices about populations. That is to say, one cannot make statements about all in a group based on a survey but only the statistical level of a particular attitudinal and behavioral set.

“...they simply illustrate percentages, averages, tendencies, and predilections. There are many religious people who are not ethnocentric, racist, prejudice, or xenophobic, and there are plenty of secular people who are,” Zuckerman said.

Many positive outcomes emerge from the church attendance. One is the greater likelihood of being charitable with both time and money compared to their secular counterparts. They report more happiness and greater well-being. Then the last is that they even live longer.

There is also the social and psychological benefits of the community for many of the religious compared to the non-religious. However, for welcoming refugees, being open to others, and viewing a oneness of humanity, religion does not help in those domains.

## Reminder: A Note on the Level of Belief in Evolution by Authoritative Authorities

July 30, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

A conversation with a theology and Christian theological history student prompted this one.

According to *Pew Research*, as many of you well know but many or most Canadians may not accept or know, the vast majority of experts in the biological sciences adhere to an evolutionary account of the adaptation, development, and speciation of species.

It amounts to an unguided evolution by natural selection (and kin selection, sexual selection, and so on) accepted by most of the scientists linked to the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

This number differs starkly with the general perspective of the general population. It becomes less of a problem in some parts of the world survey data including the United Kingdom. However, Canadian society comes in between America and the UK in adherence, by the general population, to evolution by natural selection.

As reported, “While 98% of scientists connected to the American Association for the Advancement of Science say they believe humans evolved over time, only two-thirds (66%) of Americans overall perceive that scientists generally agree about evolution, according to 2014 data from a recent Pew Research Center survey on science and society.”

That is to say, in the English-speaking Christian and secular world, the numbers of the public or layperson adherence to evolutionary theory or the bedrock of all biological sciences – and so medical sciences as well – seems false or only partial to them.

Much of this comes from the historical inertia of a new theory of the adaptation, development, and speciation of species. Some bulwarks of non-modern science come in the form of religious fundamentalism, the non-accommodationists.

This amounts to a small reminder, for myself and, I trust, you too, on the degree of separation between the world of the practicing experts in the world of science and then the beliefs about the beliefs scientists hold.

Dennett talks about belief in belief. Taking the turn of phrase in a different context, this amounts to the beliefs about others’ beliefs. The public remains wrong about the beliefs of the people active in the field. This creates a chasm in knowledge in each grouping.

How might this change the theory of mind the public and the scientists have about one another?

As noted, “Those in the general public who reject evolution are divided on whether there is a scientific consensus on the topic, with 47% saying scientists agree on evolution and 46% saying they do not.”

So it goes.

# Interview with Melanie Wilderman – Author, *Faithiest*

July 31, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** When it comes to your own background, how was religion or irreligion a part of it, especially in early life?

**Melanie Wilderman:** I'm born and raised in Oklahoma—have lived here my whole life. I was raised in a home where we went to church off and on, with some periods of steady church going, but the churches were pretty mild by Oklahoma standards. Two of the churches that stand out to me the most were a Lutheran church and a non denominational Christian church. I enjoyed Sunday school as a little kid, and I enjoyed being part of church choir and theatrical performances as a teenager, and going to some Christian summer camps. However, after I went to college and grew up a little, I questioned Christianity, and probably around age 22, I was able to say, I'm not a Christian, but it took a few more years for me to tell people truthfully that I didn't believe in any of it anymore. And there's a lot of people who probably still didn't know—that is unless they watched the play or read any of the press. Then they have likely figured it out.

**Jacobsen:** There was a real story as the inspiration for “*Faithiest*.” Who was the basis of it? **Jacobsen:** What was her story?

**Wilderman:** There was a clip on TV a few years back that gave me a moment of inspiration. It was after a tornado in Oklahoma and reporter Wolf Blitzer is talking to a young mother with her baby and he kind of pushes the point of if she is thanking God for being safe, and she finally says she's an atheist. Here's the clip: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LP3Zs\\_V\\_BQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LP3Zs_V_BQ) I remember thinking, oh that poor woman. She's going to take some shit living in Oklahoma. But I was also proud that she would say that on television in our very, very religious and conservative state. I always wondered if she regretted it or not.

However, the story is not about this particular woman. I don't know her other than things I have read about her on Facebook groups or Reddit or in news articles after that tornado. We haven't ever met, and the protagonist is not based on her life or personality or anything. There is only a similar moment to this clip in my play.

**Jacobsen:** How did you build this into the “*Faithiest*” narrative?

**Wilderman:** The *Faithiest* narrative is built more on the real-life friendship between me and my best friend of about 25 years. We are very different people, especially when it comes to religion. Her Christianity is very important to her, and I don't affiliate myself with any religion, nor would I say I believe in God. However, we have made our friendship work, and she is as important to me as a spouse or my parents. But this is a work of fiction, and while the inspiration comes from that one moment on television and my best friend, it's also inspired by my time living and working in a very small town in Oklahoma for eight years, from 2005-2013, and bits and pieces of stories other non believers have shared with me. And of course, some of it is just flat out made up.

**Jacobsen:** Where will this play be presented in its early play days?

**Wilderman:** It just finished a run in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma at a place called The Venue OKC. It ran July 20-29 with four showings. I hope to have it run again in Oklahoma City next



year, and after that I will look to some bigger cities to pitch to. I'm linking you to a review from the show: <https://newsok.com/article/5602404/review-comedy-and-drama-balanced-well-in-faithiest>

And also, here is a preview article before the show

began: <https://newsok.com/article/5601660/oklahoma-writer-goes-solo-to-produce-new-play-discussing-religion-and-friendship>

**Jacobsen: What have been the reactions to the play?**

**Wilderman:** The crowds who came out for it seemed to like it. A lot of people would stay afterward and talk to me, and I heard a lot of things like, "thank you for writing this," and people telling me I balanced many viewpoints well in the show. It's also fairly comedic at times, so a lot of people seemed to like the comedy element to perhaps temper the serious topic. But, I think people who wouldn't like it just wouldn't come to the show. A few of my family members who came are pretty religious, and I think they were uncomfortable, but I think they still love me! I did have at least two people come up to me who were quite emotional, tears in their eyes, saying this show was important to them. I think this reaction comes from people in conservative states in the U.S. feeling like they can't talk openly about being atheist, agnostic, humanist, non religious, etc.

**Jacobsen: What other projects are coming down the pike?**

**Wilderman:** I am considering teaming up with another writer to work on a show that would be a series of monologues about anxiety and depression (but again, this would be tempered with a comedic tone). And the director from this show, Rodney Brazil, and I are thinking of putting together an evening of short 1-act plays from Oklahoma writers. And, my husband and I co-wrote a stage play in 2013 called Alcoholidays that has run three times in Oklahoma City since then. We are currently talking with theaters around the country to get that one on stage in a larger venue. Here's info about that show:

<https://newsok.com/article/5464429/husband-and-wife-team-from-oklahoma-pen-funny-christmas-tale-with-alcoholidays>

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

## Claire Klingenberg on Education and Atheism – President, European Council of Skeptic Organizations

August 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Claire has a background in law and psychology, and is currently working on her degree in Religious Studies. She has been involved in the skeptic movement since 2013 as co-organizer of the Czech Paranormal Challenge. Since then, she has consulted on various projects, where woo & belief meets science. Claire has spoken at multiple science&skepticism conferences and events. She also organized the European Skeptics Congress 2017, and both years of the Czech March for Science.*

*Her current activities include chairing the European Council of Skeptical Organisations, running the “Don’t Be Fooled” project (which provides free critical thinking seminars to interested high schools), contributing to the Czech Religious Studies journal Dingir, as well as to their online news in religion website. In her free time, Claire visits various religious movements to understand better what draws people to certain beliefs.*

*Claire lives in Prague, Czech Republic, with her partner, and dog.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** If I look at Western Europe, it is more secular, non-religious, and gender equal than other parts of the world. Places in other parts of the world tend to be more religious, tend to have the religion in the government – explicitly or implicitly, and tend to be more gender unequal.

**Jacobsen:** What are some basic facts that you can deliver to the Canadian Atheist and non-religious community? That they might not know.

**Claire Klingenberg:** I suspect part of it started during the Enlightenment era, in the 17th and 18th century. Later, the Church lost a lot of its power in the communist times. Of course, the times were horrible. But it weakened the Church, and its influence, as a whole. In the nineties, after the fall of the Soviet regime, people were fed up with any kind of “moral” institutionalism. That is one of the reasons why many countries in Europe are more secular.

At the same time, a division must be made between parts of Europe. The more east you go, the more religious Europe becomes. The center is the most secular part. The reason why, [sighing], has to do with the quality of education. Many central and northern European countries have good, secular, educational systems.

Usually, quality education is related to rationalism and atheism. That would be the answer As for gender equality – it also relates to secularism and democracy. When laws aren’t based on a doctrine saying that women are inferior, there is room to start balancing gender equality.

**Jacobsen:** Do you think these variables connect to one another? The gender equality, the religiosity, the amount of influence of religion on politics, and so on.

**Klingenberg:** I think it boils down to education. As soon as you start giving women the same education and opportunities as men, the more educated the population as a whole becomes, which in turn leads to secular, even atheist thinking. So, absolutely, I think that they are related.

**Jacobsen:** When you look at many other metrics, which you do not need to go into here in full detail, the health of the country is much higher. I think that is also associated with the higher education, the lessening of religiosity, the increase of gender equality, and so on.

**Klingenberg:** Absolutely, as soon as you start caring about women's health, the less you will have women dying, especially for purely feminine medical reasons, e.g. childbirth, ovarian cancer, and various other illnesses and complications.

So, yes, many large religions – traditional religions – are seeing women in a subservient role and somewhat less of a man. These countries or societies are the ones which care less about women's health, and center around controlling women's reproductive systems. There is great contrast in the healthiness of societies as a whole between those with unequal and attempting equal healthcare.

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

# Interview with An Anonymous LGBTQ+ and An Atheist Community Member from Egypt

August 6, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When did you find out about your atheism?**

**Anonymous LGBTQ+ Atheist:** I do not know when I found out that I was an atheist, but I think this started when I was a child. The subject started to gradually grow, especially since I was the only child of my mother. My father had abandoned me when I was a baby, but I was exposed by my mother to domestic violence and punishment with imprisonment at home, and humiliation.

You know how life in Egypt is especially difficult for children. So, I started over time to ask myself why God does not help me get rid of this torment. I was praying to him over and over. I was a lonely, lonely girl with no friends. I was thinking a lot.

So when I became 16-years-old, I started looking for “Why God does not stand beside the weak people like me?” I started looking into the religions. Until I discovered after more than 4 years of research that God is just an illusion. From here, I accepted the idea and felt scared of my mother and my family, who are very religious.

**Jacobsen: How did the family and the community react to it?**

**Anonymous LGBTQ+ Atheist:** Society did not accept the idea of atheism easily, especially (you know) that it is crazy to stand in a street yelling and say, “I’m atheist.” That is impossible in an Islamic country like Egypt. So, I did not do that.

On the contrary, I hid it very strongly, but I was a child when I started to discover the subject I discovered that it was not easy to say about your beliefs. I was 18-years-old when I was associated with a Muslim. He knew that I’m was an atheist.

Then he was chasing me. After we broke up, I was afraid (he was studying in law school). He says that if he does not have a sexual relationship with me; he would tell the police that I’m atheist. The Egyptian government imprisons those who despise religions, even for the ‘crime’ of sarcasm.

I tried to escape a lot. I removed my old Facebook account and created a new account under a different name, but I met Facebook atheists from the Arab world. I spoke with them freely until I found out that I fell into the trap.

There was a friend on Facebook who claims to be an atheist and loves me and wants to marry me. I felt I finally found myself and told him about my beliefs. But I was naive. He took a screenshot from my posts, knew that I was an atheist and bisexual and sent it to my family.

He was a neighbor and tricked me into a fake account. From here, my mother began to suspect me. She even criticized me for fear that I would become a girl who had no religion and burned me over and over again and insisted that I wear the hijab. (By the way, my mother was a hardline religious and Salafist woman. She made me wear the hijab when I was 6-years-old. When I was 18-years-old, I took off my hijab.)

So, the neighbors began to bully me and threatened me. They accused me of being a prostitute. I tried to deny that I was an atheist, but they believed the man who cheated me. He put me in a trap and accused me of wanting to have sex with him.

I have closed my other account on Facebook and opened another new account, but he finds me every time I do not know when this misery will end. He is crazy. I have tried to commit suicide hundreds of times because people talk about my reputation and my honor.

I left my family's home for fear of the threat and now live with my friend in Cairo. Every time, I go to Alexandria. I visit my mother. I feel threatened.

**Jacobsen: What is the general treatment of members of the LGBTQ community in the Middle East? Why is this the case?**

**Anonymous LGBTQ+ Atheist:** Not yet. Religious authority has now tightened its grip on society. I have been suffering and still suffer. My society thinks that women are less than human. They know that I love women more than men, so my mom hates me because of that.

The situation is not capable of being reformed at the moment. Rather, the reform in their view is to put us in mental hospitals or imprison us. It can reach the point of murder. When my government knows anyone from the LGBT community, the State incarcerates them on charges of spreading moral decay, and distorting customs and traditions.

**Jacobsen: How are those LGBTQ members of the community perceived by the communities in which they live?**

**Anonymous LGBTQ+ Atheist:** My country looks at us (LGBT) as a faggot. Our government really try to help us. Do you know how? My government wants to help the LGBTQ community by putting us in a jail. My mom tried to help me through by putting me in a mental hospital. She tried to do a circumcision operation on me.

**Jacobsen: Does religion play a role in this discrimination against members of the LGBTQ community?**

**Anonymous LGBTQ+ Atheist:** Yes, a big role, Egypt is an Islamic country and the Islamic government hates us and can't accept sexual minorities or "Tranny" (trans).

**Jacobsen: What are the communities and resources available for the atheist and LGBTQ members of communities in the Middle East?**

**Anonymous LGBTQ+ Atheist:** The Internet was the only outlet for us to express our ideas and some of the associations that we intended to open. But the new law of organizations and associations closed the ports in our face. Now, in the Middle East, it is difficult to speak freely, even on the Internet because the government is watching you all the time.

If the government does not watch you, it is enough to be under the control of Muslims who report any different or abnormal people.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time.**

## From Nuns to None: #MeToo & #ChurchToo

August 9, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The number of nuns continues its precipitous decline in overall numbers. Also, they have begun to come out, calling out sexual abuse within the church.

Looking at the overall numbers of the numbers of nuns in the province of Quebec, we can monitor decline in the numbers of the faithful women in the monasteries decline over decades from its height.

The history, apparently, runs back about 400 years ago in the history of Quebec. But now, the most devout women in the Roman Catholic world are beginning to decline in numbers and age – as a reflection of religion in general in North America – and wither into the dark.

The height of the Roman Catholic nuns in Quebec, in total or raw numbers, was 47,000 in 1961. Now, the number decreased to fewer than 6,000 with the mean age above 80. This portends poorly for the Christian faith's largest sect or tradition in Quebec.

It amounts to an augury for the future of the country with respect to much religious faith. Something akin to a hollowing out of the faiths; if not in raw numbers, then in the seriousness with which individual believers take their religious faith.

I feel for the sisters in the loss of long-term culture. Not fun for anyone to lose a sense of place and purpose. However, other issues may dwarf this as the sexual misconduct claims continue to pour out of the religious institutions and organizations throughout the country and the world. By implication, many more remain unreported.

The continued decline of the faithful has not been helped by the continual deluge of sexual abuse case settlements. One, recently, amounted to tens of millions of dollars. One nun stopped attendance at a regular confession because of a priest forcing himself on her.

The rape happened when she was "recounting her sins to him in a university classroom nearly 20 years ago." Apparently, this sister was silenced due to the vows of obedience to the hierarchs of the Roman Catholic Church and its attendant orthodoxy in addition to the shame and guilt coming from the rape.

By the reportage, she appeared to remain stuck in one of the first stages of trauma: denial. Ignore it, it did not happen, then everything will be better. It will go away. Now, more have begun to come forward to tell their own narratives of abuse and secrecy from within the Roman Catholic Church, where the abusers are bishops and priests.

The cases continue to emerge not in isolated incidents, countries, or even regions; they exist in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America. The queries may emerge, as they do for me, about the hierarchical structure itself.

The unquestioned power of men who hold the levers, whether in traditional-conservative structures seen in much of the Roman Catholic Church or in liberal-progressive institutions observed in much of the culture of Hollywood.

In terms of sexual violence, the core perpetrators tend to be men in both institutions; women tend to be the main victims. Within the increasing prominence of the anti-sexual violence and justice

movements in social media and elsewhere, the church is having a moment and nuns account for a portion of it.

The sexual violence perpetrated, for example, by the Vatican in the 1990s in Africa was not dealt with or handled – euphemisms in both cases – sufficiently or at all. One of the most prominent individuals who has been charged with sexual misconduct is the sexual abuse and harassment of seminarians by the American Cardinal Theodore McCarrick.

A leading expert of the church sexual abuse and abuse of power history, Karlijn Demasure, stated, “I am so sad that it took so long for this to come into the open, because there were reports long ago... I hope that now actions will be taken to take care of the victims and put an end to this kind of abuse.”

Demasure continued, “They (the priests) can always say ‘she wanted it’... It is also difficult to get rid of the opinion that it is always the woman who seduces the man, and not vice versa.”

The references provide rather extensive coverage on the issues of both a decline in the number of Quebecois nuns, so provincial, and then the sexual abuse #MeToo moment, so international.

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## Interview with Arya Parsipur – Author, *Limu Shirin, The Bitter Story of Life After the Iranian Revolution*

August 13, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your family background in religion?**

**Arya Parispur:** I grew up in a house where my father mocked religion and my mother practiced it in her own way, but neither of them forced their children to go either way and we had much liberty to make our own decisions. In school, however, we were obliged to practice Islam that is to fast during Ramadan, say Islamic prayers and be a hijabi, which I pretended to do to avoid the harsh consequences. It was this balance in my parents' views and also the different lives I lived at school and home that kept my mind open to different aspects of religion. When I left Iran (in my early twenties) and was introduced to secular societies, the concept of God and the matter of his existence became less relevant in my life.

**Jacobsen: How did this influence the personal relationship with religion?**

**Arya Parispur:** My mother was a God believer and always talked about how God (*Khoda* in Persian) has loved and helped her in life and that she loved him back for that. Therefore, as a child, although I chose not to pray to him, I believed in the God my mother believed in, which I was told was never vengeful or mean, unlike the God they described in school. So having that ingrained in me, I separate the concept of God from religion and while I believe religion does to mind what poison does to the body, my opinion about God's existence varies based on how one describes God. If God is an entity that's the source of life and we feel peaceful when we- in our own personal way- connect to that source, then I would say "yes maybe that's God". But if he is like a nosy neighbour who is constantly spying on us with his binoculars and is keeping a tally chart of our deeds that please or upset him, and we have to behave accordingly or else he'll have his nasty revenge, then I say "that's what religion wants you to do and believe, stay away from that poison."

**Jacobsen: In correspondence, you noted the secret lives of Iranians who are atheists. Many come out as atheists and, therefore, others will not but still be atheist. What are some English translations from Persian of their protestations and statements as atheists in a theocratic regime?**

**Arya Parispur:** During my college years in Tehran I was introduced to these underground group gatherings where people discussed their willingness to leave Islam and convert to Zoroastrianism (ancient Persian religion) or Christianity, while some pointed out atheism and complete freedom from any religion. That was where I first heard about atheism. Having lost my direct connection to the young people who currently live in Iran, I can still observe on social media, mostly Twitter, that atheism has developed a lot among the young generation of atheists and ex-Muslims who express their opinions (anonymously). They criticise religion –mainly Islam- and share their journey of how they became atheists. These discussions become of more importance especially now that Iran is in a critical situation- politically, socially and economically- under the rule of religion. The argument is that Iranians are trapped in this situation because Mullahs take advantage of their religious beliefs and rule over them; therefore the only solution to break free



from this chain is to turn away from Mullah, mosque, and Islam altogether. This could come as the hardest blow for a regime whose whole existence is based on religion and Islamic Sharia law.

Over the last 8 months, there have been several street protests in different cities of Iran. The regime's or even Western media have portrayed these unrests as results of economic strain, sanctions, and poverty, whereas people have chanted much more radical slogans during their demonstrations. "Death to dictator" is one of them which is directly referred to Khamenei, the current leader of the regime who is also the highest religious figure in the country. People go to the mosques in their towns and turn their backs to the Imam and shout "turning our backs to the enemy, turning our face to the country" and "our enemy is right here, they lie to us that it's America" right after Khamenei gives a speech and blames the enemy (the United States and Israel) for the troubles in the country. A recent "Mullahs must get lost" slogan has also sparked among the protesters. But the most common and recurring slogan that's been heard from several public places in different cities of Iran has been "Reza Shah, bless your soul". Reza Shah was king of Iran from 1926 to 1941 and is known to have resented the Mullahs and have confined them and their political activities during his reign. Reza Shah is also known for his patriotism and hard work towards the systematic development of the country's economic and societal structure. Reza Shah's grandson, Prince Reza Pahlavi, currently lives in the States and is the strongest and most popular opposition that Iran's regime is facing, therefore chanting Reza Shah's name while Iran is on the verge of overthrowing a theocratic regime, carries a heavy political weight.

**Jacobsen: What have been the historic upheavals within Iran regarding atheists speaking out?**

**Arya Parispur:** We grew up under a regime (the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979) that intertwined politics with religion –Shiism- and caused great suffering for many of us. The spread of atheism in Iran could be a counterattack against that, hence a political move rather than a stand-alone dispute for atheists' civil rights. Apart from that, a certain hatred for Mullahs and representatives of Shiism has grown that reflects in the protesters' slogans (mentioned earlier), and although all of the protesters might not necessarily be atheists, they firmly disapprove of Mullahs and their contribution in running the country. What they're after is a secular democratic system where followers of any religion and atheists can all have their rights.

**Jacobsen: What have been the more recent protests and movements, public and underground?**

**Arya Parispur:** Underground movements in modern terms could be anonymous activities on social media which have extensively increased inside Iran. Anti-regime secular and atheist Iranians have no platform or media outlet to openly express themselves, and major social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Telegram are also banned inside the country. Using VPN apps and different proxies are the only way they can manage to join and speak against the regime and Islam, organize street protests, and share the news of recent uprisings among themselves. There have also been several peaceful strikes by truck drivers and shopkeepers who have planned such activities through word of mouth. What is quite interesting is that none of such uprisings have been ignited or guided by a particular person as the leader. Such movements are merely the manifestation of people's unity in one demand which is the collapse of this malfunctioning theocratic regime.

**Jacobsen:** You wrote *Limu Shirin, The Bitter Story of Life After the Iranian Revolution*. What was the inspiration for the title? What are the main premises in the book? What are the core questions raised and answers given by the end of the text?

**Arya Parispur:** “Limu Shirin” means sweet lemon in Persian, which is a type of lemon that grows in Iran and has a particular bitter sweet taste. I have used that as an analogy of how life was for us who grew up in Iran after the 1979 Revolution that brought the current regime to power. The book tells the memories of a childhood filled with bitter moments of an eight-year long war (in the 80’s between Iran and Iraq) and the grim school days of imposed Islamic ideology. But that childhood also came with a kind of sweetness that children always manage to create in their life. This book speaks for the kids of that generation who had to suffer the consequences of the mistake-the Revolution- that their parents made, but now they’ve risen up against it and are determined on changing this regime and their destiny.

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

# Interview with Shanaaz Gokool – CEO, Dying With Dignity Canada

August 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Shanaaz Gokool is the CEO of Dying With Dignity Canada. Here we talk about her work, role, and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** To begin, so some of the readership knows where you're coming from and how you came to be a leader in the Dying With Dignity Canada movement, what was upbringing like with family background? Was religion in it? Were human rights activists in it? And so on.

**Shanaaz Gokool:** It is interesting that you ask that. So, my background is in human rights activism. I like to tell people that I started my career in Nova Scotia while I was a high school student working on issues around race and inclusion and diversity.

I was part of an organization called The Cultural Awareness Youth Group. It was primarily for black high school students. It started off in Halifax, Dartmouth and went across the province. What is really interesting about that program, is that we did debates, events, conferences.

I was part of the program in the 80s, mid-80s. Most of the students who were part of the program of the time have done some interesting things with their lives. That is when I became aware of issues arounds human rights.

Partly because my parents are from the Caribbean, I was born in Trinidad. My mother is Indian-South Asian descent and Muslim. My father is a mix of South Asian, Black, and Christian. When you grow up in a household like that, there is always a balancing of rights.

Being bi-racial and bi-religious, has shaped how I view the world. What I find helpful now is that my mother is still Muslim, my father passed many years ago, and I am an atheist. But I have a real respect for people who are religious because of my parents.

A lot of the messaging we do at DWDC on around assisted dying, relates to access issues. I am very conscious of people who have a deep faith. I am very conscious that my mother is a Muslim in support of assisted dying.

That you don't have to choose in many instances between faith and assisted dying; quite often, it is the leaders of the groups who are far more vocal and opposed. But when you start looking at who their flock is, generally, you find that they are like the rest of Canada, so they have the same belief systems as the rest of us and the same support or close to the same support levels for assisted dying.

I feel that has been helpful for me in balancing. I know a number of atheists. I know some angry atheists, for good reason [Laughing], right? People have their own stances and experiences and it really shapes how they view the world.

I am not an angry atheist. I respect religion for those who believe because I feel often a little bit of jealousy because I wish I had that comfort [Laughing]. I don't have *that*. If you are an atheist and don't have children, the future is grim.

There is no afterlife for you to go to. You don't have children who will carry on your hopes. For me, that just means you do the best you can with what you've got because this is what you've got. I don't know if that is more information than what you needed to know [Laughing].

**Jacobsen: It reminds of when I talked to Lawrence Hill who authored *The Book of Negroes*. He noted in his own upbringing. His own father and mother were in an interracial marriage, but they were both atheists.**

**When I reflect on your own personal narrative, your own parents – father being Christian and mother being Muslim, but then being biracial too. It is an added dynamic because it is not a political belief.**

**It is a comprehensive worldview belief with a host of suggested practices that take, for the most part, up an entire person's life. So, it is an interesting dynamic for someone growing up.**

**Gokool:** Even my parents getting married in the Caribbean, when it was a thing, I tease my mother about it. My dad was Anglican. It was decided by both parents at some point when I was a little girl with three other siblings that we have to have some form of religious education.

They thought this was an important thing. They decided on a mosque. There was only one in Halifax, but they found it was too political. My father found a Pentecostal Church. The only reason we went to that every Sunday and Sunday school was because they sent a bus and then he didn't have to drive [Laughing].

**Jacobsen: [Laughing].**

**Gokool:** There were enough reasons with the understanding of the bases of Western democracy and Christian that he wasn't too choosy about which branch of Christianity. It was just really funny. I went to church, but the church had a bus and so I went because of the bus.

If you go to a Baptist Church in Nova Scotia, a black Baptist Church; those are fun. It is a different kind of experience. I don't go to church here, but I did not some research projects in the black community as a teenager. One Summer, I went to church at North Preston almost every Sunday. It was fun. It was very lively.

**Jacobsen: This continued into your undergraduate education. You did political science, human rights, and equity studies.**

**Gokool:** Yes, at York University, I went back to school as a mature student. I went back twice in the 90s and then 2009/10 to do the degree in human rights and equity studies. By then, I had left the private sector in 2006 and wanted to transition to the not-for-profit sector.

When I came to Toronto, a lot of the activism that I did fell to the wayside as I tried to find my way and struggled. So, in 2006, I left the private sector and discovered through a series of informational interviews a bunch of health-related and disease-related organizations, specifically, and social justice interviews.

I used to know about Amnesty International because my dad would take me to these conferences when I was a little girl. There was always someone there signing these petitions. It was kind of funny in a way when I started working for Amnesty for a few years, about 5 in total while I was still in school.

I think that in that work in particular- I have also worked for Lead Now for a while- shaped my human rights lens. It is the most obvious sort of pieces that I have brought to Dying With Dignity Canada.

We updated our objects of incorporation to reflect human rights work. That the work that we do on assisted dying, whether we're talking about the eligibility criteria or the access issues that affect people all across the country.

That we look at that through a human rights lens. I feel that that experience with Amnesty prepared for my current work and to discuss this issue as a human rights issues. That feel that that is a contribution that we have made over the past few years.

Every now and then, I will see an article. In Australia, they just passed legislation. I read an article that said 'finally a human right that I can get behind' in reference to assisted dying. I was like "Where did they get that language from?"

In other jurisdictions where they have assisted dying, they tend not to frame it that way. But I cannot imagine framing it any other way. I think that is the role of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* has played in the legalization of assisted dying in this country.

The *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is a document about balancing the fundamental rights of Canadians and those rights are human rights. It all fit naturally for the organization. We transitioned quite easily into a human rights organization.

It is nice to see other jurisdictions to use the language that we use here in Canada. I think, "That is exactly how we should look at this." It is about the autonomy of the body and the ability to make choices for yourself, as your own person – in your own personal medical circumstances.

That is something that I think has been interesting and fascinating and is great to see so many other Canadians identifying with this issue that way as well.

**Jacobsen: At the start of the interview, we mentioned the early work as a human rights activist. You recently mentioned the "human rights lens." I note two points of contact or more properly conflict with human rights lens of a secular international human rights lens on the one side and the transcendental moral law lens on the other.**

**From the outside, as a non-expert, view, I note those as two points of conflict inside the country and outside of it when it comes to physician-assisted suicide or the dying with dignity movement.**

**Gokool:** Yes, there is a natural conflict. I think that it is really problematic when we look at certain contexts, whether religious or political or otherwise, and don't apply them to the context of the day.

I don't actually see a conflict. Maybe, it is because I think there is a conflict with certain people, with certain backgrounds and views. Sometimes, opposition to assisted dying: is it always religious? For some, it is moral. Maybe, the sense of morality has religious roots. It can be a little bit more nuanced than that.

When I look at my own other and I look at people of faith that I know who still support assisted dying, and who still support of people in the queer community to have access to healthcare that they need, and the rights of women around reproductive rights, I think that there is enough evidence.

When I say “evidence,” 85% of Canadians support assisted dying. Many of those people self-identify as having some sort of faith. I don’t know the overall numbers in Canada of people who support that identify with a particular faith.

But I think for most people that there isn’t a conflict, but for the leaders of those organizations; they’ve created a conflict. It is an unnecessary one. It is one that can result in very coercive behaviours when it comes to people who suffering.

I don’t know why. I don’t know if it is that there are just a few areas of authority that some religious groups want to cling to. But I will tell you why the support is so high in Canada and in other places.

We have done some polling, where I think it is 78% of people who identify as Roman Catholic support assisted dying. It is the one human right with so much support. It is a rare human right in this way. I worked on the death penalty and polling on abortion. I worked on other campaigns against the Guantanamo Bay prison detention facilities. When you see public polling on these issues, you do not see 85% against the death penalty for instance. You don’t see it that high. In Canada, though, you do see high support for assisted dying.

My response to that many people don’t know people in prison or on death row in another part of the world. You may not know or have a mother, sister, or friend, you yourself may not have had any example of asserting your human rights.

You may not know someone who is transitioning. Yet, the one thing we know that comes for everyone [Laughing] is death. I think that’s why you have this disconnect between the majority supporting assisted dying and the small minority who doesn’t.

Death is like the great equalizer in some ways. It is going to come for us all. We haven’t found a clever way to outsmart it. Technology and medicine have done that in some ways. But at the end of the day, everyone dies.

At the end of the day, everyone experiences it. If you have been alive, you will *die*.

**Jacobsen: [Laughing].**

**Gokool:** I think that when you look at your own personal circumstances. Some people think, “It isn’t going to happen.” But you don’t until you’re in those circumstances or a loved one is in those circumstances. You really don’t know. I tell people all of the time, “I don’t want to have an assisted death. Are you nuts?! I don’t want to be in the position of intolerable suffering where that is my option out.” However, I am relieved that it is there as a choice for me.

In that position, I am relieved for everyone since I am able to access an assisted death. But personally, I don’t want to have intolerable suffering. Thank you very much [Laughing]. Often, I don’t find that funny. But I work and campaign on this and am passionate, but I don’t want to be in that position. I think that’s how most people feel. Who wants the suffering in their life? That is where the comfort comes in.

You know that if you are in that position or have a loved one in that position, then there is a better option. That is why assisted dying is so meaningful.

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

# Canadian License Plate Etiquette

August 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Some license plates in Canada remain more offensive than others, in Alberta in particular. In 1985, personalized license plates were introduced for public creation and consumption. 80,000 have been issued.

The license plates are not permitted to reference or ridicule on a number of identifiable groupings within the province. The reportage states, “any race, religion, gender or sexual orientation, employ foul or derogatory language, have sexual connotations or use political slurs.”

Some are entitled WTF LOL, BYT3ME, B00GRR, TRUMP45, MR OCD, CHRDNAY, BEY0TCH, MUHFUGG, GR84PLA, PINAS, and the last image from the article: GRABHER. Each of various levels of offence depending on the Albertan.

These are forms of license plates are entitled Vanity Plates – self-explanatory. Service Alberta set about 7 categories of offense for the license plates. Some of the others included CARRY22, SATIVA, INDICA, KRAK, SN0RTER and LSDINGO.

One business support specialist for the Alberta Motor Association, Brian Salter, described clever word tricks and plays on words can help pass a license plate. However, they must comply within the boundaries and borders set by the 7 categories of “technical and moral standards.”

Any professional titles or indications including MLA or MD are strictly forbidden, even if a qualified general practitioner or orthopedic surgeon. Also, apparently, manners and a smile can help in the registration of a questionable automobile vanity plate.

Salter continued, “Registry agents are the first line of defence... Our responsibility is to screen anything that comes in for a request, but every personalized plate request is reviewed by a motor vehicle specialist at Service Alberta.”

Now, noting the final plate listed as GRABHER, this looks as if a deliberate political message in light of comments about personal behaviour around and to women by the President of the United States.

However, the man who wanted the personalized plate was Troy Grabher. He wanted to have the family name on the car as a license plate. Troy is in the middle of a court battle over it, now.

His father, Lorne Grabher, had the same license plate title revoked, in Nova Scotia, in 2016 based on a complaint: a “socially unacceptable slogan” rather than the last name of a family with Austrian-German heritage.

Apparently, the license plate has been the subject of international news with the exhausting associated exhausting court battle.

Troy Grabher opined, “It was all over the news, and we were just flabbergasted. Like, how could this even happen? I think it’s pathetic that’s it come to this... I’m always worried about it. I mean, I have a sticker on the back of my car saying that it’s my last name so people are aware of it.”

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# Sexual Education in Ontario: Canadian Civil Liberties Association Lawsuit

August 29, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Some accomplishments in life deserve applause, approval, and accolades. However, accomplishment can seem ambiguous in the evaluation of the relative success of a purported achievement.

Indeed, the updates – or, maybe, ‘down-dates’ or ‘back-dates’ – for the sexual education curriculum for Ontario students are underway. It brings the notion of a good education and a bad education into the forefront of the public discourse, where it can show in the words and the actions of the general population and, most importantly, the educators.

International and national documents speak to the right of children to have their best interests in mind, where the parents, the educational system, the community, and the governments bear the responsibility to enact the best interests of the children by implication. Rights exist for everyone, not some – or in part for some and all for others.[1]

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association decided to sue the Government of Ontario based on discriminatory changes to the sexual education curriculum – or ‘sex ed’ curriculum – in Ontario (Gollom, 2018).

This suggests human rights, the best interests of the child, and the right to education for children. One core document in international children’s rights remains the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (OHCHR, 1989).

Article 3(1) of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* states the best interests of the child should be – so a moral stipulation – the primary consideration in all actions (OHCHR, 1989).[2]

Article 28 of the *Convention* remarks, in part, on the fundamental recognition of the right to education for children (Ibid.). Furthermore, Article 29 of the *Convention* speaks to the goals of education with the inclusion of respect for others, human rights, and their own and others’ culture (Ibid.).[3]

One may reflect on the human rights of, and intrinsic respect for, the sexual orientation and gender identity minorities within the province of Ontario educational curriculum through potential non-inclusion or minimization of existence.

If an advanced industrial economy, constitutional monarchy, and democracy retains the ability to provide a fuller education or give better educational provisions via the sexual education curriculum, and if the same nation does not, does this, in part, deny the full implementation of the right to education for children as per Article 28 of the *Convention*? Also, does this violate the best interests of the child as per Article 3(1)?

Elected in 2018, Premier Doug Ford (Progressive Conservative government for Ontario) announced the retraction of the newer sexual education curriculum constructed and implemented by the previous government in Ontario led by Kathleen Wynne.

Teachers may risk punishment through non-compliance with the implementation of the old sexual education curriculum from almost two decades ago, in Ontario. This old curriculum will be an “interim curriculum” (Gollom, 2018).

Now, the Ontario government is creating a website for parents to complain or express concerns over what kids may hear in class. Does the reportage of parents, possibly *en masse*, in Ontario public schools work to build the needed bonds of trust and solidarity between teachers, parents, and government for the best interests of the child or not?

Does the potential public humiliation and intimidation of conscientious objector status teachers improve the morale of educators in Ontario or not? What might be the long-term impact on teacher-government relations into the future because of it?

Michael Bryant, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association Executive Director, opined, “[The government’s actions are a] ham-fisted dog-whistle of bigotry, of homophobia, dressed up as a consultation fix... We are calling it out and taking it to court” (Ibid.).

Some judge the decisions of Premier Doug Ford as discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community and a “lesson in homophobia” (Bigham, 2018). Others see this as the placement of parents’ rights first (Salutin, 2018).

Others, with proper authority, including Education Minister Lisa Thompson has or, have been unavailable for comment for prominent news organizations such as the *CBC* (CBC, 2018a). Still others, they opine on the level of knowledge children have about sex, i.e., a lot (Thomas, 2018).

Some may direct attention to the recent furor over the right to free speech – with international movements, dialogues, debates and lecture circuit attendees riding the wind of it, and making good money off it – in some of the culture, which, of course, remains a misnomer – ‘free speech’ – when they mean the right to freedom of expression (Government of Canada, 1982; UN, 1948).[4] As an aside, in actuality, a minor phenomenon worth little attention.

However, the argument from *Vice News* is the hypocrisy in the argument for free speech while also the prevention of educators to teach kids about consent by the government (Csanady, 2018). Take, for example, the inclusion of the term “transgender” only with a single appearance now, too (Ibid.). These limit the ability of educators to properly and fully teach the young.

Does this transgender or trans example relate to the minimization of the marginal – often suicidal due to more bullying, misunderstanding, and prejudice – in this country through the educational system regression mentioned earlier and in-progress now (PREVnet, 2018)?[5] Bullying remains a human rights violation as well (Ibid.; PREVnet, n.d.).[6]

The updated sex education curriculum emerged in 2015, as a revision and expansion of the 1998 sexual education curriculum in Ontario schools for children. In the electronic era, this included the information about gender identity, online bullying, and sexting. Something not foreseeable by most in the 1990s.

Social conservatives remain the main opponents to the 2015 educational curriculum coverage on gender identity, masturbation, and same-sex relationships.

With the call to appeal to the social conservative base of Premier Ford, several teachers’ unions and “thousands of parents and the Official Opposition have criticized the government’s decision to scrap the modernized sex ed curriculum” (Gollom, 2018).

One daughter could be marginalized in the light of the sexual education curriculum reversion to 1998 from 2015. Bryant uses the lawsuit from the family of the daughter who may face marginalization from within the school if the complete regression to the 1990s happens in the sexual education of Ontario youth.

The daughter is 10-years-old with a protected identity. The mother, Becky McFarlane, is queer. Bryant argues the interim curriculum leaves important information out of the sexual education information needed by students now.

Bryant stated, “They’ve taken out content in a way that discriminates against this family on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity” (Gollom, 2018). A Chernos Flaherty Svonkin LLP lawyer, Stuart Svonkin, is working with the Canadian Civil Liberties Association from three main targeted arguments:

*The government’s decision is not consistent with Ontario’s Education Act, which requires the province to provide inclusive school environments.*

*The decision is inconsistent with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms — specifically, the equality of rights and security of the person.*

*The decision violates the Ontario Human Rights Code. (Ibid.)*

Many human rights lawyers are working on challenges to the decision of the government of Premier Ford, on behalf of six other families. The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) asked teachers to ignore the call by the Government of Ontario (Newport, 2018a). This created the foundation upon which the government based the “snitch-line” for parents about dissenting teachers (Newport, 2018b).

Windsor, Ontario LGBTQ+ leaders remain unhappy with the decision of the provincial government (Georgieva, 2018). The head of the largest school board in Ontario attempted to console and cajole the teachers about several important topics remaining within the interim sexual education curriculum (The Canadian Press, 2018). While at the same time, John Malloy, stated the interim curriculum still leaves things out now (Ibid.).

However, this has been frustrating several teachers on-the-ground (CBC, 2018b). Important to note, and as far as I can tell, Premier Ford and Minister Thompson have not taken questions – not simply for the CBC but any media outlet.

The Toronto District School Board chair, Robin Pilkey, described how the interim curriculum does not address the permissions and restrictions on educators of what can and cannot be taught to the youth.

As reported by *The Canadian Press* (2018), “She says board staff are currently combing through the new document and the now-repealed modernized version to figure out how they differ — but notes the province had months to provide that information.”

Does this disrespect the time and profession of teachers in Ontario? By implication, through insufficient time to prepare educational materials for students, does this harm students with improper and incomplete education?

The Government of Ontario declared a consultation process for the sexual education curriculum without an explicit statement as to the costs of it (Gollom, 2018). Throughout the consultation,

high school students will learn the modernized, 2015, curriculum while Grades 1-8 will learn the interim curriculum in Ontario.

“My understanding is it’s not going to include concepts like consent, that it’s not going to address issues like cyberbullying and that leaves our kids at risk,” Andrea Horwath, the NDP leader, stated, “For the purposes of satisfying backroom deals that Mr. Ford made when he was running for the leadership with the radical social conservatives in his party, he’s continuing to put our children at risk.”

As asked throughout, does this violate the best interests of the children in Ontario?

Does this, in part, deny the right to education of the children in Ontario?

Does the calling out of teachers humiliate them and not empower them?

Does this ‘snitch’ program degrade government-parent-teacher relations over the long-term?

Does the insufficient time given to teachers disrespect the time and profession of the educators?

By implication, through not enough time to prepare the curriculum for students, does this harm students with improper and incomplete, and hastily put together, educational resources?

If an affirmative response to some, most, or all of these, then those – as per statements at the outset – are accomplishments, of a sort, Premier Ford can count on the record with little in the way of “applause, approval, and accolades,” but, rather, the opposite on a number of fronts.

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#### Footnote

[1] If one argues for one right for oneself, e.g. freedom of religion, and against one right for another, e.g., reproductive health rights, then one denies the universality of human rights in principle and, in turn, the basic premise of human rights as something for all people through implementation of all rights – never perfect but in the fundamental ethical precept implied through the universality of human rights. Important to note, when one speaks of human rights and the international community, the purpose of the reiteration of the stipulations not only amounts to personal or group opinion in the moment about the particulars of an issue impinging on the human rights concerns of members of a society but also on the fundamental basis of stating the international rights agreed upon and signed through international rights documents, including the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). Not simply a single person or group touting an opinion, rather, the consensus and agreements, and stipulations, of the international community, of which the single person or group agrees on – the rights of persons.

[2] Article 3 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* states in full:

*1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.*

*2. States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures.*

*3. States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision.*

OHCHR. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.

[3] Article 29 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* states in full:

*1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:*

*(a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;*

*(b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;*

*(c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;*

*(d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;*

*(e) The development of respect for the natural environment.*

*2. No part of the present article or article 28 shall be construed so as to interfere with the liberty of individuals and bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, subject always to the observance of the principle set forth in paragraph 1 of the present article and to the requirements that the education given in such institutions shall conform to such minimum standards as may be laid down by the State.*

OHCHR. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.

[4] Part I(2) in subsection b of the *Constitution Act, 1982: Charter of Rights and Freedoms* states:

*...freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;*

Government of Canada. (1982). Constitution Act, 1982: Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Retrieved from <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/Const/page-15.html>.

Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states in full:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*

UN. (1948, December 10). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.

[5] PREVnet (2018) *LGBTQ Youth* states:

*All Youth Deserve To Feel Safe. Bullying Is A Human Rights Violation.*

*Questioning or accepting one's sexual orientation can be a difficult process for teens, especially when coupled with the other stresses of adolescence. Approximately 4% of teens identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning (LGBTQ). These kids are more likely to be victims of bullying, sexual harassment and physical abuse and face a greater risk of social isolation.*

*The bullying experienced by LGBTQ youth is similar to other types of bullying in adolescence, but it is particularly hurtful because these kids are keenly aware of society's heterosexual bias.*

PREVnet. (2018). LGBTQ Youth. Retrieved from <https://www.prevnet.ca/bullying/parents/parents-of-lgbtq-youth>.

[6] *Bullying: A Human Rights Issue* (n.d.) states:

**When children are victimized, whether the perpetrator is an adult or a peer, their rights are being violated. Every human deserves and is entitled to respect and protection from discrimination and harassment. As a vulnerable population within society, children are at an increased risk for victimization and depend on adults to protect them and advocate for their human rights.**

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## Interview with an Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator

August 29, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*This is an anonymous – safety remains a concern and a fresh issue for this individual – interview with an Egyptian author, atheist, freethinker, and translator. Here we talk about Egypt, atheism, freethinking, and their story and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** As an Egyptian, what was early life like for you?

**Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator:** I'm happy to make this conversation with you, first. Every Arabian and Egyptian family differs from each other. In my personal experiment, I had a violent abusive fundamental father, semi-extremist and traditional.

I lived some of my early years within the Egyptian ingathering in Qatar in the area of Persian/Arabian Gulf, the extreme violence was the usual and standard thing in the school and homes, so in my experience, to live your childhood with Islamic traditional fundamentalists isn't a good thing, it's the real hell, you can say.

**Jacobsen:** When did you become a freethinker or an atheist?

**Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator:** It happened when I was 21-years-old, in 2006, it's a lovely sweet memory, even though what I suffered for that.

**Jacobsen:** What were the reasons for leaving the faith and becoming an atheist as opposed to, for example, switching to another faith?

**Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator:** Atheism (materialism, rationalism) differs from all religions, by its refusing to believe unproved unseen unscientific things, so while it may be considered a belief, it's not a religion.

When I studied the religions in free reading and studying, I found faults in all of them, they have bad horrible unjust and un-rational laws, scientific errors in their texts, discrimination against women and other religions followers, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism are the worst religions in the world in my opinion, the Christian gospels (without the Tanach or the Old Testament) and the teaching of Buddha and his monks are not that bad, but they have contradictions, historical errors, scientific errors in their texts, and some totalism in their legendary unhumanistic values and morals.

When I study Quran, Hadiths, and the books of Muhammed's biography, I found that the laws of Islam are unjust barbaric brute primitive thing, with many legal faults, and that life of Muhammed and deeds are a bad terrorist example, most of Islam ideas and teachings are corrupted, they distort the minds and morality, and Old Testament and some parts of Talmud are as bad as the Islamic holy texts.

On the other hand, sciences have real answers nowadays about our questions about the existence of the universe and living organisms. One of the many problems in Islam world that in most of it they prevent some kind of real science books like books on evolution fact and other things, the



lay public average people in the middle east hate the sciences by nature, they consider them an evil infidel thing!

I believe also in secular liberal (maybe we can say: Western) ethics, actually I don't consider many of those who call themselves Arabian atheists as real atheists, because they keep the Islamic fundamental backward eastern values.

**Jacobsen: Have you received death threats?**

**Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator:** Yes, in the past I work on a bookshop in the street, the mate or co-worker with me tried to push me on a fast car because I said to him that to be praying or not is not business. I got in the first year of my choosing of atheism many threats and harassment from all my family and relatives.

**Jacobsen: How have the Egyptian authorities treated you?**

**Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator:** I didn't, fortunately, deal with them, I avoided that, I don't like to deal with fundamental tyrant stupid people, but I must refer that I tried in the age of Hosni Mubarak to call the secular minister of culture "Farouk Hosni" by his own number, which I got from a famous journalist, the secretary was the one who answers.

I made the call from the public phone, in the next time when I used another public phone to arrange a meeting with high educated Egyptian genetic who was a professor in the college of agriculture and an activist in human rights field.

They tried to arrest us by gathering tens of security men in the metro station which we were intending to meet in it and the go out, I just by luck reached one hour earlier and saw them, one of them describe to another what I was dressing and the bag color which I was carrying! Fortunately, they didn't suspect me because they were waiting for me after an hour later to come!

So you must be careful in a country like Egypt, and keep your head little down with the public, because you could end in prison like tens or hundreds of people, like Islam Al-Buhairy, Shareef Gaber, ala'a hamed author of "distance in a man's mind" novel, and all the others.

**Jacobsen: Does your atheism impact family and professional life? If so, how?**

**Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator:** Yeah, since 2011, when I chose to be a freethinker (an atheist) I got many troubles and persecutions, First I lost all relations with my family and relatives as an openly atheist and as an atheist writer and activist, I received threats by killing and by reporting the state security which is a fundamentally religious institution in Egypt.

I got homeless for days and searched for some mean job without getting my degree in those days (which I complete later) until now I have dead relations with all of my relatives, Egypt has one of the most fundamental extremist religious ignorant people.

I got fired from some jobs occasionally If I have not been careful enough to keep my ideas in discrete, for example, I got fired in 2009 from al-malky creamery and sweets and got insults and threats and they didn't give me my due salary for expressing some of my lightest ideas with another worker out the hours and place of the shop!

In 2018 I got troubles and fired from Al-Teegy sons tannery as a warehouseman for the same reason: expressing my ideas with a friend out of the hours of work!

Between the two jobs I got troubles and fired from other jobs, a strange example when I was in a place to secure it, and the house of the security men, which is far, far away from the place of work, was stolen, the employer tried with stupidity to accuse although of the absence proof, just because he thought atheist means a person without morals and honor!

Actually I was learned very well not to talk in public to lay people, people without real culture, I should say I'm half-hiding and I don't make any videos for the simple lay people to avoid danger like going to jail, stealing my money and things like my laptop by religious corrupted policemen, getting hit or even killed in the jail.

**Jacobsen: What happened to your books? Did they get prevented from being published?**

**Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator:** Some of my books, actually the majority of them, I wouldn't dream to publish them openly in Egypt and the Arabian area! I called about my own books in criticism of Islam, (Also of Christianity, and Judaism).

The same applies to my translations of freethought Atheist books, I just tried to publish my translation of some scientific books about evolution and history of life, all the Arabian publishers I contacted with them refuse them because they are very clear and would get attention of the fundamentalists, some of the publishing houses owners refuse them because they are themselves fundamentalists, these books any peoples who want to get rid of primitive legends and terrorism would support their publishing.

**Jacobsen: What were the books? What did you write on?**

**Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator:** A Grave assigned for Islam, an encyclopedia of criticism.

Some of my books (which I added to the encyclopedia but were older than it) like "Origins of Islam Beliefs & Legends from New Testament Apocrypha and Heresies in Jesus, Anti Christ, Ascension of Mohammad, and Some Eschatology: Day of Judgment, Hell, and Paradise" and "Origins of Islam legends and beliefs from Jewish Haggadah and Old Testament Apocrypha" were used by professor Dr. Sami Awad Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh in his critical edition of Quran

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sami\\_Aldeeb](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sami_Aldeeb)

I still have my tragedies as a freethinker and writer. My books are prevented from publishing, they reached to 57 books by me or translated by me! That sounds like the legendary Quranic Noah! 45 of them form an encyclopedia in criticism of Islam. I must say people and government do not care very much of academic writers, because most of the people do not read any books from principle.

So, I put them on some blog for educated people, But I have my human right to publish my books openly to get some good readers, make videos for lay ignorant people without going to prison or get killed. I need support by publishing or traveling to complete my other projects to translate many books on evolution and on Atheism and Secularism, and another project in criticism of 12 shia criticism, which I can't do without a supporting press or foundation.

**Jacobsen: What are some of the books that you have been translating?**

**Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator:** I translated these books into our classic Arabic formal language:

*Why Evolution is True*, Jerry A. Coyne

*History of Life*, Richard Cowen (1991)

*The Greatest Show on Earth – The Evidence for Evolution*, Richard Dawkins

*Ancestors in Our Genome- The New Science of Human Evolution*, Eugene E. Harris

*Atheism, A Philosophical Justification*, Michael Martin

*Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, Erik J. Wielenberg

*What Are You Without God?: How to Discredit Religious Thought and Rebuild Your Identity*, Christopher Krzeminski

Sana's palimpsest has differences (variants) with current Othmanic Quran (translation from English books)

I still want to translate many other books on topics of atheism, history of atheism or freethought, and on secular ethics, also other sex modern new books on the evolution of human and on his behavior and its origins in Apes family.

**Jacobsen: Why did you select these books for translation?**

**Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator:** I choose the books that the Egyptian and Arabian people of profitable culture wouldn't translate them, so they don't exist in the book markets.

I choose to adopt a project to enlighten some of the ignorant Arabian humans, whom the Islam and other religions clergymen with the governments from centuries cloud them with a dark cloud of ignorance and backward primitivism. This is a noble mission I picked up, not only me adopt it.

**Jacobsen: How can external individuals with influence or organizations help dissenters and non-believers in Egypt?**

**Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator:** Unfortunately, you would hear about 2 cases got famous in 300 cases, let's say or guess.

The role of the western world, with its civil organizations and governments are to support every prisoner or persecuted person in this plagued area, by pressing on the governments to free the oppressed peoples, they may need also to offer refuge and support to some of them in their countries.

They are not that much in number, especially supporting and helping the real atheist freethinkers. With some time passing, they may make all the difference for the Middle East, as their counterparts made before for the Western world.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, and stay safe.**

# Updates on Ex-Muslims in France and Elsewhere

August 31, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Waleed Al-Husseini founded the Council of Ex-Muslims of France. He escaped from the Palestinian Authority to Jordan and then to France, after torture and imprisonment in Palestine. He is an ex-Muslim and an atheist. Here is an update on the Council of Ex-Muslims in France and ex-Muslims, in brief.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What happened in the summer 2018 season for the non-religious?**

**Waleed Al-Husseini:** This summer was calm a bit.

We have some of the summer meetings here in France to welcome the new members and introduce them for the others, and following some issues of ex-Muslims who had some of the justice issues like Sharif Gaber in Egypt and then there were some problems in Jordan.

The greatest sadness: we lost one great fighter and writer. His name is Walid Al-Qubisi.

He is organizing from Iraq, but lives in Norway and in the 1980s got shot by Islamists in Oslo. He spent months in the hospital, then he left it.

This summer, we lost him. It was really sad even for me because he was one of the 1st fighters of political Islam in Europe.

**Jacobsen: How were things for the ex-Muslim community in France – safer, more people?**

**Al-Husseini:** We have some new members that's why we made summer meetings, and they joined us and we talked about the dangers for us and described to them how things are and our activities.

For the security things, we got many threats through the internet after big discussions about hijab and child marriage, and some of our Twitter accounts got removed!

**Jacobsen: As an internationalist independent journalist, when I get a story of an ex-religious person or a sexual minority individual, I cannot solve the problem, but I can bring light to their plight – simply hear and feel their horrible narrative as they tell it.**

**What does telling the stories, simply being heard by someone else, do for the ex-Muslims or the LGBTQ+ community in solidarity if anything?**

**Al-Husseini:** For the stories and testimony, it's really important to show for some who think about Islam that he or she is not alone, there are others who had questions. One, through this, he left Islam. These types of testimony also say that we are the voices of the many.

It helps to show for others that ex-Muslims exist. They have to fight one of the hardest fights in the world as the globe becomes more and more fundamentalist in orientation.

Ex-Muslims are the solution for making Islam less fundamentalist, and because of all these stories and the critiques and debates on Islam now in the open.

Because of these things, we have some people now talking about modern Islam or trying to moderate Islam. All these things because of ex-Muslims!

**Jacobsen:** Have there been some new ex-Muslim voices people should keep an eye on for their poignant analysis of the realities of the ex-Muslim community (global community)?

**Al-Husseini:** Yes, sure, Sharif Gaber, the YouTuber Egyptian, who faces justice now. Hamed Abdel-Samad with his show *Box of Islam* – and also his books, and the other ex-Muslims like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Ibn Waraq, in the Arabic world like Said Alqumi, for other groups like Atheist Arab Magazine. It's really a good one.

Also, some Arabic sites exist on the internet and blogs too.

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

# Sophisticated Ignorance in Canadian Media: An Addendum on a Joke

September 2, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Last year, I wrote an article entitled *Payette: It's a Joke, Folks* (2017). The commentary emerged from the ashes of the fire burned by some of the most prominent journalists and social commentators in the country, who reflect the nature of the Computer Age with the proliferation of social media: find a refined sugar story, burn the high-octane fuel, and then move onto the next intellectually diabetes-inducing story.

These seemingly deliberately inflammatory reportages openly disregard the public good and distract from real issues. It seems like a disservice to the public and a dereliction of journalistic duty to me.

Governor General of Canada, the Hon. Julie Payette, commented on factual-theoretic issues outside, but not within, the scientific community but inside “learned society,” (of course, some overlap between the communities) e.g., the realities of climate change or global warming and its mostly human inducement – through industrial activity – based on measurements of the warming rate relative to historical epochs, unguided evolution by natural selection, ineffectual alternative medicine in contrast to modern mainstream medicine, and horoscopes (Ibid.; CBC News, 2018).[1]

I respect the freedom to (and from) religion. However, if the claims amount to statements of consensus within the relevant scientific communities on fundamental science by Payette, and if no mention of religion by her, and if a select set of groups or individuals within Canadian society view this as an attack on religion, then this seems to direct attention to the truth.

The particular denominations, sects, or traditions of religion stand at odds with modern science: reiterations about the facts or major empirically supported scientific theories become affronts to the beliefs within these particular faith communities. Because the mere mention contradicts the implicit tenets or factual assertions of the sect of faith.

These branches of faith become anti-science or non-scientific, not a religion or religion as a whole, while the scientific theories remain empirically substantiated and accepted by the experts in the mainstream of the relevant disciplines.

Even in the recent CBC News article, the title states “religion,” Gov. Gen. Julie Payette on what she learned from her controversial comments on science, religion and climate (2018). Not true – false assumption or premise, Payette spoke on science and climate in the tone of a joke.

Look at the video, zero mention of religion. These repetitions continue to poison the news reportage one year down the road, as shown in the title of the August 30 *CBC News* publication.

That is, the “disservice to the public and... dereliction of journalistic duty” comes in the potential, and this case actual, long-term damage to the accuracy of the public discourse from a fabricated or manufactured controversy.

These faux controversies obfuscate real science education to the public, distract from important and substantive concerns of the public, and mischaracterize the statement of a former astronaut and the Governor General of Canada for defamation.

Thus, the problem lies not in the science, the public at large, or religion in general, but, rather, the brand of religion in some of the society and held by some individuals within it – and then appeased to through some journalists and social commentators and a conservative leader utilizing mendacious hyperbole, and unwitting or deliberate lies.

As a former astronaut, the direct, assertive, and knowledgeable statements about science remain non-controversial to the community there. It is the culture. They have great science educations and scientific theories do not create controversy when stated in an assertive tone.

To, unfortunately, some of a less educated general public on the matters of science with adherence to a particular branch of religion or spirituality, these can seem as if controversial statements, at least based on some of the journalists' publications and statements from some leaders.

In various slices of the pie of blame, it lies with the individual citizens, the media – including journalists such as myself, and the education system and, apparently, some sub-sectors of the religious and spiritualist communities, unfortunately.

To make the point further explicit – if you will indulge, please, let's take a hypothetical example through a claim – apart from climate change, evolution, alternative medicine, and horoscopes: “the Earth orbits the Sun.” For most, a non-controversial statement and an empirical claim.

Imagine, a conservative leader, major journalists and social commentators, the founder of a media platform, and others claim the fundamental concern with the statement is an attack on religion, in part or whole, without regard as to whether the claim includes critiques of religion or not, or if the term “religion” is used or not.

Then this makes national news with near-universal repetition of the false claim about the messenger (Payette). This happened last year, exactly that; then the misrepresentation continues one year onward, too, as per the *CBC News* title – probably not even a conscious mistake.

In the final note of the article, after almost one year, Payette explained a lesson. However, the educational experience seems to come from whipped hysteria around a video clip.

She opined, “I learned that you have to be careful about how you say things, but not what you say... I'm still convinced that — I'm sorry to say — the body of evidence shows that the planet is warming up. And it's warming up at a certain rate that has never been seen before in the history of the planet. We have to take that seriously” (Ibid.).

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#### Footnotes

[1] *Payette: It's a Joke, Folks* (2017), in part, states:

*Payette targeted evolution, climate change, horoscopes, and alternative medicine in the speech. Some quotes, on climate change from human activity:*

Can you believe that still today in learned society, in houses of government, unfortunately, we're still debating and still questioning whether humans have a role in the

Earth warming up or whether even the Earth is warming up, period? (Persian Mirror, 2017)

*On evolution by natural selection, unguided:*

And we are still debating and still questioning whether life was a divine intervention or whether it was coming out of a natural process let alone, oh my goodness, a random process. (Ibid.)

*On alternative medicines:*

And so many people — I'm sure you know many of them — still believe, want to believe, that maybe taking a sugar pill will cure cancer, if you will it! (Ibid.)

*On horoscopes:*

And every single one of the people here's personalities can be determined by looking at planets coming in front of invented constellations. (Ibid.)

Jacobsen, S.D. (November 5, 2017). Payette: It's a Joke, Folks. Retrieved from <https://www.canadianatheist.com/2017/11/payette/>.

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# Interview with Jim Haught – Author, Columnist, and Writer

September 4, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*James A. Haught is longtime editor of West Virginia's largest newspaper, The Charleston Gazette-Mail, where he has won two dozen national newswriting awards. He is also a prolific and important voice in the nontheist movement, having won 21 national newswriting awards. He is author of 11 books, 120 magazine essays, and 50 columns syndicated nationally. Thirty of his columns were distributed by national syndicates. He also is a senior editor of Free Inquiry magazine.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** You are a long-time atheist. You are an editor and writer, and have been for a significant period of time. Indeed, you are in the final stage of life. Let's focus on reflections here: What are the main regrets in life looking back?

**James A. Haught:** Actually, I have no regrets about my life. I'm not Hemingway, but I did my best to write clear indictments against supernatural gibberish. I tried to convince readers that scientific honesty and beneficial secular humanism are noble – the only honorable path for intelligent, educated people.

At age 86, I'm still glad to be part of the freethought movement that is triumphing in western civilization. Magical religion is collapsing, year after year. Young people increasingly reject claims of gods, devils, heavens, hells, miracles and other church stuff. Soon, such beliefs will be laughable in sophisticated circles.

Looking back, I feel deep satisfaction in seeing how we skeptics have gradually won the war of ideas. I hope the trend keeps snowballing after I'm gone. That's why I have no regrets.

**Jacobsen:** When you observe the religious, and then the atheists, what seems to best demarcate their experience at the end of life?

**Haught:** One of my longtime newspaper buddies was a Methodist. In his final months, he talked constantly of wanting to see his late wife again in heaven. I was touched – but I didn't tell him that his hope was a fantasy. I think each human personality is created by the brain (the most complex object in the universe), and when the brain dies, so does the individual existence.

Which is better – to comfort oneself with a wishful hope of rejoining loved ones, or to accept that oblivion is coming? I think my approach is more truthful.

**Jacobsen:** What would you prefer to be remembered for in the end?

**Haught:** I've written eleven books and 140 magazine essays, atop a lifetime of newspaper writing and syndicated columning. My essays still appear weekly in the Daylight Atheist blog. If any of this is remembered and reaches future readers, it will be the only type of immortality that actually exists. If it doesn't, I will be just like billions of other folks, gone into the haze of the past, eventually forgotten.

**Jacobsen:** When it comes to the faithful, what seems to be the main fallacy in their thinking about ethics? They claim that God is good, and is the source of all goodness.

**Haught:** Frequently on television news, I hear people gush about how God saved them in tragedies, while others perished. My reaction: Well, why didn't God rescue the others? Did God hate them?

In philosophy, the "problem of evil" proves clearly that the all-loving, all-powerful God of religion cannot exist. First articulated by Epicurus, the inquiry goes like this: If God created everything, why did he create breast cancer to kill women and leukemia to kill children and Alzheimer's to destroy aging minds? Why did he create earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis and other natural tragedies that kill multitudes? Why did he design pythons to crush pigs and cobras to poison Indian children? If God can't prevent these horrors, he isn't omnipotent. If he doesn't want to prevent them, he is cruel – a monster. Therefore, logic doesn't disprove a vicious God, but it disproves a loving one.

**Jacobsen: Why do so many believe in supernatural and non-scientific explanations for phenomena in the world?**

**Haught:** I think the human mind has two contrary capacities – an ability to reason intelligently and scientifically, and also an ability to imagine demons and spirits, pure fantasies.

Sigmund Freud had a clear explanation for the widespread belief in a father-god: Little tots, maybe age two, see a huge, mighty, human father looming over them, loving them, rewarding them, punishing them. As they mature, this baby image of their biological fathers fades, but it remains buried in the subconscious. When the church says, "A huge, mighty father-god looms over you, loving you, rewarding you, punishing you" – bingo, the old toddler image resurfaces, causing the person to say, "Yes, yes, it's true." They actually worship a long-buried subconscious memory.

**Jacobsen: What should the young focus on for living a better life and leaving a better world?**

**Haught:** All the values of The Enlightenment – scientific thinking, democratic equality, human rights, better living conditions – are now locked into modern western culture. They keep growing more firmly entrenched. Old evils such as slavery, dictatorship, subjugation of women, victimization of workers, racial apartheid, imprisonment of gays, have faded through the centuries. But reactionary forces still try to drag humanity backward.

If today's young can learn Enlightenment values – and ignore supernatural hokum – the future will be in good hands.

# **Brighter Brains Institute: Tarpaulin for Nigerian Refugees**

**September 5, 2018**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

So many people live in difficult, terrible environments and then are thrust into even further utter uncertainty through extremist groups. This happens everywhere to different degrees. One of the nations in which this is a problem is Nigeria, which is with the terrorist group known as Boko Haram.

They have produced many refugees based on the chaos left in their wake. It is a serious issue not only for the nation and communities but also for the future livelihoods of those who are displaced and without homes.

What is it to lose a home? The placeholders of one's personal story based on the things held in personal storage. The family members in the home, possibly, and the interpersonal connections built through the community. All gone, along with the quality of life of so many people.

In Nigeria, this happened, as it has happened to millions of people around the world due to the steady and erratic work of the extremist groups – often coordinated chaos in a way. Some of the survivors are refugees.

One camp is the Al-amin Dagash IDP Camp, in Maiduguri, Nigeria. It functions with a thatched roof housing construct set. However, when it comes time to rain, which does happen, these refugees are left with leaky roofs.

A proposed solution is tarpaulin to prevent this, for the huts and the refugees who use them. One solution, potentially, is tarpaulin. It is better than thatched roofs. There is a fundraiser, brought to my attention through the Brighter Brains Institute if you have some time and finances. Your help would be appreciated:

<https://brighterbrains.institute/clinics/tarpaulins-for-al-amin-dagash-refugee-camp>

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