

SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

HUMANIST VOICES: COLLECTION II



In-Sight Publishing

HUMANIST VOICES: COLLECTION II

IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

Publisher since 2014

Published and distributed by In-Sight Publishing
Fort Langley, British Columbia, Canada
www.in-sightjournal.com

Copyright © 2019 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In-Sight Publishing established in 2014 as a not-for-profit alternative to the large commercial publishing houses who dominate the publishing industry. In-Sight Publishing operates in independent and public interests rather than in dependent and private ones, and remains committed to publishing innovative projects for free or low-cost while electronic and easily accessible for public domain consumption within communal, cultural, educational, moral, personal, scientific, and social values, sometimes or even often, deemed insufficient drivers based on understandable profit objectives. Thank you for the download of this ebook, your consumption, effort, interest, and time support independent and public publishing purposed for the encouragement and support of academic inquiry, creativity, diverse voices, freedom of expression, independent thought, intellectual freedom, and novel ideas.

© 2014-2019 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen. All rights reserved. Original appearance in or submission to, or first published in parts by or submitted to, Humanist Voices.

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

This first edition published in 2019

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

Independent Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

No official catalogue record for this book, as an independent endeavour.

Names: Jacobsen, Scott Douglas author

Title: Humanist Voices: Collection II / Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Description: British Columbia: In-Sight Publishing, 2019.

Identifiers: None (epub).

Subjects: | BISAC: PHILOSOPHY / General (PHI000000)

Classification: LCC (None) | DDC (None)

p. cm.

Not printed but available on the internet at www.in-sightjournal.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Designed and implemented by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	7
1 HUMANIST VOICES	8
a Humanism in the Trump Era	9
b Grafting or Growing	12
c An Interview with Kwaku Adusei - Founder, The Common Sense Foundation.....	15
d Conversation on Humanism, Irreligiosity, and Education in Nigeria with Dr. Leo Igwe — Session 2	18
e An Interview with Elizabeth Loethen — Executive Member, SSA at St. Louis Community College (Meramec Campus)	21
f Conversation on Discrimination Against Non-Believers with Bob Churchill — Session 1	24
g Freedom of Thought in the US: Humanism, and the Constitution and Free Expression	27
h An Interview with Secular Student Society at Miami University — Part 1	29
i An Interview with Secular Student Society at Miami University — Part 2	31
j Americans becoming more secular	33
k An Interview with Kayla Bowen — President, SSA at Morehead State University	35
l An Interview with Secular Student Society at Miami University — Part 3	38
m An Interview with Karen Loethen — Previous Member, Meramec Secular Student Alliance — Part 1	40
n An Interview with Secular Student Society at Miami University — Part 4	43
o An Interview with Karen Loethen — Previous Member, Meramec Secular Student Alliance — Part 2	46
p Freedom of Thought in the US: On the Origin of Humanist Education in the United States	49
q An Interview with Kato Mukasa — Board Member, IHEU	52
r An Interview with James-Adeyinka Shorungbe — Director, Humanist Assembly of Lagos	55
s A Call for the Reclamation of Music	58
t Pragmatic Living and Rising from the Ashes	59
u Interview with Dr. Giovanni Gaetani — Growth and Development Officer, IHEU	61
v An Interview with Professor Michael J. Berntsen — Faculty Advisor, University of North Carolina at Pembroke SSA — Part 1	66
w Phrase Matters: “Good Without God,” “Under God,” and “In God We Trust”	68
x An Interview with Professor Michael J. Berntsen — Faculty Advisor, University of North Carolina at Pembroke SSA — Part 2	70
y An Interview with Professor Michael J. Berntsen — Faculty Advisor, University of North Carolina at Pembroke SSA — Part 3	72
z Interview with Roar Johnsen — Treasurer of International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and Past President of the Norwegian Humanist Association	74
aa An Anonymous Interview with a Gay Ex-Muslim	77
bb This Week In News, A Kevin and Benedict Story	79
cc Conversation on Humanism, Irreligiosity, and Education in Nigeria with Dr. Leo Igwe — Session 3	82

dd	Is Nonconformity Required to be Humanist in Our Modern Societies?.....	85
ee	African Humanist Youth Days (AHYD) 2017 Report	88
ff	An Interview with Cayman Travis Gardner — President, University of North Alabama SSA	89
gg	An Interview with Kaeleigh Pontif — President, Yuba Community College SSA.....	92
hh	Weekly News Briefs (Canada)	96
ii	An Interview with Wendy Webber	98
	License and Copyright.....	101

Acknowledgements

For the collaborations of some of the following and the interviews with others in the past couple of years, thank you for the opportunity to learn some techniques and stylistic aspects of writing from you, these include Anya Overmann, James Croft, Wade Kaardal, Julia Julstrom-Agoyo, Bamidele Adeneye, Marieke Prien, Bwambale M. Robert, Julia Julstrom-Agoyo, Yvan Dheur, Danielle Erika Hill, Ariel Pontes, Emily Newman, Stephanie Guttormson, Pamela Machado, George Ongere, Ray Zhong, Nabina Maharjan, Amjad Sattar, Leo Igwe, Houzan Mahmoud, and Chris Worfolk, Kwaku Adusei, Leo Igwe, Elizabeth Loethen, Bob Churchill, Secular Student Society at Miami University, Kayla Bowen, Karen Loethen, Kato Mukasa, James-Adeyinka Shorungbe, Giovanni Gaetani, Michael J. Berntsen, Roar Johnsen, Anonymous Gay Ex-Muslim, Kevin and Benedict, Cayman Travis Gardner, Kaeleigh Pontif, and Wendy Webber. I feel happy and appreciative to contribute to Humanist Voices.

Scott

HUMANIST VOICES

Humanism in the Trump Era

Emily Newman and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 1, 2017

Emily Newman is the Education Coordinator of AHA Center for Education. She has been a key organizer of the Future of Ethical Societies since 2011 and helped develop the IHEYO American Working Group.

Introduction

The Trump Administration has shown itself as a, if not *the*, major concern for citizens in the United States, as well as the rest of the world because the US is the most powerful nation in military might, economic power, and international soft power.

In the final 2016 presidential debate, current President Donald Trump proclaimed “no one respects women more than me.” However, later in the debate, he interrupted then Secretary Hillary Clinton over 35 times, once to refer to her as “such a nasty woman.”

The deliberate slanders on the campaign trail were numerous, and quite conscious — and even at times non-conscious and highly impulsive — in trying to muddy Clinton’s representation as an activist for women’s rights.

Trump keeps telling us that he respects women. But has he been showing us? Has he treated women with respect and encouraged others to do so as well? Do we trust that he will support and defend women throughout his term? How much can he really respect women?

He previously bragged about grabbing women in their privates and shows little indication of a change in his perspective that women are inequality in physical treatment as objects to him, as things to be objectified.

He may think that he respects women because he has done some good things and could be worse, but there is not enough evidence to show he truly respects women. Besides, the standard for treatment of women and female empowerment is not thinking, “It could have been worse,” or, “He’s done a little.” It’s an inappropriate benchmark, especially for leader of the free world.

Trump can highlight how he hired and promoted women in his businesses, listens to his wife and daughter about “women’s difficulties,” and invites women to meetings at the White House. His administration can boast that he signed a proclamation designating March as Women’s History Month, and tweeted something nice for International Women’s Day.

He can claim that he has matured from previously made rude comments, which are insulting to many women, “locker room talk,” and actions that caused him to be accused of sexual assault by 11 women.

But his past actions should at least prove that he does not respect women more than everybody else, certainly not more than the many people who have fought and continue to fight for women’s rights around the country. The fact that he continues to praise himself in this regard and not acknowledge other people’s dedication to supporting women is strong evidence against his claim.

Putting aside our issues with his hyperbole (and grammar), let’s look at how Trump could show he respects women. The Center for American Progress prepared an issue brief that “highlights 100 ways in which Trump’s policy actions and proposals fall short of — and often harm — the

comprehensive progress that millions of women and their families need.” Please read them all. We highlight a few key issues below:

Healthcare

Women, like men, need reliable and affordable healthcare in order to stay healthy. Trump repealed the Affordable Care Act before having a good replacement prepared and his budget cuts Children’s Health Insurance Program, Medicaid, and international support (causing resurgence and spread of diseases that could be treated if detected early).

The proposed healthcare bill, developed by only white men, does not provide needed services to “pre-existing conditions” including rape, mental health issues, and pregnancy. His proposed budget also attacks STEM education programs, which would enable women to get a better education, good jobs, and support health opportunities for all.

Does he not value science, research, and health, or does he not understand how essential they are to improving our country? Either answer terrifies us.

Reproductive Rights

A significant part of a women’s health is her ability to get or avoid getting pregnant. Trump has said (in Presidential debate & August 2015 interview with Sean Hannity) that Planned Parenthood provides vital services for millions of women other than abortion, including cancer screenings, yet he supports defunding it.

In March 2016, he told Chris Matthews in MSNBC town hall-style forum that abortion must be banned and women who seek abortions should be punished, later clarifying that he meant the person who performed the abortion would be legally responsible.

Is this denial of what Human Rights Watch calls a fundamental human right permissible? He is appealing to the fundamentalist and ethnic nationalist base to thrust women into secondary status without the right to choose how their bodies are treated.

The president also reinstated and expanded the global gag rule, preventing NGOs from receiving U.S. aid if they provide abortion counseling or referrals. It is an absurd regrowth of the Reagan-era politics, which will punish women — and especially poor and minority women.

Parental Leave and Equal Pay

Families that have children need to spend time caring for babies, without losing their jobs or being forced back to work soon after the birth. Parental leave is needed for both men and women because it is not only the mother who is raising the child and dealing with this new life change.

On March 27, Trump revoked Obama’s Workplaces order, which ensured that companies with federal contracts comply with 14 labor and civil rights laws. The Fair Pay order was put in place after a 2010 Government Accountability Office investigation showed that companies with rampant violations were being awarded millions in federal contracts.

In an attempt to keep the worst violators from receiving taxpayer dollars, the Fair Pay order included two rules that impacted women workers: paycheck transparency and a ban on forced arbitration clauses for sexual harassment, sexual assault or discrimination claims.

Conclusion

On the bright side, many women are acting on the frustration based on the decisions and actions of the Trump administration, where demeaning phrases like “nasty woman” become battle cries. They have been inspired to donate to organizations such as the ACLU and Planned Parenthood, contact their politicians to voice their views, and run for office.

According to a March 2017 post on Emily’s List: “Since November 8, over 10,000 women have contacted the organization about potential runs for office — roughly ten times as many as reached out during the entire 2016 election cycle, from January 2015 to last November.”

We can and must come together to raise our voices for the administration to hear. No matter your gender, sexual orientation, income, race, religious beliefs, or any other distinguishing qualities, we are all humans that expect our government to support its people.

That is the universalist, humanist, credo. Even if you don’t live in America, you are affected by its policies. America should be supporting every person by funding educational programs, protecting the vulnerable populations, using evidence-based information to make responsible decisions, and working towards that universal humanist credo.

Grafting or Growing

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 1, 2017

Some religions, or faiths, graft themselves onto culture into which they find themselves, such as the prominent examples of Christianity or Islam. All, at one time or another, grow out of them. I will explain more of this in a bit, which I assume you know as well, simply intuitively if not indoctrinated into pure positive thinking about dominant mythologies in the culture. Both of those religions — Christianity and Islam — have histories, centuries of devoted to them, of bloodshed and conquest connected to their names, despite the formal advertisements about ‘love’ and ‘peace’ (RationalWiki, 2017). Where love and peace become excuses for ancient hatreds and us-them tendencies, let’s look at the country of my origin, Canada, on the far, but not farthest, reaches of the West of it, I live in Langley, which is in British Columbia (City of Langley, 2017).

In Canada, most of, much of the country remains religious, Catholic or Protestant by a wide margin, with a smattering of Indigenous religious faiths and non-Indigenous world faiths introduced into the belief system or concept ecosystem of the country — which would include Catholicism and Protestantism. These faiths, especially the dominant few, were spread by murder, attempted and many times successful termination of peoples and cultures, and forced assimilation in residential schools, in friendly ol’ Canada, right here — and not too long ago. Only a few generations ago, not even, really: think of Wab Kinew, and the impact on his life, and his father, who was the direct victim of the Catholic residential school system in this country (Kinew, 2017; Miller, 2016). Then from them, feel for the thousands of others.

With the residential schools alone, and with the attempted elimination of not only the people but the various cultures and faiths of various nations in the modern sectioning of North America called Canada, the palpable and understandable distrust, even hatred and resentment of some of the Indigenous populations towards the dominant Christian faith and culture, in the Canadian case, is present, in some, even many, instances. From those that are the direct descendants of those most affected by these actions, the Christian religion is *the* colonial religion — an alien entity imposed, inculcated by force on the young: ask many countries on most continents in the world with human inhabitants.

It is a hard-to-ignore or hard-to-be obscurantist about this fact, because it happens to be true. Yes, some Indigenous populations were slavers; yes, there was warfare among various nations prior to colonial times (Revolvy, 2017). However, the fact remains that the entire country of Canada was founded, in part, on — strange-to-say — good-intentioned murder of peoples and culture, to ‘save souls’ and bring, even by force, the ‘right culture’ to the people, or “savages” according to the first prime minister of Canada Sir John A MacDonald, of the region (Joseph, 2016). To me, these seem like open crimes couched in delusional, in some ways, thinking. The road to hell...ironically.

Also, there was the simple slavery conducted in New France with most of, or many of, the slaves being of Indigenous heritage, and so origin (Lawrence, 2016).

Islam massacred peoples and cultures, and planted their own socio-religious structures and culture by force on them, too — flying, winged horse and all. All faiths probably grew out of some ancient culture, but some modern ones are known to have grown out of modern societies, such as

that founded by the charlatan and fraudster, and purported prophet Joseph Smith, right in America.

Blacks, or African Americans, were not allowed in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints for a long time, at least until the 1980s, which is recent, very much so. Islam has liberalized in some respects, especially some branches of American Islam or that represented by the Aga Khan. Same with some post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment Christianity. These took time to tame, from the outside.

But often the grafting plus time appeared to soften the traditionalist, fundamentalist aspects of the religions, on average. When I reflect further on the nature of the growing out of, and eventual grafting onto, culture, especially with the religions having greater zeal and variety of methodologies in proselytizing and conversions, humanism has some reflections, or isomorphisms with religion, as it is a belief system, but not in other ways.

In some ways, one targeted objective is the increase in the numbers of humanists in the world. In other ways, most humanists, probably, gristle at the thought of open attempts at conversion, and so do not go door-to-door, which is a significant difference. But many hope to live up to an ideal and then the example of living a good life sets the standard, by which people may want to consider humanism. Some religious individuals share this view.

Humanism doesn't exactly have a violent history, which is distinct from most big "R" religions, whose histories are bloody from the start, but also proclaiming the highest ideals — as does humanism. Humanism simply doesn't have the outcropping of zeal plus violence, which is a big demarcation. Does humanism grow out of a culture or graft itself onto one? In an ironic way, as with many people leaving religion and then building a unique non-belief, humanism seems to grow out of the ashes of religion.

As society becomes more modern, more technological, more civil, more diverse and inclusive, more democratic, and more scientifically literate, the more society seems to become irreligious. Sometimes, citizens cling to spiritualisms in those ashes of religion, but most often people leave that stuff behind, by and large. Humanism is part of that modernizing wave; and part of its force. I'm not saying this is the way it is with these statements, but am feeling and thinking it through. And then presenting them in print, risky.

Happy Canada Day, by the way.

References

City of Langley. (2017). City of Langley. Retrieved from <https://www.city.langley.bc.ca/>.

Joseph, B. (2016, June 28). 10 Quotes John A. MacDonald Made About First Nations. Retrieved from <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/10-quotes-john-a.-macdonald-made-about-first-nation>

Kinew, W. (2017). Wab Kinew. Retrieved from <https://www.wabkinew.ca/>.

Lawrence, B. (2016, November 22). Slavery of Indigenous People in Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/slavery-of-indigenous-people-in-canada/>.

Miller, J.R. (2016, October 10). Residential Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools/>.

RationalWiki. (2017, May 6). Massacres in the name of a peaceful faith. Retrieved from http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Massacres_in_the_name_of_a_peaceful_faith.

Revolvy. (2017). Enslavement of indigenous peoples in North America. Retrieved from <https://www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=Enslavement%20of%20indigenous%20peoples%20in%20North%20America>.

Views expressed not necessarily those of IHEU or IHEYO.

An Interview with Kwaku Adusei - Founder, The Common Sense Foundation

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 1, 2017

This interview edited for clarity and readability.

Scott Jacobsen: How did you first find and become involved in Humanism? What makes it more or less true to you as a worldview?

Kwaku Adusei: It has been a long time. Somewhere in 1999, I was interested in the *Bible*. I started reading the *Bible*, trying to understand what is really in that book. The more I read, the more I come across something. I went to read the books of Exodus and Genesis. That was Jews starting choosing. That means that the Gentiles are not part of God's family. Some of Israelites were ordered to go to Amalek and killed the Amalekites.

They slaughtered them all. I thought, "What kind of God is this?" A God who can kill a mass group of people. A God who can create even with word of mouth. That God cannot kill by himself, but only through others. I thought some propaganda is behind the story. Some political propaganda. They are seeking to achieve a political end, to achieve something by trying to use the Word of God to cover up.

You get my point. It is something used to deceive people. The more I read the *Bible*, I thought, "This isn't making sense. Why don't I go and get other books?" So I started reading the *Bhagavad Gita*. The holy book of the Hindu people. I read books of logic. I thought, "These books aren't making sense as far as logic is concerned." Then I started making the transition from the religious life to the humanistic life.

I realized if there was a supernatural power outside the universe that can give me energy, or any power to do whatever I want on this material world. It would mean that if you have a belief in God, then you can do anything. But in Ghana, this is when I changed so fast. When there are more religious people, you have more poverty. The more people become religious, the more they become poor. So something is missing.

I started reading Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*. I read *Christ Conspiracy*. I read *Historical Jesus and the Mythical Christ*. After reading all of these books, I thought, "This thing we call God is nothing but something designed to deceive or enslave the masses. So that is what took me away from the religious life." Now, it was not easy for me. The books began to shape me. I became demonized. I said, "Hey, I know what I am doing."

My family and my loved ones, they all neglected me. I said, "No, I still have to be strong and live my life." So every day I make sure I read my logic books and anything that has to do with science. Unless, it can be scientifically proven, then I will not believe it. If people say, "If God wills it, it will come to pass." If I say this, I will not be applying logic and reason. In 2002, I became a full atheist.

That's where I started moving into atheism. After atheism, I thought, "I need a step forward." For one, we are humanists. Without human beings, it will not be easy to do whatever you want to do. If you are calling yourself irreligious, how do you work together with them on this particular

planet? I started looking for others who are also thinking like me. It was difficult to me. I hide my humanist ideology for more than 5 years.

Maybe, it was 6 years. In 2010, I found 4 people who were also like me. We would get together on a weekly basis to discuss humanist ideas to make sure we make a meaningful life for ourselves without adherence to supernatural forces or higher powers. 2 years ago, I was trying to found humanist groups across the country. I saw on Facebook. I connected with IHEYO. They said they had a group in Accra, in Ghana.

I also got my friends who were humanists in Kumasi, in Ghana. I started to form a humanist group associated to the one in Accra. So we agreed and formed a humanist group in Kumasi here. When I formed the humanist group with Roslyn, I figured, “We cannot hide in the darkness. There are people outside will to hear from us. So why don’t we go outside?” Others can understand that the religious people are not what they are hearing about.

So I joined one of my friends who is a radio presenter. He was preparing something for all atheist people. And then the program features people from Hare Krishna. People from Christianity and Islam. So I joined that program. The outcome was [Laughing], I got a lot of backlash. People tried to even kill me. People, some of them got to understand me. As I talk to you, I have 59 members on my platform, where we interact each and every day on humanist ideas to get more people involved.

SJ: As well, you founded The Common Sense Foundation. What is the target audience, and the purpose of it?

KA: Yes, The Common Sense Foundation, we are an organization of the Humanist Association of Ghana. First of all, it is one part of my plan. I want to make a radio program. I started to realize there are more people who are willing to hear our message. I put my phone number on the radio station. People started calling me and saying they wanted to learn more from me. That’s where I created a WhatsApp platform and then have some direction with them on daily issues.

I thought, “Why don’t we have a platform to spread the news across the country?” If that is what we are proposing, then we can do that. Then we formed the humanist community and The Common Sense Foundation. Our main target is the youth because the youth are more open to information. The youth have now come to realize that religion is killing people. Religion is dehumanizing people.

Religion is making people slaves. The youth have the mindset, but they don’t have the courage to come out of that mess. We have come to give them that boost. We have come to encourage them. So they can be strong, be bold, and can move from religion to the secular world, which is what we seek to do — to build a critical thinking centre. Where we organize a forum to encourage them.

That way, they can realize things without panic or being hypnotized by the religious people. We cannot teach logic to some of the adults because they have already made up their minds. The youth are always looking for new information. The Common Sense Foundation is there to give them the information that they need, to help encourage them to live their lives, and can do whatever they want to do without adhering to any spiritual forces.

We realize they have the doubt, but that they are now free to move to another level. We talk to them. So that is what we are doing now, we go to the radio stations and talk to people. Those that want to talk to us, contact us, and then we put them on the WhatsApp platform to share ideas and

have fun. That's all. It is difficult for us because sometimes we don't organize very big programs, so that we also invite +people from outside it.

Eminent and experienced humanists come to give lectures, but we are moving in that bigger direction. Especially with the critical thinking centre the work with the young people, it is difficult for us. We are talking to other friends who are humanists in their work. We see if they try and help us. The target, though, is for the youth.

SJ: Thank you very much for your time. It was nice talking to you, Kwaku.

KA: You too.

Conversation on Humanism, Irreligiosity, and Education in Nigeria with Dr. Leo Igwe — Session 2

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 1, 2017

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When you mention an ineffective education system, what are the main weak points?

Dr. Leo Igwe: First of all, in many rural communities, there are no schools to attend. Children who want to learn cannot learn. Other children trek several kilometers to attend the nearest schools where there may not be enough teachers or classrooms.

In some of these schools, children learn under the trees, in make-shift structures. Many classrooms have no desks or benches, and children sit on the floor to take lessons. Where the schools are available, there are no qualified teachers.

Many teachers are poorly paid. Their monthly salaries do not come regularly. In many cases, teachers retire into poverty because they receive very little as a pension — that is if the pension is paid. The condition is worse for those who teach in private schools.

For instance, some teachers in private schools in Ibadan in South West Nigeria are paid as low as 50 dollars a month. Some of these teachers are not paid during the holidays and they are not entitled to any pension. Now I ask: what kind of knowledge would such teachers impart?

So generally, the morale of teachers in the education system is low. Even in situations where there are schools and qualified, well-paid teachers, these teachers are compelled to teach in accordance with certain religious ideologies and traditions.

Education is largely by rote learning and memorization of what is allowed to be taught in the classrooms. There is very little going on in terms of research, experimentation, and exploration of new frontiers of knowledge.

There is a disdain for cutting-edge ideas. The place for creativity, innovation, and invention is marginal. Merit is not always rewarded. Originality, adventurous, and independent thinking are not encouraged, especially when such ideas are perceived to pose a threat to religions or the authorities.

So, education as a facility that would lead people out of ignorance is not the case. The education system has failed to provide the impetus that is needed for national development and renewal.

Jacobsen: How can individual Nigerian parents work to improve the education for their children?

Igwe: Parents can help improve the education of their children by ensuring that children continue to learn even when they return from school. Parents should not rely solely on what the children are taught at the school.

They should make sure that the homes are continuing education centers. Parents should also lobby for the improvement of the quality of education in the schools. They should pressure the government to employ more qualified teachers and pay them well.

They should get the government to build and equip the classrooms, and ensure that there are learning aid materials for children. Parents should understand the importance of separating education and religious indoctrination.

Too often religion has so much influence in the educational system due to pressure from parents. Parents should realize that what is taught in classrooms need not be compatible with what children are told at home or at their churches and mosques; that education is not the handmaid of religion.

In fact, parents should know that religious interference in schools undermines the education, growth and development of their children.

Jacobsen: How can we inculcate critical thinking and science training in the young Nigerian population?

Igwe: By encouraging critical thinking, rewarding scientific discovery, and investing in scientific research; by Africanizing and Nigerianizing, not westernizing, critical thinking and the scientific method of acquiring knowledge.

Too often it is mistakenly said that critical or scientific thinking is a Western value. No, it is not. Critical reasoning is a human property. Scientific thought is a human value, and not an exclusive heritage of any culture or race.

Nigeria must make inculcation of critical thinking skills part of its curriculum and ensure that the subject is taught from the primary to the university level. As a society, Nigeria needs to show that it values those who question ideas and demand evidence, those who inquire, investigate, and examine beliefs.

Nigeria should honour its adventurous thinkers and get the young ones to know that acquiring critical thinking skills is a venture worth pursuing. Nigeria cannot instill critical thinking when it makes criminals of those who criticize religions, and does not guarantee freedom of expression. The country must ensure that critical inquiry is applied in all areas of human endeavor.

So, critical thinkers must be protected and defended, not penalized, prosecuted, jailed, or executed. Nigeria should invest in science, in the training scientists and in scientific research. Nigeria should fund scientific experiments, set up science laboratories, and celebrate excellence in scientific research. Young Nigerians should be encouraged to choose science subjects and to become scientists.

Jacobsen: Why is the religious ideological filter so pervasive and damaging to society, rather than positive and beneficial?

Igwe: Religious ideology is pervasive because it thrives on fear and ignorance. It recruits easily and is not mentally demanding. Blind obedience is the main obligation and qualification. Apparently, religious ideology is for the intellectually lazy, for minds not inclined to diligence, rigor, and adventure.

For minds that are closed and are unfree, but more especially in Christianity and Islam, this ideology manifests in its insidious forms because, backed by powerful political and financial interest groups in the West and the Middle East, their influence is potent and pervasive.

The ideology has been on a rampage as evidenced by the political and militant demands for Sharia law in northern Nigeria, the hijab crisis in schools across southwest Nigeria, and witch persecution in many parts of the country.

The ideology is damaging by any stretch because it holds the Nigerian mind hostage and prevents it from unfettered expression and intellection. Religion enslaves the mind. Ideologies that spring from it colonize the intellect.

The people even the highly educated are afraid to think freely and openly exercise their minds. They are afraid to challenge the religious dogmas. They are reluctant to condemn acts of bloodletting committed in the name of religion.

Many Nigerians are unwilling to think outside the box of their religion, their god(s), or their holy book. Unfortunately, in pursuant of these competing versions of the faith ideology, Nigerians have inadvertently turned their country into a proxy battleground where the cold war between Christianity and Islam rages endlessly at Nigeria's and Nigerians' expense.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Leo, my friend — chat on the June 8th for the next session.

An Interview with Elizabeth Loethen — Executive Member, SSA at St. Louis Community College (Meramec Campus)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 7, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is family background — culture, education, geography, language, and religiosity/irreligiosity?

Elizabeth Loethen: Currently I go to school at St Louis Community College-Meramec with my brother, though before that I was primarily homeschooled. I am an Atheist, along with my parents and little brother.

Jacobsen: What is the personal background in secularism for you? What were some seminal developmental events and realizations in personal life regarding it?

Loethen: Well, I was raised secular right from the get-go. My parents were both Catholics growing up and once they got older and started dating they both “converted”, for lack of a better word, to secularism and Atheism. So, I was raised not believing in any god and knowing that science is the answer. When I was little, I really *wanted* to believe in a god. All of the kids at school believed and they often talked to me about the things they learned at church or Sunday school, and so the naive five-year-old in me wanted to believe and fit in. Although she wasn’t, I thought my mother was against me wanting to believe in God and so I almost did it to rebel against her. Instead, she encouraged me and helped me to learn more about it until I finally realized that I just simply didn’t believe. This, of course, made it hard to make friends since children at that age are told that anyone who isn’t their religion are bad and Atheists worship the devil, so I didn’t have many friends growing up until college where people just don’t care what your religion is, they just care if you’re nice.

Jacobsen: You are an executive member of the SSA at St. Louis Community College (Meramec Campus). What tasks and responsibilities comes with this position? Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Loethen: Since this group is struggling to even get off the ground, the curse of the commuter college, I spend a lot of time promoting the group and encouraging people to come to meetings. As of last semester there were five people, including myself, but when I fell ill and had to drop out of school, that number dropped. I’m unsure how successful the group was after my departure, but I’m hoping to get the group up and running again in the Fall of 2017. I pursue this because not many people on my campus are Atheists or secular in any way. I want to create a space for the secularists to converge and talk about things that matter to them.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Loethen: There are seven Christian clubs on campus. Seven. And that’s not to mention the Catholics, Muslims, Protestants, etc.... Nearly every major religion is represented on campus, and Christianity is OVER represented, in my opinion. I’m thrilled that these clubs are a place for similarly-minded people can go to meet each other, make friends, do charity work or read their holy text together in safety. My SSA group is the only one on campus, period. There is no safe

place for Secularists to discuss things that matter to them without the influence of a god. Personally, I have always been alienated from other kids my age and adults since I do not believe in their god and there was no one for me to talk to about issues that meant something to me. I had my parents, but I wanted someone on my level to talk to. It would mean the world to me if I could create a place for people to speak freely without religion in the picture.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more valuable tips for campus secularist activism?

Loethen: Don't be afraid to promote and talk about it! Due to my alienation, I have lots of anxiety when it comes to outing myself as an Atheist or Secularist in fear that people will simply stop talking to me. However, the more we talk about our group the more interest others will have. Do charity work! Our group was nowhere near organized enough to do charity work, but the more charity you do the more charitable people will take notice. Also, attend as many on-campus social events as possible. Once a semester we have something of a "club fair" where all of the clubs set up tables to recruit new members. Get to the location early and snag a table that will be right where the heaviest traffic will be.

Jacobsen: What have been some historic violations of the principles behind secularism on campus? What have been some successes to combat these violations?

Loethen: Off the top of my head, I can't really think of any. My campus is a commuter campus so people go to class and leave. No one really has their entire focus on a club. I am guilty of the same, so I don't know a whole lot of what goes on on campus when I am not there. Like I mentioned before, there are dozens and dozens of religious groups on campus and not a single secular one, so a major success was getting the SSA group started in the first place. At my school you have to get ten people together in order to create a club, so our president at the time was able to get ten people interested in a club like this. We have not had success since, but getting started was really hard in the first place.

Jacobsen: What are the main areas of need regarding secularists on campus?

Loethen: We need a voice. A presence. The SSA chair at the Student Governance Council is vacant with no one to fill it. I am doing everything I can to give us a voice, but it's not as easy as one might think.

Jacobsen: What is your main concern for secularism on campus moving forward for the next few months, even years?

Loethen: That there will never be enough of us to keep a stable place for us on campus. Every semester at the club fairs we get at least a dozen names on our sign up sheet all interested in joining, but when it comes to the actual meetings we're lucky to get anyone. I'm worried that it will always be like this and alone, I cannot come up with any solutions.

Jacobsen: What are the current biggest threats to secularism on campus?

Loethen: Surprisingly, the secularists themselves. Our club wasn't terribly organized and, despite our best efforts, we weren't able to bring any sort of organization to the club. There simply wasn't enough of us to call ourselves a proper club. So, the lack of willing participants severely threatens our spot on campus.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Loethen: Our club isn't that old, a year or two at most, but there are already people who don't want us to exist. Our posters get ripped down and thrown away and defaced and we get primarily hate mail and angry texts. There are more people who want to destroy us than there are people who want to join us or to help us.

Jacobsen: What are the main social and political activist, and educational, initiatives on campus for secularists?

Loethen: Our president has graduated this most recent semester, and his main goal was to create a safe place for likeminded people to meet each other and have civil discussions. He was also extremely focused on charity so most of his efforts went towards helping our school charity project, which was "Project Peanut Butter", helping children in underdeveloped countries beat malnutrition. The two of us really enjoyed working on the project and doing everything we could to help. We never really got to discuss what kind of education aspect we wanted to bring to the table on campus. Personally, I wanted to educate people on secularism and Atheism to see if I could bring down the stigma about our irreligiosity. Just because we don't believe in the same things you do and we rely on things like logic and reason to give us the answers we seek doesn't make us any less of people.

Jacobsen: What are the main events and topics of group discussions for the alliance on campus?

Loethen: As I've mentioned profusely, our club was horrifically small and had very little support, so one of our primary discussions was about how to make people interested and want to join us. The other topic that we discussed was events we wanted to hold on campus, and how to make them happen. Only one of our events ever happened, but our president always put lots of emphasis on our visibility on campus, even though we had very little.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved and maintain the secular student alliance ties on campus?

Loethen: Join us! Work with us at our various charity or recruitment events even if you can't make the meetings. Talk with us about how we can make your involvement work for *you*. Our community is rather small and we could use all the support we can get. You can still reach us through the information on the posters, though it's likely you won't reach me directly but feel free to ask whoever you DO reach if you would like to know more. Like I mentioned, we're pretty unorganized at the moment but we're working hard to remedy that and make sure that you have a safe, comfortable place to be.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Loethen: Keeping this club afloat is a struggle and there have been many times when I just wanted to throw in the towel and give up. Since no one seems to want to be a part of it, then why should I keep trying? When I fell ill this last semester, I had no choice but to give up, even if temporarily. For a while, my mother was a student on campus as well and together, we worked incredibly hard to keep this club alive and for awhile, it was working. However, now that our president is gone and my mother will not be on campus any longer, it is up to me to keep our club alive. It is not going to be easy, and I am desperately going to need someone to lean on, but if I can make this work even if just for a while I will consider my time at the local community college to be beyond worthwhile.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Elizabeth.

Conversation on Discrimination Against Non-Believers with Bob Churchill — Session 1

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 8, 2017

Bob Churchill is the Communications Director for the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), Editor of the Freedom of Thought Report. Bob Churchill is also a trustee of the Conway Hall Ethical Society and of the Karen Woo Foundation.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are best person I can think of to be in a position to know the ways and types of discrimination against non-believers in the world. Why? We did an interview before, on the relevant topic matter. I wanted to do an educational series on non-believers' experienced discrimination by the numbers. You agreed. Here we are, so here we go: what is the most common discrimination non-believers across the world share? The standard prejudice against them.

Bob Churchill: This is very difficult to actually measure, but I would say the most *prevalent* problem (i.e. it affects the most people most often) is social discrimination. By this I mean the day-to-day suppression committed by other people: it might be friends who bristle if you say the wrong thing, teachers who might explicitly threaten you to keep you 'belonging' to a religion, parents who let you know how disappointed they'd be if you failed to conform to their beliefs and traditions. They might even let you know in no uncertain terms that they'd ostracise you.

I think in more liberal, secular countries it may be easy to forget or not to think about this social discrimination for the mainstream broadly secular population — though not if you're raised in a 'conservative' religious community of course! But across huge parts of the world, criticism of religious beliefs, practices or institutions may be viewed as deeply suspicious, or even as malevolent. To actually assert boldly "I do not believe in this God or his prophet" could mean being thrown out of your own family, losing friends, losing your support network. To supposedly 'insult' religion can get you lynched.

And this is a very real threat. Just recently Mashal Khan, a student in a Pakistani university who called himself "the humanist" on Facebook, was accused of blasphemy and murdered by a crowd of fellow students (the incident was filmed on mobile phones).

Maybe it's worth adding that in 'the west' you get some church leaders and religious commentators who say they feel like they can't talk about or preach their Christianity anymore because of anti-Christian "persecution". And *superficially* there's a similarity there, but I don't think it holds up: I don't think the situation of Christians in secular Europe for example is at all symmetrical with the very real persecution of the non-religious in predominantly Islamic countries. Yes, in some countries in Europe, religion no longer has the cultural heft it once had, but it is often still privileged by the state. Yes, it's no longer the dominant worldview, but it was for centuries, and its doctrines have been heard ad nauseam, and it has simply lost most of the arguments. Yes, we're often suspicious of preaching, but it is permitted and protected. Yes, churches are dying out, but they still dot the landscape, and they're not being forcibly shut down they're just closing as people leave them. So while obviously there are places where Christians really are persecuted, just like the non-religious, I would strongly resist the idea that that's

generally the case in Europe or ‘the west’, and really when someone makes that claim it is either being made strategically, or it just reveals their ignorance to the realities of actual persecution.

Jacobsen: What is the most unique form of discrimination you have ever come across through research into the bigotry and prejudice against non-believers?

Churchill: Well, I would say that the more remarkable feature of problems faced by the non-religious is how similar they often are from place to place. At the legal level, it’s often the same religious supremacist or traditionalist arguments that are used to privilege religion or discriminate against atheists in law. In Islamic states in particular the same lines of so-called Islamic jurisprudence or religious law appear from place to place to justify very similar laws against ‘blasphemy’, ‘apostasy’, constraints on marriage and family law according to religion, restricting the freedom of thought and expression, and so on.

Another very common recurring theme with ‘blasphemy’-type cases in particular is how often it’s all about texts, Facebook posts, Whatsapp groups and so on. Sometimes it’s still about books or physical protests, or in the Ashraf Fayadh case it was about “atheistic poetry”! But the medium is usually online now. And this isn’t something to be just shrugged off by saying “well, that’s where people speak in public now”, because a really worrying trend just in the past year or two is that we’ve seen more and more cases where the person being prosecuted is being prosecuted for posting in private conversations, in Facebook groups that people have *elected* to join, and even in more-or-less private Whatsapp groups. So as we’ve developed these ways of using the internet in smaller, more selective channels, even those are being broken into and subjected to the same kind of restrictions as if you were standing on a street corner.

In terms of social problems too, I’d say it’s the similarity risks and concerns from place to place that stand out for me: the threat of being ostracized from family and friends, in extremis the threat of being publicly named, attacked or lynched. The fear of being cut off from support networks recurs a lot from atheists in the most hostile countries, and — this has come up when I’ve been talking to people a few times — if someone is very isolated then it’s not just about losing their existing family but about damaging their chances of starting one. If you live in a more conservative society and marriage traditionally depends on the support and approval of families and so on, and if you’ve lost all that because you’ve been thrown out of your family, then finding a wife or husband might have gone out of the window too.

None of this isn’t to say that every nation has its peculiarities of course, I don’t want to make the whole world sound homogenous. But it’s more the patterns of similarity that strike me that uniqueness.

I can mention a few details that have stood out though; things which are not really unique but are certainly very indicative. The Alexander Aan case in Indonesia a few years ago had a horrible ironic kicker to it. He was charged with ‘blasphemy’ and ‘calling for others to embrace atheism’ for posting on Facebook — so far so horribly predictable. But also, Indonesia made it a requirement to state your religious affiliation on identity papers, and they were only allowing six choices: you can be a Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, Confucian, Buddhist, or Hindu. You can’t put “atheist”. So in addition to being put on trial for spreading atheism he was also accused of lying on official documents by putting “Muslim”.

One of the less commented-on aspects of the Pussy Riot trial a few years ago was that the judge said in her summing up that they were found guilty of “religious hatred” because their protest was

feminist, and the Russian Orthodox religion was incompatible with feminism, therefore the band was obviously promoting their own beliefs in a supremacist way over that of the church! Quite incredible.

Ashraf Fayadh who I mentioned before, in his trial in Saudi Arabia the court was reportedly shown pictures of him, selfies maybe, with female friends at art shows, and also his long hair. This was all used against him, basically to show he was too liberal. Imagine being on trial facing a possible death sentence for “apostasy” — and he was actually sentenced to death on the back of this, although that’s since been commuted to a long prison sentence — but imagine that your life is on the line, you might be executed for leaving your presumed religion, and some prosecution lawyer starts banging on about the length of your hair! Utter mockery of justice.

Jacobsen: To give an idea of the range, what country is the worst for respecting human rights of non-believers? What country is the best? Why (for each)?

Churchill: In the IHEU Freedom of Thought Report we assess each country according to a global ratings system. There are four thematic areas we consider, and five levels of severity across all four thematic areas, so you might say that the worst countries are the ones rated most severely across all four thematic areas. That’s true of Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan. And a very close second, with the worst ratings in three out of four strands and the second-worst rating in the remaining strand, there’s another six countries: Brunei, Iran, Pakistan, Sudan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

But there’s a lot of ways of chopping the data up, and that’s just looking at where the country is performing consistently badly across our themes, so you could look at it another way. For example, you might very well say that any country in which there’s a possible death sentence for being an atheist, under ‘blasphemy’ or ‘apostasy’ laws, then that has got to belong in your absolute “worst” category! And there are thirteen countries in that camp (many the same as above of course): Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates, Yemen. And recently we’ve seen extrajudicial or militant killings of humanists (or people accused of atheism) in India, Maldives, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. And in each case there appears to be near complete impunity for the attackers.

Meanwhile, we’ve applied the *best* rating across all four thematic strands in just three countries: Belgium, the Netherlands and Taiwan. This isn’t to say there’s never any problem in these places, of course! There may still be some battles to fight along secular lines. And of course anyone in a conservative religious community in any country may find themselves discriminated against. But legally speaking and in terms of the social indicators we could detect, these three countries succeed in having none of our negative boundary conditions applied to them.

Every country has its own dedicated web page via freethoughtreport.com/countries/ and all the summary data is available via freethoughtreport.com/data/. I’d urge people to read the Report and we’re always looking for volunteers to help maintain and update the information — there are details about how you can join the volunteer researcher pool at iheu.org/volunteer.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, my friend.

Freedom of Thought in the US: Humanism, and the Constitution and Free Expression

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 8, 2017

Humanism is a progressive philosophy affirming the responsibility and right for neutrality in government towards religious matters, as well as the pursuit of ethical lives for the beneficence of humanity (AHA, 2017; International Humanist and Ethical Union, 2016; Oxford Dictionary, 2017).

Secular humanism, in addition, affirms these ideals while rejecting religious dogma and supernaturalism in morality and decision-making. Secularity in constitutional law has historically allowed for the blossoming of our deep-rooted emphasis on religious freedom. But conservative Christian undertones remain smattered in fundamental legislature intended to be humanistic. ‘One nation, under God’ seems stuck between the comfort of tradition and the push towards progress.

Take, for example, the popular sentiment in literature following the Second World War. Popular “neo-reactionaries”, or those wishing to dampen humanist causes, frowned upon political progress, creating an American disposition inclined towards comfortable conservatism in post-war culture. Orwell’s view that “merely political changes can effect nothing, progress is an illusion.”

The perception of the importance of humanism within law has been battered and warped, reducing its importance to mere legal exercise. Recently, in the aftermath of the 2017 election, an air of acceptability in returning to law of the 1950’s Cold War Era increased paranoia towards atheism because of its association with Communism (International Humanist and Ethical Union, 2016).

President Donald Trump won the appeal of voters through policy pledges around conservative religious and nationalist values (Ibid.). Trump’s election lowered the standard for acceptable public and political behavior. Recent legislature reflects the slow return to institutionalized oppression, localised recurring social marginalisation, and prejudice against the irreligious.

The struggle for equality and integration of humanism is constant. Where the U.S. Constitution prohibits governmental endorsement of one religion over the other, there are still attempts to establish religion (predominantly Christianity). Significant anti-secular laws at the state level disrupt the continuity of federal secularism.

Due to lack of political will to amend them, numerous unconstitutional laws impede upon humanist progress at a state level. Take the Arkansas *state* constitution, requiring that identified secularists may neither hold office nor testify in court — a direct contradiction to the *federal* constitutional prohibition in Article 6 of any religious test for office (Arkansas State Legislature, 1874). Similar laws exist in Maryland, Mississippi, Texas, both Carolinas, Tennessee and Pennsylvania (International Humanist and Ethical Union, 2016).

The anti-irreligious sentiment of the American legislative system may impart a social perception of true nationalism through adherence to Christianity. By extension, elected officials may feel inclined to promote Christian conservatism in campaign platforms and while in office. The

continuation of Christian conservatism for political success has set a precedence, and by extension, a vicious cycle.

The negative consequences of identifying as secular in an elected government have debilitating consequences on success. Possible qualified candidates may be avoiding government positions because the majority of Americans would be less likely to vote for a presidential candidate if they were an atheist as opposed to a religious candidate (McCarthy, 2015). American anti-secular sentiment of elected officials goes as far as to suggest “no other trait, including being gay or having never held elected office, garnered a larger share of people saying they’d be less likely to support the potential [presidential] candidate” (International Humanist and Ethical Union, 2016).

Popular sentiment against secular qualities extend into the socio-cultural arena. Social freedom of expression and advocacy of humanist values are limited. Those pressures against humanists are not in the fundamental right to free speech and expression, but, rather, in the ability to discuss topics about religion in a critical manner — in public.

The suppression of humanism can be through social pressure. Even if the right for free expression exists for American citizens, social context can reduce or deter the expression of humanistic or irreligious values. This amounts to a social privilege for the religious over the irreligious in American culture.

The very environment created by the 2017 election polarized activist efforts. A spike in activism interest was seen in voters disillusioned with the election outcome (Kirabo, 2016). This activism was not only for the maintenance of won rights and the pursuit of more complete equality, but in the protection against the reduction, or elimination, of extant rights.

References

Arkansas State Legislature (1874). Arkansas Constitution.

Retrieved arkleg.state.ar.us/assembly/Summary/ArkansasConstitution1874.pdf.

American Humanist Association (2017). What is Humanism?. Retrieved from <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/>.

International Humanist and Ethical Union. (2016). Freedom of Thought Report: United States of America. Retrieved from <http://freethoughtreport.com/countries/americas-northern-america/united-states-of-america/>.

Kirabo, S. (2016, November 16). Post-Election, Humanist Activism Kicks into Overdrive. Retrieved from <https://thehumanist.com/commentary/post-election-humanist-activism-kicks-overdrive>.

McCarthy, J. (2015, June 22). In U.S., Socialist Presidential Candidates Least Appealing. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/183713/socialist-presidential-candidates-least-appealing.aspx>.

Oxford Dictionary. (2017). Humanism. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/humanism?q=humanism>.

An Interview with Secular Student Society at Miami University — Part 1

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 8, 2017

Audio interview has been edited.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your family background — geography, culture, language, religion/irreligion, and education?

Secular Students of Miami University (SSM): My family moved from Greece here to Ohio when I was very young. My mom raised us. She raised our family under the Greek Orthodox faith, but not really strictly religious — more so in a cultural sense. We didn't go to church often. It was mostly attendance at services for Christmas and Easter, which we called "Eastermas." This faith was not strongly intertwined with my identity. Cultural background, very strongly Greek.

I didn't have to question any part of my identity or assess my reality until I came to college. It was so different from the diverse schools of my hometown. I am a student at Miami University, liberal academically but the opposite demographically. Miami breeds a crop who are conservative, wealthy, and religious. For someone who doesn't have part of my identity in any of the above, I need to constantly remind myself of my values.

The further along in my studies, the more I am able to gain exposure to humanism. I think of it as going to school to unlearn, not learn [Laughing]. Realizing all my perceptions and adjusting towards compassionate neutrality of secular humanism. Secular humanism also complements my studies as a psychology student in the pre-law program, with a minor in the philosophy of law.

SSM was a springboard for my growth as a community of students who share similar ideals.

I think SSM has helped build that sense of community. We stress secularism and humanism — they go hand-in-hand with the organization.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the personal background, what is the specialty in psychology?

SSM: Psychopathology, which is abnormal psychology. I had this need to understand the *why* and *how* in the damaging effects of abnormal psychology that I had seen.

I actually started as a pre-med student studying microbiology because science was pushed and my family is full of doctors. I didn't really think I had much of a choice. There is this expectation in my culture.

You had one of the big three: engineer, lawyer, and doctor [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

SSM: I wanted to follow through on that, make my family proud, and support them. I would work as hard as I could to repay my family. I wanted to follow through on that unspoken promise of success. And I think part of that included accepting the religious beliefs presented to me.

Jacobsen: With a Secular Student organization, why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

SSM: This is a hard question...because I don't consider SSM as volunteering. We promote progressive ideals meant to improve human life. It just made sense.

When I went to college, I had the chance to re-think everything. Religion, sexuality, morality — everything. I have this sense of independence. I decided that I didn't want my actions to intentionally cause harm to any living thing. Alongside that, I became vegan. This choice I think it definitely impacted the way I see the world through a greater focus on being intentional.

I realized I felt no connection any higher spiritual thing and do not feel a need for that connection, I don't think I ever did in my life. But I do feel connected through human compassion and mutual understanding. I have always been curious about the world and the life circumstances of others, what are they struggling with, how can I relate or understand it. I felt the need to help people and especially not cause harm any living thing.

Secularism and humanism promote these values; a push to see everyone as equal with this neutrality that should carry through to everything — through the appropriate form in the sense of what goes on in the state.

Being exposed to friends who are all different religions and nationalities and discovering the richness in that, and the peace among all of those different friends, I wanted that something promoted that at university, where it wasn't.

SSM is a secular organization. Students who don't identify as secular, or are simply interested in hearing the perspective, or are an atheist, agnostic, or religious all come. We have discussions, debates, spread awareness of secularism, and spend time together as a community.

Usually, our discussions are political, cultural, social topics during the meeting, not religious. But the religious perspective of those who attend are always welcomed. We wanted to create that respectful atmosphere where it was lacking.

We got some backlash from the campus because — I don't even know the percentage who identify as Christian — the majority is Christian, conservative. It is hard to have our presence be accepted or even known on campus with the overwhelming Christian and conservative presence.

We are just a rag tag group of like-minded free thinkers trying to get an event together and keep open perspectives. Getting all our members together for a meeting would be like trying to get a group of cats all together in the same room.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

SSM: [Laughing] It is very difficult. We may not have the support or exposure of more well-known student organizations, but even so, SSM has in a sense become like a family. I feel better knowing I am pursuing a line of work that can only benefit humanity and keeping my mind open. Being part of an organization that is neutral and non-partisan, that is not limited to adherence in a set belief system, seems the only way to be truly fair and to prepare for me for the future.

An Interview with Secular Student Society at Miami University — Part 2

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You mentioned the word faith, when referencing yourself, but you also mentioned humanism and secularism. To me, this makes me think you have a humanist and secularist perspective reconciled with a personal family tradition of Christianity.

Secular Student Society at Miami (SSM): I see a separation between faith and spirituality. I am spiritual without a faith-based belief system. I have a strong spirituality in how I feel connected to others. That is in showing compassion to other human beings. It is my only consolation, which would be my spirituality — feeling compassion for others and helping them. The best way for me to understand others is to have no faith whatsoever myself.

It is the best way to say, “I understand you because I have been someone exposed to your culture and your perception, and I may observe it, but by not adhering to it, I am not limited by the bounds of it.” I think that’s the best person to help, the best judge of neutrality. That is the reconciliation between faith and where I lie.

Jacobsen: The one reconciliation is taking what people usually assert for faith and shifting that from a transcendentalist orientation to a “here-and-now” orientation. What are some of the more valuable tips for campus secularist activism given the fact there is at least 10 Christian organizations compared to the one secular organization, for instance?

SSM: I would say get your message out there, but in a way that’s completely respectful of other organizations as well. It is not a competition, merely a leveling of the playing field.

People get a little uncomfortable with the term secularist or atheist, especially on a mostly religious campus. SMM strives to familiarize students. I think the lack of exposure of secular ideals has led to confusion and even aversion. We are not evil baby eaters who have no sense of morality.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

SSM: A tip would be to dispel misconceptions people have one person at a time. Through a conversation, person to person. Appeal to secularism but in a way that the individual will understand. Another way is to have the interfaith panels. There will be disagreement but the mere exposure to the spectrum of perceptions is what’s important, and that at some point there is no right or wrong answer.

SSM aims to keep as nonpartisan as possible, but we find it difficult when what you would like to get done or the political stances we agreed on as being basic and human rights are being disrupted.

Aim for a slow, gradual change in perspective of the group itself. I do think there has been a slow shift in perception towards humanism and secularism. But because of the current political climate, secular progress has backslid.

Small or newer organizations should seek support in a larger group. Let's say the Secular Student Alliance, who we are affiliated with, have SSA Con, where they will provide funding for SSM to attend. Find a larger or other organization for help to break down the barriers for understanding, get funding, you have to be relentless with it.

Jacobsen: I remember someone else using the term inter-belief rather than interfaith. I felt this was intentional this was inclusive of the whole suite of irreligious types within the general secular community.

Small things like language changes can bring people together from a common banner. Also, when people have interfaith panels, if inter-belief, they would have to by definition include you.

SSM: [Laughing]. Yes. Absolutely.

Americans becoming more secular

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 9, 2017

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It’s a politicized religion situation.

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

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

You see the disjunct.

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

An Interview with Kayla Bowen — President, SSA at Morehead State University

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is family background — culture, education, geography, language, and religiosity/irreligiosity?

Kayla Bowen: I grew up very poor. My high school was at one point ranked one of the worst in the state of Kentucky. I attend Morehead State University now as a Psychology and Philosophy double major. I'm also a board member for the national Secular Student Alliance as well as my local chapter President and Founder. I'm from Hazard, Kentucky. It's in the middle of the bible belt in rural Appalachia. Luckily I got out. My mother is very religious. I lived primarily with her until I went to college where I have my own place. She took me to church as a child, and indoctrinated me. When I told her I was an atheist she reacted worse than when I told her I was gay. My father doesn't really care much about that sort of thing, so he was supportive when I came out as an atheist. For a lot of secular people, however, they don't have as much support.

Jacobsen: What is the personal background in secularism for you? What were some seminal developmental events and realizations in personal life regarding it?

Bowen: For most of my life I was inwardly agnostic, meaning I wasn't open about it. On the outside I believed. When I was in high school, this creationist evidences pastor recruited me for his meetings, and I briefly became a creationist. The breaking point for me had to be when we all watched the Ken Ham vs. Bill Nye debate. That triggered my dissent into atheism.

Jacobsen: You are a president of the SSA at Morehead State University. What tasks and responsibilities comes with this position? Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Bowen: I delegate tasks to our other leadership. The biggest responsibility is knowing how to do everything so I can know what to tell others to do. It's a work in progress. This line of volunteering is important to me because secularism has become my life. I want to make life easier than it was for me being an atheist in a religious world.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Bowen: Knowing that these once misplaced nonreligious students now have a community, and a safe place to go when they have questions or concerns, or feel ostracized.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more valuable tips for campus secularist activism?

Bowen: Be on social media. It's the 21st century. Most college students are involved in it. Have a website. You will need a central hub to send people wanting information to. Don't be hostile to your campus religious groups. You don't want a bad reputation to where no one wants to cooperate with you. However, don't back down. Don't be afraid to express your identity. Be proud, but diplomatic.

Jacobsen: What have been some historic violations of the principles behind secularism on campus? What have been some successes to combat these violations?

Bowen: The campus clinic used to send pregnant women to the HOPE center off campus, which is a religious pro-life place. They're not even a qualified medical institution. SAGE, our local feminist group started a petition to stop this, and talked to the administration of the University and eventually got it changed. They now give out legitimate resources to women seeking information about pregnancy, and safe sex.

Jacobsen: What are the main areas of need regarding secularists on campus?

Bowen: Funding. I see all these religious groups on campus that have entire buildings dedicated to worship, while secular groups sometimes don't even have as much as a broom closet. We need space. It's not like we're 2 people on a campus of thousands. We're 25% of the population. If people saw that we had a space I feel like not only would we be taken more seriously, but we'd attract more secular people.

Jacobsen: What is your main concern for secularism on campus moving forward for the next few months, even years?

Bowen: That people will look over us, and not realize how difficult it can be to be nonreligious especially now that Mike Pence is our Vice President.

Jacobsen: What are the current biggest threats to secularism on campus?

Bowen: I'd say religious campus administration's lack of cooperation. On a wider scale though, we should be concerned about religious freedom legislation. That's where the major set backs are going to stem from.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Bowen: Being outnumbered by religious groups, and as a result not being considered.

Jacobsen: What are the main social and political activist, and educational, initiatives on campus for secularists?

Bowen: Right now, reproductive justice, racial justice, fighting Islamophobia, and LGBTQ rights. These aren't just problems that people affected by them should work on. It's our problem, and our duty to fight back against all forms of prejudices because we face them in the secular community every day.

Jacobsen: What are the main events and topics of group discussions for the alliance on campus?

Bowen: Our group, the Secular Student Alliance at Morehead State University does service projects, panels, and we make sure we discuss intersectionality in our meetings. Our main goal I think is to create awareness of our cause on campus, and within our community as well. We're working on having a debate right now this coming October. It'll be a basic creationism vs. atheism debate, to address the group's controversy on campus in a respectable manner.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved and maintain the secular student alliance ties on campus?

Bowen: You can go to secularstudents.org and find the group nearest to you. If there isn't one, start one! The Secular Student Alliance is there to make it as easy as possible to start a group. They have tons of resources available. Without them, Morehead's wouldn't exist. Once you have a group you can host events, go on field trips, or help the community. SSA allows you to network

with people in the secular movement you never would've met otherwise. You have the potential to make life long connections. There's an infinite amount of ways one can stay involved with the secular movement with an SSA chapter.

You can even stay involved with your local group, and on a national level after you graduate by becoming an alumni member.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Bowen: Check out my local group, the Secular Student Alliance at Morehead State University at msussa.com. Thanks so much for the opportunity!

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Kayla.

An Interview with Secular Student Society at Miami University — Part 3

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 11, 2017

Jacobsen: Does SSM provide for the groups for individuals who may not be explicit secularists?

SSM: Yes, we have members who come weekly, who identify as Christian, and SSM makes sure they have a chance, if they'd like, to give their perspective.

We also have students who I describe as a blending of belief in science and rationality, but through the lens of their belief system. They can separate their studies with the part they believe their faith plays in how they understand the world. This has given SSM a secular perspective that we haven't heard before.

I appreciate the members who don't identify as secularists. They are coming to broaden their understanding of themselves. We have members who come identifying with the cultural and social aspects for their cultural background, but not the faith within it. So, they are secular, but identify with their culture.

We have people who are not secular at all. They identify as faith-based believers. They come to hear what we have to say and liven up discussions.

We hope that like a sponge absorbing all types of liquids, they absorb some secular humanistic ideals. But it is a choice. We are a freethinkers group. I appreciate that aspect of SSM. It drew me to the group itself. There was no pressure to conform within it. Everyone has the right to express their beliefs.

We have done a great job of being inclusive and accepting. We can disagree at the end of the day. It makes for a good debate. These are knowledgeable and extremely articulate students having real conversation on hard topics, from so many different perspectives. I'm not seeing this anywhere else at Miami.

Jacobsen: You mentioned this was a forum to be neutral on beliefs. So, you present material and views from a secularist perspective and a discussion follows. But also, students have the ability to not feeling coaxed into one side or the other in the moment.

In terms of your own background, you have mentioned no formal faith, but you connect more with a sense of compassion and a sense of community while remaining rational and skeptical.

So, where do these values source themselves in personal background?

SSM: I attribute my disposition to a combination of the different circumstances that shaped me. My mom always made sure to remind us that no matter what struggles we faced it would be together as a family. This resilience was instilled in me.

We always got through struggles because we have been worse off before but we got through that, so we can get through whatever it is now. I was exposed to other people in similar situations, worse situations, suffering, I found purpose in helping others.

I try to be intentional in everything I do. I'm very self-aware, introspective in that I like to avoid complacency. A conscious control of behavior. Minimalism is a big part. Reduce the things I 'need' and just focus on breaking down barriers that reduce approachability and really reaching people — learning from human interaction.

In a Stoic sense, I take time find pleasure in the simplest things, like really appreciating that first bite into a perfectly ripe piece of fruit. To keep my mind clear and focused on my goals, I abstain from a lot of common indulgences most undergraduate students partake in. By living a simple life, I'm starting to find that fulfillment.

My character has always been one of compassion. I learned it from my mom. She's such a caring person. I owe my compassion and success to her. She has sacrificed a lot, more than I can even comprehend, to get my family to where we are.

Now, she is a school nurse. Which requires a natural disposition for compassion and helping others. How can I not absorb some of that nature? But because I'm still young, I realize that I'm compassionate even to a fault. I'm stubborn and don't like to give up on people. I want people to become the best version of themselves.

How does this compassion influence relations on campus?

I think students and my professors sense my commitment. I come with palms open, not arms crossed. I attend religious services for different belief systems so that I have the breadth of their perspective, and that my presence — and in extent SSM's presence- is known as open and inclusive.

I don't know if you'd call it altruism, but I feel this obligation to spread some of the success and community I have been given to other students who may be struggling. Even though I'm the same age as my peers, I often get mistaken for being much older because I give off this maturity and self-motivation. I've always been aware of this growing up. I found the solution in teaching.

In higher education, with such a brief stint at a college or university, I get that there is resistance to be committal in improving the community because in 4 years your life will most likely not center around your university.

I wish the community was a little closer and cohesive. As a college, it is constantly changing. There is a sense of detachment to the place itself because they are there for such a short amount of time. It is hard to make that difference in that short amount of time.

We are all trying to find ourselves [Laughing].

An Interview with Karen Loethen — Previous Member, Meramec Secular Student Alliance — Part 1

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is family background — geography, culture, language, religion/irreligion, and education?

Karen Loethen: Thanks, Scott. I come from a small town in Illinois, just your basic homogeneously white, lower-income Christian small town. My family didn't really practice religion much until I was in my younger teens. My own parents come from differing religious, Mom was Methodist and Dad was Catholic.

Their two families clashed over these differences so we kids were mostly kept away from religion just for the peace of it for my parents. But I was very attracted to it so I visited churches of many differing Christian denominations over my childhood years. I truly thought that "good" girls went to church and I was a good girl!

Jacobsen: What is the personal background in secularism for you? What were some seminal developmental events and realizations in personal life regarding it?

Loethen: Luckily enough for me, I was also a reader and a researcher. After grad school I got married and had my first child. It was during this period that I was doing massive reading on the historicity of religion.

The obvious man made nature of religion allowed me, first, to reject any contact with religious institutions. This was satisfying for me for about a year.

All of the doubting and reason (not to mention the complete absence of historical support for religious claims) simply couldn't support the religion any longer. During that time, I was still thinking of myself as a deist. I was 34 years old when I realized that the existence of a deity was simply inconsistent with all observable and known reality.

I was reading the Bible, perhaps not ironically, when I got a thought out of the blue: BAM. *This book is ridiculous and there is no god. It makes no sense.*

It was an incredible moment for me that truly changed my life!

Without the slightest bit of exaggeration, a ton of weight slipped off of my shoulders that moment and I've been incredibly happy ever since.

Jacobsen: You were a member of the Meramec community for a semester. The semester was spent in the freethinkers' club on campus and the SSA. How did you find them, eventually? Why were you drawn to them?

Loethen: I was interested in the fledgling club because I believe in the process of THINKING and in the power of COMMUNITY. The group's founder, Kyle, was very active on campus with various campus clubs, including being president of the Student Governance Council (SGC).

SGC is the group that oversees campus clubs. He was so busy and also about to graduate so he asked me, begged me really, to help build the Freethinker's Club that he had started on campus.

I'd seen one of his little flyers on a bulletin board one evening when I was taking a break from my class. I took a picture of the flyer on my phone and contacted the email address a few days later. I was delighted to see an atheist presence on campus! I am very drawn to people who take initiative and who are true thinkers like Kyle. I was very excited to support his efforts.

What I discovered, though, is how very new and ailing the group was. Kyle was simply too busy to put in the kind of time he longed to offer the club and the students on campus didn't seem interested in a secular club.

Kyle and another guy worked hard, but I think they had a lot to learn about group organization and planning and such, just like any student would; that's not a criticism. Most other clubs on campus were continuous groups that had been in place for many years, faculty support, campus presence, tons of inherited momentum.

Kyle, knowing he was about to graduate the campus, begged me for weeks to give the club a hand in getting a stronger foothold. I resisted for a long time because I felt that the clubs on campus were for the kids and I am, well, not a kid. I finally agreed to give it a single, intense semester of push.

The first thing I did was take our group over and join the national organization Student Secular Alliance, the SSA, because why reinvent the wheel? SSA offers tons of support to groups seeking to have a secular voice on campus, including a personal advocate online to help in any way they can.

Jacobsen: Now, you remain a parent, of a secular student. While a student at Meramec, you took your kid to school too. How does bonding with a child through a common ground, secularism, help build trust and friendship within the family?

Loethen: Oh, that one's obvious, I think. With no forbidden subjects, no belief in the concept of sin, and no ridiculously male-oriented overseeing body of rule makers, our family is extremely open with and supportive of our kids' interests and activities.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more valuable tips for secularist activism on and off campus?

Loethen: I'm not sure I can say what is a road to successful secularist activism on campus because our club wasn't successful. Perhaps that was because of the Christian vibe on campus, or the young minds' inability to think outside of their religion, or maybe it was simply the commuter nature of our campus.

I'm sad to think that the club doesn't have a major presence on campus because I know of several students who would approach, then avoid, then approach, then avoid the group activities. I could see the cognitive dissonance working in them; I could see that they were thinking and I know that a secular entity being available is important to their journey.

But I'm happy to tell you things that we tried over the two semesters of my involvement with the club. We put out press releases for activities that we did on campus.

We had some very interesting speakers come to our meetings, from activists and scientists to philosophers, we did several fundraisers for Project Peanut Butter (a wonderful program that funds a nutritious peanut butter-like product that gives intensive nutrition to the most needy populations of children in Malawi and Sierra Leone), we created social events, and we held

informational tables on campus for both secularism in general and for our group in particular. We also had a couple of social events for members.

As for off campus, I'm a huge atheist activist. I have several blogs, I have a podcast called *The Secular Parents* on a Youtube channel called Secular TV, and this month I will be speaking to the atheist community at an atheist convention in St. Louis called Gateway to Reason.

How to be an activist? Be openly atheist and live a life of integrity, peace, knowledge, and reason.

An Interview with Secular Student Society at Miami University — Part 4

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 12, 2017

Jacobsen: There was another point on universal education. In particular, the improvement of our situation. What do you mean by universal education, improve, and the situation being improved?

SSM: That is a loaded question [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

SSM: [Laughing] So, universal education is accessible, neutral in its beliefs, and it provides meaning to people's lives by imparting a sense of fulfilment through inclusion.

Education stressed very young in a person's life can improve their situation. Improving your situation means access to basic rights, and being aware that you do in fact have a right to these things. Universal education is a way to lift people up so they can effectively carry out their goal or mission that they would like to do for the world.

Progress comes through universal education. Working towards providing this for everyone is good for the beneficence for mankind. It seems like a no-brainer.

Jacobsen: To improve the situation for mankind, or human kind, do you think some people are setup to be more compassionate, and why?

SSM: That is a tough question. Something I've been thinking over. If you consider professional athletes or musicians as people who make significant advancements within a specific field, they have a developed skill set that is very rare.

You can't expect everyone to be Mozart or LeBron James. But because they exist in the first place, it means there is that ability to have that high achievement within their area. Why can't we expect that within the realm of compassion? Of humanism?

I think the only way to foster humanism, to see that progression towards improving your life, and showing compassion and neutrality in how we treat each other is universal education. Until one day the significant gains made by these exceptions become commonplace, but I certainly won't discount people who had circumstances that set them up with a disposition towards compassion.

Jacobsen: You have an expertise in psychopathology. For those reading this, it does not mean an expertise in psychopaths, sociopaths, and antisocial personality disorder types in general. When I focus on people being more set up for compassion, I think of individuals, akin to but not as hereditarily strongly, with schizophrenia, which is probably 80% hereditary.

For the most part, and you would know better than I would, we are the compassionate species. We build very large social networks, from which we can build tribes, cities, metropolises, and states.

SSM: Actually it does. Psychopathology is an effort to understand the genetic, biological, and social causes of mental disorders. Any type of abnormal pathology.

Psychologists are still trying to figure this out. What extent of disposition is affected by nature versus nurture.

And I agree, we are a compassionate species. When there are violations of humanist ideals, I don't focus on individual blame, but ask where did we go wrong as a society to not educate and prepare against these violations? A collectivist ideal I bring is not to fault the individual, but, "Where did society have a lack of compassion or have a misunderstanding and a lack of inclusion? How can we improve that?"

I think that's how I was drawn to my field of studies.

Jacobsen: I want to draw this back into your compassion — how you'd see worms washing out of the ground. Can you expand on that?

SSM: I have always noticed small details, what others didn't. That very trait is what made me want to pursue behavioural analysis. In this line of work, it is necessary to notice the small details people inadvertently divulge during interaction, how that can be displayed within their behaviour, and what this says about their general state.

As a child, I noticed a lot. I am very perceptive, listening, and observing first then asking the right questions to put myself into the mindset of whatever I was observing.

In the playground, as an example, I didn't want to be part of any hurt that would happen to living things because I didn't want to be ignorant of it.

Even as a kid, I thought, "What will even happen to those worms on the sidewalk? Tomorrow they'll be dead and dried up to become something crusty on the sidewalk that is kicked around." The indignation I felt! Even as a small kid, I'd spend my recess on those rainy days picking up each worm and putting them safely back in the soil.

It just felt right. I have the ability to move them back into the soil and try to repair whatever damage the rain caused. The worms just happen to find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. I hope that one day if I find myself in a similar circumstance, the same mercy would be extended."

I felt this obligation upon myself to do something. It was not out of my way. It felt like second nature [Laughing]. This compassion, is it ingrained? Or is it because of where I grew up? Or who I've interacted with?

I don't have an answer to that. That is one we're still working on.

Jacobsen: Thank you. You wanted to expand more on the issues at Miami University. One of them would be combatting or working against the dehumanization of everyday workers on campus. Those that would be cleaning toilets in campus dorms, janitorial staff, food service workers.

SSM: Against those on the margins of campus as well, on the fringes. There have been instances of inflammatory material like racist and nativist posters hung around campus. That would be another loss because it means we failed, the community failed, for them to think it was acceptable to hold that belief and act on it.

As students, we are at pivotal developmental moments in our life — we are still impressionable. And to crush humanist compassion, to take that away, is a disservice to them and everyone in the community.

Jacobsen: Success would be through inclusion. What is your definition of “inclusion”?

SSM: Inclusion is the validation of someone’s experience through acceptance. Within that, the subsequent improvement of their experience through education.

Through education, we learn inclusion; by educating someone, we practice inclusion. Inclusion is proximal compassion, and must be considered a right if we want progress.

It is a naïve wish that everyone would get that inclusion, or feel that inclusion. It is something to work towards collectively.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time.

SSM: Thank you.

An Interview with Karen Loethen — Previous Member, Meramec Secular Student Alliance — Part 2

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are your main concerns for the secular community off campus, in society that is, now?

Karen Loethen: Oh, Scott, so many. I'll try to keep my capitalizations down to a minimum. Lol I have HUGE concern for the many ways that the religious right has put institutional religion into the schools, into the minds of our children. The textbooks that offer CREATION as a true counterpoint to the Big Bang and evolution...ludicrous and criminal! Teaching this to the kids, whose minds are open and interested and listening?!

Do you know that atheists are the least trusted group in our nation? Less trusted than rapists. Seriously? In the United States of America, people actually prefer religious thought and control to reason. It truly boggles my mind. People are willing to close their minds to the hideous abuses of the church (HIDEOUS abuses). People prefer the idea of faith over knowledge. This is not only lazy, it is also dangerous!

Oh, Scott, this list is way too long; I could go on for pages.

Jacobsen: What is the main battleground for secularism, its values and principles and their implementation in America now?

Loethen: Obviously in our politics. Our nation actually still has *In God We Trust* on every bit of currency that circulates through our hands every single day. Public policy is continually impacted by the religious beliefs of the masses. The inconsistent and hateful practices of various religious institutions actually impact the laws of this country, a country founded on the essential tenet of separation of church and state. The people in power in our country bring their religions into our governmental halls.

Every time secularism gets a toe hold anywhere the religious right rallies and starts shouting *We are being attacked!*

Oh gosh, I could go on and on here too, Scott.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Loethen: The threats to secularism on campus are the same threats to secularism on this planet. People's fear and ignorance keeps minds shackled to their religions. Secularism truly frightens people. We had several instances of violence towards our club announcements as well as emails from people that were, shall we say, unsupportive of our club on campus.

Jacobsen: What are the bigger misconceptions about secularists? What truths dispel them?

Loethen: Also an easy one! Atheists are thought to be Devil worshippers. LOL...which is hilarious! Atheists are *a*-theists. We believe in NO deities. None. And that includes the scary ones they've created for themselves. But I understand this one because the church really scares the heck out of people with regards to their demons and whatnot.

That atheists are a group. All the word atheist means is *without a deity*; there is no way to characterize a single atheist based on any other one.

That atheists have no morals. Religion didn't invent the idea of good behavior, that is a human thing. On the contrary, many of the atheists that I know are so very THINKING. Our behavior is based on our thoughts, on the situation, on reality...there is very little black and white thinking among the secular.

That atheists are angry at a god. Again, no. We have no belief in a god of any kind, therefore anger at a non-existent thing makes no sense. But, again, I understand where this comes from. The church scares believers so much about atheists. I remember being a believer and learning how scary and slippery atheists were.

There are many more myths about atheists propagated by the church, tons of them.

Oh, another one really quick: atheist can't experience real joy.

LOL — SO wrong! I have never experienced the truly sublime until I began to recognize the realities of our species, of our world, of our galaxy, of our universe.

Jacobsen: What were the main events — even though the group was more or less dead — and topics of group discussions for the alliance on campus?

Loethen: Activism and fundraising, talks about questions of morality, conversations about what does it mean to be secular or atheist, talks about being strong when being attacked, what we wanted to do as a group, and possibly the best thing we offered: being open to any and all questions one might have.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved and maintain the secular student alliance ties on campus? How can citizens become secular activists, and make even a minor impact?

Loethen: Good question. Some people actually can't be open and active as a secular person because the costs to them may be too high at any given moment. But I think that being open and out as much as possible is important. If you can't be open, still read and research and talk to trusted people.

The more THINKING people we have on each campus, on this globe, the better our chances of survival as a species and the more peaceful our world can be.

To become involved you might start by informing yourself, read and learn as much as you can, join groups with like-minded people. Start with yourself, see. There are cool and interesting hobby clubs out there, from rock collecting to nature clubs to rocketry to astronomy to debate. These clubs encourage critical thinking and help people to recognize when logical fallacies are trying to sneak into the argument. Listen to podcasts, read books, etc.

Then, put the word out there.

Simply living and open life of integrity is a huge thing.

To make greater impact, help social movements that mean something to you, join organizations that support the secular agenda, vote or even run for office, pay it forward. We in the secular community have some excellent resources these days thanks to the connections of the internet. Use your skills and interests in ways that grow the community.

Even if you can't or don't wish to participate in such a way, live a life being true to yourself. That is incredibly difficult and very admirable.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Loethen: Scott, keep doing what you are doing! You are doing what I mentioned above, taking your talents, skills, and interests and using them to improve yourself and the world around you. Good work.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Karen.

Freedom of Thought in the US: On the Origin of Humanist Education in the United States

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 13, 2017

The American educational system developed from European education, where humanism affected the establishment of schools (Koopman, 1987). Under the affluence, social and political organization, and increased communication of Western Europe, enlightened education revived interest in the Humanist classics of Greco-Roman cultures, where humanism had been taken for granted.

The revival profoundly impacted the full development of the individual — the hallmark of early American education. Liberal Arts were taught alongside science and theology. Most American elite universities were founded as religious institutions (Coudriet, 2016).

There was a recognition that progress and truth were discoverable with a broad periphery. ‘Periphery,’ as in, the ability to focus on individual development outside of the core aspect of the curricula. ‘Progress,’ at this point, meaning the amalgamation of knowledge.

Early colonial education designed to further religious understanding and to prepare society for life in the New World meant free universal education promoted the virtues of humanism under a Christian lens.

The growth of state and tax funding for educational institutions meant the integrity of education catered to the needs of the local populace, not the elites. Dissemination of humanist ideals for the sake of appeasement created an irreversible impact on the curriculum development of higher education systems.

Over time, waves of reform following the Industrial Revolution impacted the academic environment by emphasizing performance over quality. The importance of humanist ideals were put on the backburner of importance in the quest for scientific advancement and technological mastery. These forces brought untold development in wellbeing and quality of life, while, at the same time, reducing the implementation of humanist values.

The return of humanist rationale may be credited with the publication of Darwin’s material on evolution in 1859, starting with *On the Origin of Species*, which, in some ways, was a response to *Natural Theology* (1802) published by William Paley.

Progress took on a new meaning of neutrality and movement towards humanist qualities, especially with the overwhelming support of an irreligious explanation for development, adaptation, and speciation. The Creationist explanation for the origin of life was dispelled.

Without the necessity of a divine artificer to explain life, the educational curricula was freed from the bounds of theistic explanation and theological influence. There was surprise and indignation from the Creationists.

Mankind, as they saw — and thought that they knew — it, was reduced from being the pinnacle of creation to the descendants of lowly pre-humans. We were seen as the evolutionary byproduct of natural forces.

Our survival, and evolutionary success, was from ‘inferior’ species, in contradistinction to the metanarrative from the Holy Bible about the Creation of Man by God — and Fall of Man due to Adam’s and Eve’s sins.

The contribution of evolution by Darwin is both scientific and pedagogical. He contributed scientifically to the fields of biology and medicine, which experts deem as foundational to the curricula. As a result, a serious problem of the source of truth was placed on the establishment of education at the time. Although Darwin’s contribution created initial upheaval, humanist rationale was cemented into the American public education system through John Dewey in the 1920’s (Law of Liberty, n.d.a).

Dewey’s efforts revolutionized America with a return to progressive education. As the founder of the American Humanist Association, Dewey is known as the “father of progressive education and Humanism in America.”

Fast forward to the current educational climate. Although there exists no formal discrimination in education, per se, the undertones in the culture provide the clearest example of the prejudice against humanist values, or humanists as people.

Also, there is modern hysteria from the religious community against humanism, as in humanism equals atheism, and by extension atheism equals communism (Law of Liberty, n.d.b). This is in the same theme of non-believers being shunned by their community with general intolerance of the irreligious, even family and friends. As noted by IHEU beloved Bob Churchill:

I think in more liberal, secular countries it may be easy to forget or not to think about this social discrimination for the mainstream broadly secular population — though not if you’re raised in a ‘conservative’ religious community of course! But across huge parts of the world, criticism of religious beliefs, practices or institutions may be viewed as deeply suspicious, or even as malevolent. To actually assert boldly “I do not believe in this God or his prophet” could mean being thrown out of your own family, losing friends, losing your support network. To supposedly ‘insult’ religion can get you lynched. (Jacobsen, 2017)

It is also worth noting the struggle between progress and tradition, as seen in the style of educational administrations. Autocratic oriented administrations resist new ideas and sacrifice potential humanist growth for the sake of a smoothly run system (Koopman, 1987, p. 234)

Democratic administrations are more open to recognize and praise outside ideas, and are concerned with growth of individuals, specifically freedom from annoyances of the exposure to preeminent belief systems (Pew Research Center, n.d.).

Secular education reform would resist partisanship, instead pushing dominant belief systems into a foreground of neutrality for student success. That is, it is distinct, but related to, a humanist style of education (Anderson, n.d.).

However, secular education reform would provide the nonpartisan foundation for the education by fighting repressive forces that seek to reduce humanism, or other minority ways of life.

A humanist education would affirm values adjunct to the secular education. Support of objectives such as family-life education, continuing or adult education, and sexual education are critical to promotion of humanism (Koopman, 1987, p. 234).

A secular education is the most reasonable and just response. Keeping the status quo for the sake of efficiency within the system is at the expense of humanist progress. If there is to be just education for every student within the system, disruption of these practices are necessary.

Urging qualitative as opposed to quantitative reforms may, over time, produce a higher priority of humanistic ideals.

References

Anderson, M. (n.d.). Principles of Humanist Education. Retrieved from <http://web.cortland.edu/andersmd/mda/mahome.htm>.

Coudriet, C. (2016, July 19). Top 25 Christian Colleges: The Essential Questions On Religion And Education. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/cartercoudriet/2016/07/19/top-25-christian-colleges-the-essential-questions-on-religion-and-education/#488ccf7f5576>.

Jacobsen, S.D. (2017, July 8). Conversation on Discrimination Against Non-Believers with Bob Churchill — Session 1. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/humanist-voices/conversation-on-discriminations-against-non-believers-with-bob-churchill-session-1-dcb8638ab56d>.

Koopman, R.G. (1987, Spring). The Thread of Humanism in the History of American Education. Retrieved from www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/jcs/jcs_1987spring_koopman.pdf.

Law of Liberty. (n.d.a). The Threats of Humanism #1. Retrieved <http://www.lawofliberty.com/sermons/Resources/01-humanismthreats.pdf>.

Law of Liberty. (n.d.b). The Threat of Humanism #2. Retrieved from <http://www.lawofliberty.com/sermons/Resources/02-humanismthreats.pdf>.

Pew Research Center. (n.d.). Religious Landscape Survey. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

An Interview with Kato Mukasa — Board Member, IHEU

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 14, 2017

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

Mukasa: Yes, but the background was never very directly linked to humanism as I know it to day but it as more to do with awakening my critical thinking skills and increase doubt in whatever was being said by religious people. My mother was religious but my father was rather liberal. He read lot of literature on philosophy and gave me several works of Leo Tolstoy, Voltaire, works on Plato, Socrates and I found several critical novels written by Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe. What my father did was to encourage me to read, though I did not have lots of time with him growing up. The literature I read as a teen somewhat made me start questioning several things as a young person but it was my skeptical agnostic grandfather who seriously made me question all about religion. My grandfather never attended church and was too critical of religion and its leaders. By the time I joined secondary school I was questioning much about the God theories and believing more in employing my reasoning, research, and science in answering things that looked difficult to understand.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find humanism, or a humanist community? You are from Kampala, Uganda, and currently live there too.

Mukasa: I had read one book: ‘Wretched of the Earth’ in 1997 and the author talked about Humanism in the passing and when I first joined University in 1999, I attended Philosophy lectures out of curiosity and the teacher talked about different types of religious beliefs including unbelief. It was then that he explained Humanism in details that I then discovered that even when I had been taking myself as an atheist for some time then, I was equally a humanist too and somewhat I loved the idea and methodology behind humanism and the works done by humanists even more. I began researching and finding out more about humanism that by end of 2001 I had noted there was already one humanist organisation in Uganda, the Uganda Humanists Association (UHASSO) which I later associated with and in 2007 found the Humanists Association for Leadership, Equity and Accountability (HALEA)

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

Mukasa: Those who do not believe in gods/ God but want to be doing works that empower the vulnerable, promote human rights and challenge retrogressive religious and cultural practices find it appropriate to label themselves as Humanists.

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

Mukasa: It was nice to know that there were more other people with whom we share the same world view. It made me know that I am not alone and indeed I have a family of critical thinkers I can associate with.

Jacobsen: You studied commercial law at CUU Kampala, and economics and social administration at Makerere University. What were the main lessons and theories from these educational experiences?

Mukasa: The lessons are many but they all boil down to one thing in my view: that my skills and education is useless if I do not put it to serve my passion. My passion is in empowering others to discover the potential in them and to empower the most vulnerable and powerless individuals in our communities. Whether it is the knowledge in economics or law that I have I want to utilize to live a purpose driven life to keep on doing what I love doing.

Jacobsen: You have a broad base of professional experience through work as at and at International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation, and as the former president at Uganda Young Leaders Platform, former director at Bigtalk studio, and former member at Uganda. What were the tasks and responsibilities involved in those positions, or at those organizations?

Mukasa: {Note, I have not worked at De Mensu but visited them} I have been more of a leader, manager or member of the organisations are mentioned. In brief my experience is more into management and making things happen in challenging work settings.

Jacobsen: At present, you are the director of legal services & humanist ceremonies at Humanist Association for Leadership, Equity and Accountability (HALEA), chair of the Uganda Humanist Association, and board member at the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

Mukasa: All these positions are very challenging. At HALEA, I am in charge of legal affairs and Humanists Ceremonies. We have issues that call for the application of legal knowledge and I keep on working towards getting the vulnerable people we work with — out of trouble. I have handled rape and defilement cases, land evictions, parental neglect and domestic violence issues. For humanist ceremonies, I am currently championing the training of humanist celebrants in Uganda and other African countries. At UHASSO I and a team of committed leaders are working towards rebuilding it and taking it to greater heights. IHEU is one busy and result oriented organisation whose work is international. This keeps me busy attending board meetings and following up tasks given to me that in most cases link me up with several countries.

Jacobsen: What seem like the core parts of humanist thought? Who are living and dead exemplars of humanism as an ethical and philosophical worldview?

Mukasa: Humanism is beyond critiquing religions and its dogma. It goes into changing people's lives for the better and putting people first in whatever do. There are several humanists doing exceptionally good things but I will point out Josh Kutchinsky — The founder of HUMMAY- for his resilience in linking up humanists together ensuring that the world comes to the rescue of humanists in danger.

Jacobsen: How we expand the internationalist, humanist movement and its message of compassion, science, rationality, and unity?

Mukasa: It is important to identify freethinkers in countries where organised humanism is missing. Then it is at that stage that need to come up and support them get organised and support them start organisations that can have an impact in society.

Jacobsen: There can be many damaging effects from religion. What are the damaging effects of and the positive aspects of religion? How can humanism ameliorate those damaging effects — as you see them? How can humanism improve upon the positives of religion?

Mukasa: Religion makes many people swallow every lie in the name of faith. Many people in Africa do heinous crimes in the name of religion. Things like marrying off children, stopping the sick from accessing medicine in the guise of prayers can heal any disease and selling off property to donate money to the already rich pastors are some of the things that result because many religious people don't question what their religious leaders say. There are also those who kill in the name of Allah and those who treat non-believers as infidels. The positive aspect of religion I see is getting people together and believe in any cause as long as they believe God or Allah wishes it so. The damaging effects can only be ameliorated by promoting critical thinking and getting more freethinkers to challenge the ills that come with religion. Humanism must learn that religious people are able to rally together because they're convinced in whatever they believe in. It is vital that humanists are well grounded in their own world view and be able to share it with the world from an informed viewpoint.

Jacobsen: What are some of the big future initiatives for you? What have been some honest successes and failures of the Ugandan humanist movement?

Mukasa: At Pearl Vocational Training College, we are starting a course to teach Humanists to become Celebrants not only in Uganda but in several African countries. I have been able to establish HALEA and we have been able to transform it into a strong and results-oriented humanist organisation that inspires many others especially in Africa. On the whole, the Uganda Humanists Movement has achieved lots of success in terms of starting legal organisations that are spread in all parts of Uganda. We have several humanists' schools too that are training students to think beyond the national syllabus that is heavily influenced by religious indoctrination. The movement is still failing to effectively make Humanism a life stance that is well known and respected in the country. We need to work more on the publicity part of humanism.

Jacobsen: Also, if you take the Ugandan humanist movement, how can places, like Canada where I live, learn from its successes and failures?

Mukasa: Canada and other countries in the more free world have no excuse for failing to have strong humanists' organisations because they have at least more informed people and tolerant governments. This is not the case for us in Uganda and the rest of Africa but despite the many challenges we have managed to start humanists organisations and run them to some reasonable success. Our failures stem more on our lack of adequate resources including finances to make things happen and repressive regimes that curtail our operation and once humanists' organisations can manoeuvre through this then there is no cause to worry about failing.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Mukasa: Humanism is the best world view that all humans should be embracing if we are to live in a more rational, happy and free world. Humanists must dare to stand up and be counted wherever they are, we must avoid playing second fiddle to religions and endeavour to champion causes that make the gods-obsessed people see the relevancy in being humanists.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time today, Kato, it was a pleasure.

An Interview with James-Adeyinka Shorungbe — Director, Humanist Assembly of Lagos

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 15, 2017

This interview has been edited for clarity, concision, and readability.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So you are the director of the Humanist Assembly of Lagos. What are some tasks and responsibilities that come along with that position?

James-Adeyinka Shorungbe: Essentially, organizing the affairs of the organisation, charting annual programs to promote critical thinking in Lagos (Nigeria), maintaining relationships with other organizations such as IHEU, IHEYO, NHM. HAL is also a founding member body of the humanist movement in Nigeria so I actively involved in that regard.

Jacobsen: What are some of the impediments to the education and advocacy for both critical thinking and humanism within Nigeria?

Shorungbe: First, Nigeria is a society highly entrenched in superstition. So that is a major, impediment, to promoting critical thinking. In order to address that, education and awareness has to be done. While the Government is trying to improve the literacy level from its current level of just under 60%, a number of topics that promote critical thinking are not being taught in schools.

Evolution is not being taught in schools. Anthropology is not taught in schools. History is not taught, as so on. So there's education but low application of critical thinking to challenge the norm. Creationism is the only story taught in schools. So this creates an entire mindset of citizens who are highly superstitious. You also have the movie industry churning out a lot of superstition which the citizens all buy into and believe literacy as factual.

As a major impediment, superstition is a big, big problem. To address this, not enough of our message is getting out there. To be honest, I don't think we're doing enough to get our message out there in terms of awareness and enlightenment. We have barely scratched the surface in terms of addressing superstition in Nigeria.

Jacobsen: With the larger culture having a superstitious mindset in addition to the alignment of that superstition with the education system in a lot of respects, from the perspective of the larger society looking at an organization such as the Humanist Assembly in Lagos, what is their general perception of the organization if they're coming to this with a superstitious perception in addition to the education system that bolsters the superstition?

Shorungbe: The few people who we have interacted with, they generally do not understand humanism or humanists. Their perception is anything that doesn't recognize any divine being is straight evil, paganism, evildoers, etc. People we've had interactions with, often ask shocking "So you mean you don't believe in God?"

When you try to get across the message that human problems and human situations can be solved by humans and are best solved by human efforts, we always get push backs, "No, no, no, you need to have divine intervention." It is something strange to them, to the society — very strange.

Jacobsen: How are the number of humanists looking in Nigeria? So if you take a survey of public attitudes and beliefs, like, how many humanists can one expect to find in Nigeria, or at least in the area surrounding in Lagos?

Shorungbe: Because Nigeria is a very conservative society and a lot of people do not openly identify as humanists, atheists, and freethinkers, agnostics, etc it is a bit difficult to count. Many official forms and data gathering application usually only have the two main faiths as beliefs. However, when you go to online forums, when you go on social media, there are quite a lot of Nigerians who express them as nonbelievers.

There was research — I think by the Pew organization. It stated that as many as 2–3% of Nigerians are humanists, freethinkers, nonreligious. In a population of 180 million, 2–3% would come to 3 to 5 million Nigerians, but many are not outspoken. But in terms of the outspoken ones, we have very few humanists who are openly affiliated humanism and agnosticism online and offline.

Jacobsen: I have had discussions with other humanists, atheists, freethinkers, and so on, about having umbrella organizations as a key element of having the global community of atheists and humanists under a common umbrella to work towards common goals. Do you think that is an important part of solving problems that others and you experience when, for instance, coming to teaching correct scientific theories in the biological sciences with evolutionary theory?

Shorungbe: Yes, definitely, it is. With an umbrella body, you have a louder voice. You have more clout. That is one of the reasons why in Nigeria a number of associations we are all coming under the umbrella of the national body ‘Nigerian Humanist Movement’. Aside from the online community of The Nigerian Atheists and a couple of chat groups, we are still fragmented in Nigeria.

The Humanist Assembly of Lagos is one of 2 organizations that is formally registered and trying to break barriers and putting the voice out there for other humanists to appreciate they are not alone. That you can be different. That you can be good without any divine belief. The importance of having an umbrella body is very critical. Now, with an umbrella body, we can have representation push to the through the Nigerian National Assembly, through government bodies, etc. We can better organize to ensure the adoption of more scientific methods in schools — for example, advocate for the teaching of evolutionary theory in school curriculums.

Jacobsen: As a last question — two tied together, what are some near future initiatives of the Humanist Assembly of Lagos? Also, how can people get in contact to help or donate in some way?

Shorungbe: For the future, we will be looking to organise events that can showcase and promote humanism as well as critical thinking. Events such as film screenings, lectures, debates etc. Are also toying with the ideal of a radio show to enlighten the general public and kick start discussions the public space. A radio where speakers would come on and talk essentially, about everyday human issues and how these can be addressed without thinking they are caused by divine or superstitious means.

Just essentially, enlighten the public that various challenges one has in life can be addressed by practical action, which do not require divine intervention.

Essentially promoting humanism, freethinking, atheism, agnosticism in a bigger national level.

To get in touch with us, we are reachable by email: humanistassemblylagos@yahoo.com. We're also have a page on Facebook Humanist Assembly of Lagos and Twitter under the [@humanistalagos](#). That's how we can be contacted.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Adeyinka.

A Call for the Reclamation of Music

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 16, 2017

Steve Martin produced one of the first hymns for the atheist crowd in, well, probably ever, which he termed the “the entire atheist hymnal” ([Martin, 2017](#); [V1de0Lovr, 2011](#)). And its actually very good, not only because he’s a talented musician and an extremely gifted comedian — among the best ever by a reasonable IMDb peer review measurement, but because a) there’s nothing to compare it to so the hymn remains both the best and the worst of its kind by definition internally and b) I have sung in a university choir and find the song ‘pleasing to the ear’ ([IMDb, 2013](#)).

Martin sings the hymn with a quartet of male singers in the performance, which has, likely, become the first staple of the atheist hymnal genre — hopefully more to come — and goes against the expected stereotype from two angles. Angle one, those looking at the rather thin, tawdry, and rather small set of texts — simply Hume and Voltaire for starters — devoted to atheism as compared to those — such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas — oozing with praise to the Heavens, and God the Almighty Father, and with tacit, nay explicit, statement of how “so absolutely huge” or simply big is the Theity reflect the musical world ([247adam, 2008](#)). Religion, or worship and communal rituals, dominates the historical, and so the present, landscape.

Take, for example, *Herz Und Mund Und Tat Und Leben*, or “Heart and Mouth and Deed and Life,” a beautiful piece of work by Johann Sebastian Bach and one of the more memorable pieces of music in the older Western canon, which brings mist to my eyes, sometimes ([Umut Sağesen, 2007](#); [Marshall & Emery, 2016](#)). Or one closer to home, by Bach once more, played with a dead, reasonably famous, Canadian pianist named Glenn Gould and accompanied by another artist, a singer, named Russell Oberlin, it was entitled Bach Cantata 54 ([Xiaolei Chen, 2011](#)). It is another moving piece with a sentiment for the transcendent; something outside and other, even infinitely mysterious — lovely piece. So angle one is the communal and social, and well-established, music is seen as religious. Many people coming to think of the ways in which the religious music is in congregations as, in some way, akin to these pieces of music.

Angle two, the music typically associated with irreligious individuals does not tend to associate with the communal or the social, but, rather, with the a-social, antisocial, or the deviant. There seems to me a negative valuation of some music, which then becomes associated with irreligiosity, even Satanism, including the rock n’ roll and head bangin’ band movements. Those two angles, of many, seem to influence the perception, and so the motivation, for the development of an irreligious genre of music, even hymns — until now.

Pragmatic Living and Rising from the Ashes

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 16, 2017

Humanism seems like a practical ethical philosophy to me. A way to develop the appropriate acts of morality in life grounded in a scientific and physicalist interpretation of the world — granting the strange interpretations of the ‘physical’.

The foundational aspects of the world seem to be the physical, the material, or the atomistic. A world built on atoms, for most intents and purposes, with construction into the material or the physical. That is, the atomistic, by precise definitions from physics, of the world into the apparent material or physical sensed, perceived, and conceived from evolved organs and capacities.

With the diminishment, or reduction, in the viability of the philosophy of the supernatural, not necessarily the metaphysical, conception of the world, the diminishment of the supernaturalist, transcendentalist, philosophies appears, not only palpable, but understandable too.

Religion in the advanced societies continues to diminish — but over generations — and will continue to attenuate with more time, based on projections by Pew Research Center. Its diminishment seems a pity, and one with a silver lining.

I pity the loss of parts of culture because of the grafting nature of most religions. By which I mean, they graft onto the surrounding society, and so culture with the social-cultural, and even the political, life. With the loss of religion, then, comes the loss of culture, religions also give community; religions build it. They even maintain it, but they also destroy or co-opt, it.

This natural diminishment of faith based on the dominance of the young one in town, on the global stage: science and its frameworks. The empirical knowledge and the theories that encapsulate them. These theories and frameworks overrun the supernaturalist philosophies, probably on functional truths.

Things work. In a physicalist sense, they run. These intellectually robust, but emotionally unsatisfying, theories, not on purpose but by the supplanting of the assertions of the past, then dominate the culture. Science is more objective than the faiths, and more hard-edged in its interpretation of the world.

The naturalist, not by assumption but through the slow, steady, accumulation of support, perspective becomes the best represented of the world, and so us and our placement in the cosmos. The ethic follows from this.

A moral authority from the ground state of religion; its ashes. As the quantity of the religious declines, and the scientific revolution — centuries in the making — continues to move forward, the liberalization of religion will continue, mostly, unabated as well.

Humanism, or humanist-like, ethical philosophies, ways of practical or pragmatic living, will grow as mushrooms out of the rot of the others. Maybe, even as things are minor now, it is time for a change in the interpretation of the world and the relation of people, one to another and, to the world.

What does this mean for pragmatic living? It means knowing the times, and the nature of the institutions around us. Acting in good conscience based on the limitations in energy, knowledge,

and time, then taking the responsibility of the possible negative even in the apparent, at the time, positive, from drinking coffee or not, to who to partner with for life, or not.

Interview with Dr. Giovanni Gaetani — Growth and Development Officer, IHEU

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 17, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family background — geography, culture, language, religion/irreligion, and education?

Dr. Giovanni Gaetani: That's a huge subject! Making a long story short, I can say what follows. Raised as a Catholic, I started questioning my faith at the age of 15. My "conversion" to atheism has been a slow, long, and gradual process, in at least 4 stages.

The first stage was the *anti-clerical Christian* one: without putting in doubt the existence of God, I started harshly criticizing the authority of Church, which I used to think betrayed the Christian message.

It was to better defend this message that I decided to read the Bible alone, without any intermediate, as an *autodidact theist*. What a bad idea it was! Indeed, this apologetic attempt ended up being the end of my faith in God. Why?

Because I found it impossible to keep together every contradictory message in the Bible — turning the other cheek with the fire-rain of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Plagues of Egypt with Jesus's miracles, the commandment of stoning adulterous women with the ethics of forgiveness, and so on. "If this is the Word of God," I thought, "I'd rather live without it..."

At the age of 18, I became an *agnostic deist*; that is, I still believed in a universal, superior principle whilst criticizing every revealed religion in the world. Anyway, this was short transitory phase.

When I went to the university to study philosophy, I realized that I could not believe in God, whatever I defined it. From that moment, I became an atheist; even though, today, I prefer to say, "I am a Humanist." The difference is important for me. The problem in Italy is nobody knows nor uses this term. That's a real pity! I hope things will change soon.

One last thing, it's worth to be reported here about my bio. At the age of 25, I officially left the Catholic Church through a formal and legal procedure named "sbattezzo" — literally the act of "de-baptising".

I've done it for many reasons, but one, in particular, I think it's the most important: many people in the world can't freely and publicly say that they don't believe in God as I myself can do practically everywhere in Europe and in the UK.

My "sbattezzo" is a way to vindicate the freedom of belief and of expression many atheists and humanists in the world are deprived of. My plain reasoning is the following: if they can't, I must.

Jacobsen: You joined IHEU in January, 2017. What have been some of the more startling developments in the IHEU community, even in your short time there What have you found out about the community and the things that we are dealing with?

Gaetani: Now, I had a closer insight into it. I can reasonably say that the international humanist community is a prism with hundreds of different faces. Every Member Organization has its own

history, its own challenges, as well as its own way to carry on those challenges. However, we share the same roots and values, and have a common vision of life.

Concerning the progress, we made, in these first five months, we have already launched two new amazing projects (the Café Humaniste and the ¿Qué pasa Humanista?). Also, we are preparing to launch other projects, while doing our best to help our 138 Member Organizations all over the world.

Jacobsen: How do you build the relationships for the rapid growth of new ties and strengthening of the existing ties in your new position? Also, as the growth and development officer, what tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

Gaetani: We are trying to let the IHEU speak in as many languages as possible, because we must be proactive in our efforts to globalize and reach potential humanists wherever they are in the world. That's why we have already organised three events in Spanish, one in Italian, and soon other events in other languages.

My professional task is to implement IHEU's Growth and Development Plan, a three-year plan that targets three regional priorities (Latin America, Africa, and Asia), and includes many different, interesting projects. As an example among the others, we are developing an "How to start a Humanist organization" guide, which is part of a bigger four-section guide — coming soon...

Jacobsen: How does the mainstream religion in America historically view and treat women, especially in the light of modern rights such as general women's rights and reproductive rights?

Gaetani: You say America, but this is valid worldwide.

I am a feminist, so I cannot but be drastic on this precise point. I could literally spend hours discussing how sexist all religions are in themselves. Even so, rather than focusing on this, I prefer to work with women and men to build together a Humanist alternative, where all human beings are respected in and of themselves, regardless of their gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, beliefs, and so on.

Indeed, both the feminist struggle for women's right and the LGBTQIA movement are part of the bigger, thrilling Humanist challenge.

Jacobsen: Women's rights, especially reproductive rights, in the world are under direct, and indirect, attack. How can grassroots activists, legal professionals, and educational professionals, and outreach officers fight to maintain those new and fragile rights from the historic norm of religious violations of women's bodies?

Gaetani: That's a complicated question, which nonetheless demands an urgent, unavoidable answer. First of all, all activists need to understand (and spread) the idea that today no one can sit down and wait for the world to change.

Those who do it, claiming that they are doing "nothing wrong," are automatically standing on the regressive side of the struggle. It's like an enormous tug-of-war. Many nihilists or "indifferentists" sit innocently on their hands, claiming that every progressive effort is impossible or useless.

They don't understand that in this way they are rowing against progress — and that, yes, they are actually doing “something wrong.” Neutrality is impossible today. Everyone has to understand that nihilism is an enemy of Humanism at the same level of religion, as I stressed in a short article for *Humanist voices* named “Stay Human, go Humanist. Sketches for a Humanist manifesto.”

Concerning the feminist cause, it's all about education and reeducation. We need to educate the new generations to respect women, but, at the same time, we need also to extirpate in our own souls all sexist behaviours, often hidden in our daily routine behind a facade of innocence.

Jacobsen: In April, 2016, you earned a PhD in Philosophy from the Rome “Tor Vergata” University. The thesis: “If you want to be a philosopher, write novels. The philosophy of Albert Camus.” What was the research question? What were the findings? Why did you pick Camus? He is, after all, a little depressing.

Gaetani: A little depressing? That's simply *wrong* — one of the many persistent commonplaces on Camus! My thesis was simply an attempt to debunk all these myths about Camus “the existentialist” (false), Camus “the nihilist” (false), Camus “philosopher for high school” (false too), Camus “crypto-Christian” (outrageously false), etc.

If you want to read something funny that I wrote on the subject, have a look at “The noble art of misquoting Camus — from its origins to the Internet era”, an essay where I listed and debunked the most absurd internet misquotes attributed to Camus.

Going back to the “depressing” Camus, my advice is to read *Nuptials*, or the incomplete novel *The first man*, or simply the last chapter of *The myth of Sisyphus*, who is a truly humanist hero by the way. Then you will understand why I picked up Camus — why I was and I still am fascinated by the “invincible summer” at the hearth of his works.

Jacobsen: You have a substantial academic background with publications in English, French, and Italian — once more on the delightful subject matter of Camus, though depressing extremely fascinating as a philosophy — on not only Camus but Nietzsche too. Why Nietzsche too?

Gaetani: As atheists and as humanists, we owe so much to Nietzsche, even though we turned our back to him. What I just said about Camus equally applies to Nietzsche, his philosophical master; in fact, many stupid commonplaces ruined and still ruin Nietzsche's image — first and foremost, the absurd story that wants to classify him as a “precursor of Nazism.”

On the contrary, I think that Nietzsche is one of the most lucid and visionary philosophers ever. The proof is that today one cannot philosophize without taking into account his philosophy. It's either with him or against him, but not without him.

Jacobsen: Some other academic subject matter focuses on liberalism, pluralism, and secularism. Why these topics? What are some of the main ideas within these topics explored? What are the arguments put forth? What one most interest you?

Gaetani: Oh well, this could be enough for a whole lesson! Last year, I wrote an article in Italian named “Atheist, Secular, and Liberal: three definitions for a vocabulary of moderation.” Luckily, I have translated the paragraph where I resumed in few words my “personal definition of liberalism”.

I think this could be a good starting point to understand my position. There is also a more specific article where I discuss the relationship between secularism, liberalism, and pluralism, but I still haven't translated it.

Jacobsen: Who is a personal hero for you?

Gaetani: I won't say Camus because the risk is that readers would think that I am a maniac — which is true in some ways.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Gaetani: So, to avoid this accusation, I would say Bernard Rieux, the protagonist of Camus' *The Plague* [Laughing].

Jacobsen: You worked for the Italian Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics (UAAR). What did you do? Why work for them? How did this benefit the rationalist community and you?

Gaetani: I volunteered for UAAR from 2013 and I still do it, even now that I moved to London to work for the IHEU. I volunteer for UAAR because I cannot sit on my hands and whine while Italy collapses, as practically everyone in my country loves to do.

I once wrote an ironical but serious article on my blog about these mythological figures — “Where is UAAR going? The perfectible atheism and the impossible innocence” — but unfortunately it's still untranslated.

Everything started in 2013 when I won the UAAR best thesis prize with my work on “Nihilism and responsibility at the age of God's death in Nietzsche and Camus.” After this prize, I have done many things during the years.

I wrote some articles on philosophy, atheism, and secularism for UAAR's blog “A Ragion veduta” and for UAAR's revue “L'Ateo.” I have been involved in first person in the youth section of UAAR, representing it in two IHEYO events — once in 2016 in Oslo for IHEYO's General Assembly, then in 2017 in Utrecht for the European Youth Humanist Days.

I created a series of philosophical pills on atheism, named “Ateo ergo sum”. I conceived the contest “The devil wears UAAR”, where I am also participating in the improvised guise of graphic designer with this artwork. I also wrote an anthology on “philosophical atheism for non-philosophers” which soon will be published by “Nessun Dogma,” the editorial project of UAAR.

Jacobsen: What is your main concern for IHEU moving forward into 2017–2020? How about into the next decades?

Gaetani: Next decades is too far to make any reasonable forecast. From my humble point of view, the only appropriate horizon is the constant effort we are daily making to ensure the fastest and fullest growth and development of Humanism worldwide.

Still, if you insist, I can tell you that my small utopia is that in the next decades the word “Humanism” will be recognized worldwide, so that there won't be any more the need to explain to everyone what “Humanism” is and what does it mean to be a humanist.

Jacobsen: What are the future prospects for the fight for the most vulnerable among us and their rights being implemented, such as women and children (globally speaking), because —

as we both know — there are some powerful and well-financed people and groups who hold rights in contempt of the advancement of their theocratic endeavours?

Gaetani: All Humanist organizations have to understand that, against these regressive and theocratic “colossuses” you alluded to, the mere self-financed volunteering is not enough, and that it is necessary to have a more structured, well-organized, strategic approach.

Money counts, especially in the charities world I would say, where every dollar counts twice given the scarceness and the instability of resources. That is why the IHEU has just launched a crowdfunding campaign named “Help us protect humanists at risk.”

Think about it: in 13 countries in the world the apostasy is still punished with death penalty. To help those humanists in danger, the IHEU and its Member Organizations cannot simply rely on goodwill: we need to be efficient and to act decisively, but without resources this would be simply impossible.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Gaetani: As you can see I am a quite prolix person, especially when I talk about these kinds of subjects. But I need self-control, so I will just thank you for this interview. It was all my pleasure.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time today, Giovanni, was an absolute pleasure.

An Interview with Professor Michael J. Berntsen — Faculty Advisor, University of North Carolina at Pembroke SSA — Part 1

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is family background — geography, culture, language, religion/irreligion, and education?

Professor Michael J. Berntsen: I grew up in a Catholic family in New Jersey. While my mother and father were religious, my father volunteered as a lectern and my mother was a member of a Bible study group, they were aware of how dangerous religion could be. My mother's parents experienced much sorrow since my grandfather was Irish Catholic, while my grandmother was Irish Protestant. Many family members, mostly on my grandfather's side disowned them. This rejection echoed Christian hypocrisy and demonstrated to me how false religious sentiment could be.

My parents also opposed the Catholic Church's anti-abortion, anti-birth control, and anti-homosexual stances, so their practice of their religion had more thought and self-awareness. They had faith in their God, yet they saw the human flaws inherent in the worship and practice of any religion.

My current affiliation is humanism. On good days, I'm more agnostic. On bad days, I'm more atheist. While I gravitate on the spectrum, I usually label myself a secularist or humanist. For thousands of years, religions have dominated human existence, yet here we are in the 21st century, and human trafficking and slavery are great threats, starvation thrives in numerous nations, and wars rage across the planet. I have yet to witness religions solve any world issues.

I currently live in Laurinburg, North Carolina. My Ph.D. is in literary studies and creative writing.

Jacobsen: What is the personal background in secularism for you? What were some seminal developmental events and realizations in personal life regarding it?

Berntsen: While I spent my early teenage years as an active youth leader for St. Cecilia Church in Rockaway, NJ, I started questioning religion once a friend came out as a lesbian. She was even more involved with the church than I, but the priest treated her crisis of identity and faith with flippant answers. Here was a person devoted to the Catholic faith, yet the priest reduced her to a cliché. No matter what she would say to the priest, he repeated the same response, "It's okay to be gay, you just can't act on it." She would bring up scripture, talk about footnotes, discuss how there's no real mention of female homosexuality, but it was a monologue rather than a dialogue. She needed someone to talk to and with, but, since he was driven by strict dogma, his version of helping came off as insincere and unintellectual. My initial frustrations with religion begin with her experience.

I also have a few gay cousins who are kind, smart, and hilarious. My version of God would not send them to hell for a seemingly arbitrary reason. The God I wanted to believe in could not be found entirely in any sacred text. At this point, I started piecing together a god much like Frankenstein and his creature. As I read Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim books, I could see ideas that

had potential, but the ghost of judgmental dogma always eclipsed the calls for enlightenment and peace. Some group or some simple act would inevitably lead someone to the underworld, which always seemed silly.

The idea of Satan, too, made no sense to me. If Satan punishes those who have turned away from God, he must be working for God. Why would Satan punish people who are on his side unless he is a demonic secret agent? I did not need to believe in a devil to know pure evil. Corrupt politicians, gangs, drug lords, human traffickers, and other such base people were doing much more real damage to my state and to the world than any red hot fallen angel with hipster facial hair.

The more I investigated reason and science, the more I realized that a just society could build its structure on rational laws, promoting logical discourse and decision making. The notion that people do good out of fear of being punished or out of some promise to live forever in a paradise seems rooted in selfishness or self-centered desire. More meaningful actions come from critical thinking.

Jacobsen: You are the faculty advisor of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke SSA. What tasks and responsibilities come with the position? Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Berntsen: The most important responsibility is acting as a mentor. The first year I became the advisor, we had students whose parents kicked them out when they came out as atheists and students who lost friends when they revealed their atheist views. The students provide the friendships they need, so my job requires me to cultivate their philosophies, to ensure they respect all beliefs, and to guide them to mature decisions and directions concerning their campus presence.

The other tasks include the bureaucratic elements of the club, making sure they follow a budget, adhere to university policies, obey national SSA guidelines, respect each other since each student varied within the agnostic and atheistic spectrum, and plan events that entertain and educate.

The background responsibility, of course, is making sure students have someone on campus who will defend their beliefs and protect them if people start to harass them for speaking out. Luckily, the UNCP campus has a culture of civility, so blatant harassment was never a problem. We have an Office of Diversity and Inclusion, which has succeeded in providing a campus community that promotes open dialogues.

I pursued this opportunity when students ask me to be the advisor because my job as a teacher is to support all intellectual pursuits and encourage personal development. Since atheists and non-theists are marginalized and encounter varieties and overt and passive discrimination, I believe it is my job as an American to protect this group and make sure they have equal opportunities to promote and present their voices.

Phrase Matters: “Good Without God,” “Under God,” and “In God We Trust”

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 18, 2017

Humanists, as noted by the American Humanist Association (AHA), believe in the principle of “Good without God” (AHA, 2012). In this, we can derive the philosophy of secularism, as in secular humanism, which strives for a secular government with the separation of church and state. The United States has violated this separation on occasion, and so has violated principles inherent in humanism.

This is important because millions of American citizens do not adhere to a faith or a religion (Pew Research Center, 2016; Newport, 2016). They remain unaffiliated with religion. Faiths with preference in the legal system make the law unequal for Americans in general.

Take, for examples, the uses of the phrases “Under God” and “In God we Trust” (IHEU, 2016). Of course, these are explicit theistic terms, of which millions of American citizens will disagree (Alper & Sandstrom, 2016).

It has a history too. Since the Cold War, there was paranoia about atheism because of association with communism (Ibid.). The phrase “Under God” was interpolated to the Pledge of Allegiance by “The Knights of Columbus.” What is the issue here?

The implication is those without belief in a God, or gods, cannot take the Pledge of Allegiance with total legitimacy. “In God we Trust” was established in 1956 as the motto of the US. It is a recent addition to the public discourse around religion in the American canon.

As the Freedom of Thought Report notes, the secular and minority religious groups have worked to establish the separation between church and state. This is for the betterment of all, including the attempts to make the Pledge of Allegiance and the motto secular. The most recent attempts, among many prior, to the supreme court and appeals court cases being in April of 2014.

For another example, there was an AHA campaign in 2015 to remove the mandatory statement of the Pledge of Allegiance with the encroached religious phraseology and language by students, in academic settings. This is an ongoing issue of concern and needed deliberation, and subsequent activism. Many American citizens don’t want theological verbiage in public statements — including mandatory ones — such as the pledge, especially the irreligious members of society.

References

Alper, B.A. & Sandstrom, A. (2016, November 14). If the U.S. had 100 people: Charting Americans’ religious affiliations

Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/14/if-the-u-s-had-100-people-charting-americans-religious-affiliations/>.

American Humanist Association. (2012). American Humanist Association’s Key Issues. Retrieved from <https://americanhumanist.org/key-issues/statements-and-resolutions/issuessummary/>.

IHEU. (2016). Freedom of Thought Report: United States of America. Retrieved from <http://freethoughtreport.com/countries/americas-northern-america/united-states-of-america>.

Newport, F. (2016, December 23). Five Key Findings on Religion in the US. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/200186/five-key-findings-religion.aspx>.

An Interview with Professor Michael J. Berntsen — Faculty Advisor, University of North Carolina at Pembroke SSA — Part 2

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Professor Michael J. Berntsen: Raising awareness and seeing people embrace new ideas motivate me. Since I became advisor, 42 faculty and staff members as well as 14 students have trained to be Secular Safe Zone allies. These training sessions offer a chance for like-minded people to share their ideas and stories as well as opportunities for unlike-minded people to learn more about others, producing many moments of enlightenment. My greatest joy is when I can dismantle preconceived notions, stereotypes, assumptions, presumptions, and misguided opinions. When people realize that atheists have similar moral codes and identical views concerning the importance of family, they empathize and understand who we are, which is an important step in moving from ignorance to tolerance to acceptance.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more valuable tips for campus secularist activism?

Berntsen: Avoid ever being concerned with numbers. Whether one person or a thousand people attend, embrace the people who can help you grow and your organization.

Plan events you want to attend. Think as a group and organize events that everyone is excited about.

Attend the SSA conference each year to generate and refresh the passion for your group and your sense of activism.

Despite how many other groups may behave or believe, campus is a place for exchanges, but not for conversions. Secular activism on campuses should be meant to educate and create useful dialogues rather than bent on changing people's minds.

Jacobsen: What have been some historic violations of the principles behind secularism on campus? What have been some successes to combat these violations?

Berntsen: The main issue is the prayer disguised as an invocation at every commencement ceremony. While it is inclusive to cover anyone who believes in higher powers, it still represents how religions attempt to dominate public spheres. This fight is ongoing.

Overall, our UNCP campus has not suffered heavy violations. While our students have had issues with family and friends, they have always felt comfortable on campus. The only time we encounter resistance is in an immature, passive way. Whenever we post flyers on campus, they are inevitably taken down. Campus police and the administration are aware and concerned about this juvenile form of protest, but it continues to happen at times.

Jacobsen: What are the main areas of need regarding secularists on campus?

Berntsen: Enthusiasm and perseverance from students are essential. Students need to celebrate their secular philosophies and be confident in sharing them, which is why the SSA and other such

groups exist. If students are interested in forming or reviving an SSA affiliate, they must continually inspire students from each year to join and show the group's relevance.

Depending on area, secularists need confidants, friends, and mentors to be visible. While proclaiming one's secular tendencies and identities can be risky for many, each one of us must normalize secular thoughts and actions.

The greatest challenge is making people understand the secular spectrum and encouraging them to think of atheists as people rather than god-haters. The crux is that certain dogmatic and fanatical groups cast atheists as the ultimate sinners, so there is a certain difficulty in finding common ground and helping them perceive atheists as human. I've met a few Southerners in North Carolina and Louisiana who are openly gay with their family, but will never reveal their atheist beliefs because that would permanently destroy any relationship.

Jacobsen: What is your main concern for secularism on campus moving forward for the next few months, even years?

Berntsen: Popularism or populism, depending on which word you prefer, and blind faith are the highest threats. While secularism is on the rise in Western cultures, America will be a believer's battleground for decades to come. Political leaders in many states continue to push evangelical agendas even when religious leaders unite against bathroom bills and anti-abortion bills disguised as building regulation bills. I am worried that many students in oppressively religious areas will remain silent and hidden. I fear they will let others speak and shout even when their falsehoods and emotions poison the public discourse.

"Have a Blessed Day" exemplifies the current trend of over-extending church into the public sphere. This phrase was not common before the 21st century. Now, everyone feels obligated to say it rather than "have a good day." Most people say it because it is normal to them now. When others, such as myself, politely confront them by highlighting its unnecessarily religious connotation, they simply respond, "that's how things are done." If people can be convinced that bringing religion into all sectors of conversation from a cashier's good-bye to closing a deal to a friendly thank you, even more dangerous dogmatic ideas can permeate the American consciousness on campuses.

An Interview with Professor Michael J. Berntsen — Faculty Advisor, University of North Carolina at Pembroke SSA — Part 3

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Jacobsen: What are the current biggest threats to secularism on campus?

Professor Michael J. Berntsen: Anger and insulation. Most campuses have provisions for free-speech, but people's anger and inability to listen to unpopular thoughts have threatened those policies. The main issue is that Americans have confused unpopular with controversial and illegitimate. For example, anti-vaccinations have no right to speak in public forums because their views are unsubstantiated just as a science teacher should have no right to teach creationism. This denial of speaking is not a violation of free-speech because they are free to believe and speak in other private and public forums. The real issue is that in public education spaces, we should welcome controversial and unpopular views that have foundations in reason, measurable research, and experimental validity.

Another example I always provide is Take Back the Night events. Organizers would be irresponsible if they invited a rapist to speak. This form of exclusion is not censorship, but rather a logical omission. We don't need to hear the side of a rapist. A rapist lost all rights to participate in public forums by committing one of the most disgusting violations. This idea that every side has to be included is a form of fanaticism. Logical reasoning would deduce that educational spaces require educated and reasonable voices. The blend of expertise and common sense is crucial to protect fundamental freedoms.

We are at a crucial time in American democracy in which we have to define exactly the parameters of free-speech since many people are confusing it with chaotic-speech. Groups who seek to pervert free-speech into an anarchical extreme will do more damage to secularist freedoms than religious zealots.

Other threats carry over from American culture include what I call Machiavelli Christianity and the return to Romanticism. Machiavelli Christianity is demonstrated by Christians voting against public safety in order to preserve strict dogma. All the outrage against needle programs and marriage equality and transgender rights produces terrible laws that threaten the safety and freedoms of all. Under Mike Pence's leadership, Indiana experienced an AIDS epidemic that should have drawn compassion from Christians, yet this issue was abandoned given Pence's push for supposed religious freedoms.

The return to Romanticism is another overarching threat. Even though Steven Colbert parodied this sentiment over a decade ago, the notion that emotions are more trustworthy and truthful than facts. This impulse explains why people are quick to believe fake news and so quick to reject expert opinions. This aspect is linked with Machiavelli Christianity. There is a certain arrogance inherent with believing that you know the truth above the rest of the world. This idea parallels the notion that personal instinct is greater than other people's perspective.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Berntsen: Not comprehending that atheists are good people and thinking all secularists are atheists. These confusions hurt all of us who think complexly and embrace all sorts of secularist philosophies. I've known many heathens and humanists who would love to join the SSA, but think it's an atheist club or fear others will assume their affiliation will mean that they are atheists, which threatens creative and productive collaboration.

Jacobsen: What are the main social and political activist, and educational, initiatives on campus for secularists?

Berntsen: This aspect depends on the needs of the school. Establishing Secular Safe Zone allies is a great start because it can educate all members of the university communities.

We should also copy the Secular Safe Home programs in areas where children and young adults are abused for questioning religious leaders and ideas.

Ultimately, we need to stay visible at all costs. While many of our billboards around the country are vandalized, we need to keep putting them up. Right now, placing "Thank You, Jesus!" signs are everywhere, so we need to counter with "Thank You, Science!" ones. Any initiative should attempt to showcase the importance secularism had on American history and its necessity to unify American citizens in the 21st century.

Initiatives that rely on collaboration are the most essential and will be the most successful because doing so immediately eradicates the notion that atheists are militant.

Jacobsen: What are the main events and topics of group discussions for the alliance on campus?

Berntsen: Types of events also depend on the campus. Holding events that are open to the public and campus are crucial. The UNCP SSA held a "History of Witches" lecture on Halloween, we hosted a "Gender in Advertisement" debate, which we organized with the GSA and Gender Studies department. We also hosted a "Truth about Evolution" night with the Episcopal student group, which helped to show the scientific proof why creationism couldn't actually work. Again, for any secular group on campus, aiming for collaboration is indispensable in promoting and maintaining the group.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved and maintain the secular student alliance ties on campus?

Berntsen: The best way is to establish sustainable resources on campus and share responsibilities. If a faculty member wants to establish a Secular Safe Zone, be the founder and go-to expert, but don't be afraid to co-host training sessions with colleagues or students. Make sure there is someone to take up any activities if you leave. The same applies to students. Even if you don't have someone in mind when you first start out, make sure, as the group grows and catches momentum, that you inspire the members to become leaders. Embracing the small steps and small victories is a great way to avoid being discouraged, so you can keep on keeping on.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Berntsen: Thank you for all, you do!

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Mike.

Interview with Roar Johnsen — Treasurer of International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and Past President of the Norwegian Humanist Association

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 21, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was your family background — geography, culture, language, religion/irreligion, and education?

Roar Johnsen: I am living in Oslo, the capital of Norway, with a population of more than half a million people. I have a degree in marketing and administration, but have worked as a consultant in IT for the last 35 years. Norway has had a Christian state church system, which only recently separated from the state, so Christianity is dominating in school education and cultural tradition. However, the majority of Norwegians are not really believers, but stay on as church members out of tradition and ceremonial services. My parents were passive church members and freethinkers. I realized while in college that I was an atheist, and left the church as soon as I could, and my parents followed shortly after. I joined the Norwegian Humanist Association ten years later, and has been an active volunteer since 1979.

Jacobsen: You are board member for IHEU. How does the position work? Why do you pursue this line of work?

Johnsen: The Board of IHEU are responsible for IHEU strategy development and its operation between the annual General Assemblies. Over time, the workload of the Board change quite much. When we have a very small office staff, or none at all, the Board has to be very active and operational, while when we have a Chief Executive and other staff, as now, the Board can be more strategic and leave most of the operational issues to the staff. The Board meet in person four times a year, and have four Board meetings by Skype. Some Board members are also participating in working groups or sub-committees.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Johnsen: Apart from the satisfaction of seeing the organization operating successfully and growing over time, it is very stimulating to meet with local activists all over the world. When we meet at a world Humanist congress, a general assembly or a national event, it is always a positive exchange of experiences, viewpoints and challenges. Even if the conditions are very different from country to country, we share many of the same issues, and can use many of the same strategies to work on those issues. When we hear that we have been able to help a local organization grow, or someone has been motivated to continue their effort for a Humanist group, that is a very good motivation for me as well.

Jacobsen: How does the general global public view the humanist and ethical culture movements compared to other worldviews and movements?

Johnsen: That is a difficult question! I am not sure that we have something we can call “the general global public view” on these matters. The situation is very different in various places and

contexts. Some non-religious organizations focus on their own members and keeps a non-confrontational style in public. Such organizations are often well respected in society, but does not get big headlines in media and grow slowly. Other organizations are more confrontational, and create more headlines in media, but may have problems achieving a good working relationship with the authorities and other religious and life stance groups. Overall, I think that non-religious groups are, slowly but surely, gaining more understanding and respect worldwide.

Jacobsen: What are the main areas of need regarding the irreligious in the world?

Johnsen: We must focus on respect for human rights, which is the topic of the Freedom of Thought report that IHEU publish every year. In too many countries the non-religious are discriminated against, partly by governments and partly by extremists not being stopped by governments. Other issues are religious education in public schools, which should be only in history classes, and promotion of scepticism and the scientific method, which can help people avoid the worst problems of traditional thinking, superstition and new age prophets.

Jacobsen: What has been one of the most touching stories you've ever personally witnessed or heard of through IHEU?

Johnsen: Over the years, I have met many activists and many people who have been helped out of situations where they were victims of discrimination based on religion. They all have a story to tell! The Atheist Centre in Vijayawada in India has helped many people, and one of their major projects has been the rehabilitation of an entire village “of thieves” called Stuartpuram. When they started that work, they realized that they would have to carry on for at least two generations, but started anyway. When we visited the village, they could look back on many years of dedicated and successful work. A touching story, indeed!

Jacobsen: Also, you are an IT consultant, and IT service management project manager. You volunteer for the Norwegian Humanist Association too — and have been its president too. How have these positions helped prepare you for the current and ongoing IHEU work — since 2006?

Johnsen: All people who volunteer for organizations bring with them good practices from their professions, whether they are lawyers, teachers, business people or project managers. My background has helped me guide organizations in developing their organizational structures, their finances and their work programs. Volunteer organizations need good management too! Having been internationally active since my first World Humanist Congress in Hannover in 1982, it was natural to volunteer for the IHEU Board at the end of my tenure as president for the Norwegian Humanist Association.

Jacobsen: What is your main concern for humanism moving forward into 2017–2020? How about into the next decades?

Johnsen: Humanism will continue to grow, there is no doubt about that. However, not all Humanists or other non-religious people feel the need to be organized in one of our many groups, so organized Humanism will always be smaller than our wider community. Many of our organizations are having much more to do than their resources will allow, so for many years ahead we will have to focus on the core issues for the non-religious that only we will do.

Jacobsen: What are the biggest threats to irreligious types in the world today?

Johnsen: In most countries, the non-religious does not face any serious personal threats, the problems are more of a systemic kind. However, in some countries, intolerant religious groups and even the authorities themselves, are threatening, intimidating and even hurting people for their lack of religion. All Humanist groups must participate in helping our less fortunate fellow humanists, as well as taking care of their own local business.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to humanism and ethical culture?

Johnsen: Political instability and continued poverty are the main problems in many societies today, and often affects cultural minorities even more than the majority. It is interesting to see that many studies show that when a population grows from poverty through education to a more secure society, the need for religion is reduced. And we find that regardless of which religion you come from, when you leave it and find a secular life stance, most people end up with Humanism.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Johnsen: It is very nice to see the way IHEYO has developed over the last few years, and it is important that we continuously manage to engage with new generations of youth. The sooner they become engaged in Humanist activism, the faster the world will improve!

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Roar, that was interesting.

An Anonymous Interview with a Gay Ex-Muslim

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 22, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Is there an embassy or someplace which can help with a visa and travel to at least a more moderate country?

Anonymous Gay Ex-Muslim: I basically belong from Pakistan and currently living in Saudi Arabia for my job Purpose. So here we don't see any forum which can help the people like me to move to a better place.

Jacobsen: What is your story in becoming a non-believer?

Anonymous Gay Ex-Muslim: I was a believer till I was under graduation but then I met a friend on Facebook and in no time we became best friends. Slowly he made me to think over the Concept of GOD and Science. I started to analyze the things and my findings made me to accept that I was just obeying someone blindly and in real there is no such power. This was a turning point for me from believer to non-believer.

Jacobsen: How has this impacted personal life?

Anonymous Gay Ex-Muslim: It impacted my personal life in a way that I get irritated seeing the religious stuff happening in my surroundings and I find myself unable to utter a word even as I live in society where if I will go to speak for me I will be dumped like anything. My family is believer but they are moderate ones. I am non-believer in closet actually.

Jacobsen: Do you keep things inside and do not tell many people?

Anonymous Gay Ex-Muslim: Yeah exactly I do same. But there is only one person whom I love more than anything in life; He knows all my feelings and things which I cannot share with anyone else. He is love of my life.

Jacobsen: What would be the likely reaction of the community and religious authorities to your beliefs and sexual orientation?

Anonymous Gay Ex-Muslim: If I expose myself to them I will have to face serious consequences which will lead to my death without any doubt as there have been such cases in my society where innocents were killed just due to some doubts of being non-believer of God etc. Sexual orientation also matters a lot in my community as it's forbidden in our religion to make relation with same sex partner. There are some rules for that which leads to death of victim or life lasting prisoning.

Jacobsen: What is your main message for people in developed countries — mostly Western — that you can't say publicly with an open identity in your country without being labeled a terrorist or an infidel/apostate and then threatened with death?

Anonymous Gay Ex-Muslim: I will give a loud voice to the West that please helps me. I love a boy and without him I feel myself incomplete. I would request them to help me by any mean to get me out of this place into a better one where I can live my life freely with my love and can enjoy the multiple colors of life which is just given one time to us.

Jacobsen: Is there an underground renaissance of critical thinking and moderate religiosity and outright irreligiosity in your home country?

Anonymous Gay Ex-Muslim: Yes, there are many more like me who are non-believers like me in closet. Some teams also do hidden work to sort out issues and help people like me. But very few of us can approach them as they work so silently that it's hard to find them.

Jacobsen: What is your main situation now? How can the international community help those in similar circumstances because so many more stories like this are out there?

Anonymous Gay Ex-Muslim: My situation is like I was living with my love in Saudi Arabia who belongs from another country. Due to bad situation of work he left Saudi Arabia. Now we both are apart from each other and it's very difficult to stay far like this. I will want and request international community to help us in a way which brings us together and in a better place where there is freedom of speech and equal rights of choice to all. I believe that love is something which if someone loses, he or she cannot be happy at all. I found my true love and I don't want to lose. Those who are reading this and they also love someone they will surely understand my feelings and pain of being far from your love.

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

Anonymous Gay Ex-Muslim: I would like to thanks your platform which gave a chance to speak out and convey my feelings to others. I just hope this step will lead me to some success and better life. I convey my thanks to all those who support me and understand me.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the time today.

This Week In News, A Kevin and Benedict Story

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 22, 2017

Kevin and Benedict are colleagues. We have written and worked together. They have a podcast called This Week in News with Kevin and Benedict. I like them. Here's their story. Kevin grew up in Sacramento California, where he conquered his enemies and saved the city from annihilation multiple times. He currently attends UC Berkeley as a Political Science major. He also worked as a heavy equipment mechanic for 5 years before college. He enjoys cigars, hockey (Go Sharks), politics, and saltwater fish tanks. Benedict is a Brit living in the US. Just for you, part 1.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I wanted to interview each of you together because you're friends and do some decent work through a podcast. I wanted to explore some of that. You both agreed. What is your brief background?

Kevin: I first want talk about the statement where you said we are friends. We are acquaintances at best. How dare you put my name in with his, interview over!

Jacobsen: [Laughing]

Benedict: Now, we're going to answer your question. I am originally from the UK. I studied at Oxford University, Spanish and Portuguese. I decided I didn't want to do anything with that. I wanted to be a journalist or pundit, whatever I am now.

I have done a lot of writing for people for free to get my name out there. I stumbled upon Kevin. Now, we have a podcast. That's how we got there today.

Kevin: I am from Sacramento, California. I took two semesters of Spanish [Laughing]. I worked as a heavy equipment mechanic a few years after high school. I radically changed my life from being a Right-wing dirt bag to leaning heavily to the Left.

It was a dual change of coming to atheism and realizing everything I ever believed was basically wrong. I was re-examining things and searching for the truth. This brought me there. I was a mechanic for 5 years.

I went back to community college, then got into UC Berkeley, where I am now. Then all three of us were working for an outlet, writing online. We met through there. Benedict was doing a podcast there at the time. It was terrible, I must say. Your form was off.

For a quick moment, can I critique your old podcast?

Benedict: You can if you want.

Kevin: I always wanted to do a podcast, but it was a matter of finding a partner. It is a matter of British accents. I thought, "This is a perfect podcast partner, who can make me sound better."

Benedict: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Kevin, you noted the transition from a Right-wing social and political, and so cultural, perspective. Was it all-at-once or slow transition? What was the feeling?

Kevin: It wasn't all-at-once. It was a gradual thing. It started with some things I believed being chipped away at, starting with climate change. I was a climate change denier. People would introduce me to the facts.

It became more and more apparent that I am wrong here. That something else was going on here. In my mind, and the way I was raised, I had to look for myself and examine things. Once you can do that with one issue, it becomes easier with other things. It was looking at the bottom of it rather than what the Right-wing commentators had been saying all of my life such as the guy who ran *The Blaze*, Glenn Beck.

I had more Glenn Beck books that anyone should ever have. I had two.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Kevin: Five years ago, if Donald Trump ran for president, I would have voted for him. That's how far gone I was.

Jacobsen: What about you, Benedict?

Benedict: *I have left-wing tendencies growing up. I go through occasional center leaning wobbles, especially in high school. That kind of time because of the people I was surrounded by at the time. When I went to university, I solidified in left-wing and liberal thinking. At the same time, I came across atheism and being skeptical of stuff and trying to question everything.*

I do not think I have changed much. I haven't had a radical right-to-left swing like Kevin, but I have become more left-wing as I study politics more. Europeans tend to be more left-wing anyway, so definitely in the American sense — maybe for a European perspective too. If anything, I have become more left-wing with time, but probably more centrist than leftist.

Kevin: Was high school your Tory years?

Benedict: *Yes, when I write my autobiography, I will become famous and those will be the "Tory Years."*

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Kevin: You had a picture of Margaret Thatcher up on your wall.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Benedict: *Yes, it was when we went through the recession and had a left-wing government, so we felt there must have been some reason for this to be wrong and a change must be necessary away from the established way of thinking. But you could more left-wing than the Labour government had been to that point, I assumed the natural change was to be Right-wing.*

It wasn't necessarily the "Tory Years," but more like the "We need change" years — from the status quo. An obvious change at the time was to lean more Tory, though I don't think I'd agree with myself now.

Jacobsen: You founded TWIN or This Week in News with Kevin and Benedict. What was the inspiration for it?

Benedict: *I am a very grumpy person. I like to complain the news. I spend too much time thinking other people are dumb [Laughing].*

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Benedict: *We spend a lot of time critiquing the Trump administration because that's who is in power. I like to think we'd be critiquing whoever else might be in power. We simply have a lot more to talk about with the Trump administration because they are in power. Do you agree with that Kevin? We are both democrats, but we wouldn't not critique Democrats simply because they are of our party.*

Kevin: I asked, "What will we do when Donald Trump is out of office?" Well, then is the time to start looking at more of the mundane issues, I feel like right now we are in crisis mode. I feel there are many bad and dangerous things. It is important to focus on them. I believe other things are worth focusing on our side when our people do wrong, but there is a limited amount time. It is more important with constraints to focus on Donald Trump and the administration.

It is important to critique people on our side when it is appropriate. We do try to get those smaller stories and criticize people on our side when it is appropriate to do so. We made a point of critiquing Kathy Griffin, people on our side, and say stupid things. In the show recorded today, we talked about how the new Democratic Party slogan is stupid [Laughing]. It is not just news. We try to keep things light and entertaining too.

As a news consumer myself, I like nice and dense news, but I want it to be entertaining as well.

Conversation on Humanism, Irreligiosity, and Education in Nigeria with Dr. Leo Igwe — Session 3

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 23, 2017

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Without the appropriate provisions for a healthy and stable education and educational environment, this seems to leave many rural communities in difficult circumstances. Maybe, one question is not about the improvement of the education itself, but working from the foundations. How good are the educational provisions in this or that neighbourhood?

Dr. Leo Igwe: Well, neighbourhoods are not the same. There are rural and urban neighborhoods, upper class, middle class and poor neighbourhoods. There are also liberal and conservative neighbourhoods, Christian and Islamic neighbourhoods.

The ways these neighbourhoods relate to education are different. Some relate better with eastern Islamic education, others may ally closely with western Christian education, still, others may go for a combination of both. So the way various neighbourhoods relate to education differs.

There are other intervening variables. And these variables are factors in determining how education works, no matter the quality of educational programs and curricula. An excellent educational curriculum is not enough!

Those who impact the knowledge are also important in fact, these circumstances go a long way in determining if education leads people away from ignorance, and into knowledge and enlightenment, or holds them firmly in chains in the cave of fear and ignorance. Then we can begin to establish proper curricula based on critical thinking, science, logic, and so on.

Jacobsen: How should we tackle both of these problems, even at the same time?

Igwe: We may have to burn the candle at both ends: put in place a sound curriculum and work on making the environments more receptive to the educational modules.

However, this is not going to be an easy task especially in situations where religious ideologies trump educational goals and objectives. Or better this is a challenging task because of religious usurpation of educational modules. Religions want education to serve their ends. So schools often try to Christianize or Islamize educational materials before they are allowed to be used in schools.

Schools in Nigeria are always trying to satisfy the interests of their owners even if it means watering down an excellent educational curriculum. So even if they agree to teach critical thinking, science and logic, the delivery is interspersed with religious caveats. That is why the secular schools such as the ones we have in Uganda present us with a glimmer of hope.

This is because in this case, one does not worry that the owners would sacrifice the curriculum on the altar of their religious interest. Instead, my guess is that secular schools would ensure optimal delivery of the educational curricula. But we must be aware that these secular schools are few, so few at the moment one in Nigeria and 3 in Uganda. So we need more secular schools in Nigeria and Africa to ensure a more hopeful future. Some Africanizing and Nigerianizing of critical thinking and the scientific method could especially help inspire the youth in their endeavours to learn more, be inspired more, and to pursue their dreams with adult examples.

Jacobsen: What are some examples of Africanizing and Nigerianizing these general human capacities, critical thinking and the scientific method?

Igwe: By Africanizing or Nigerianizing critical thinking and the scientific method, I do not mean anything exotic. No, not all. I rather mean trying to highlight the roots of these values in African culture and stop creating this false impression that critical thinking and science are western values. The habit of basing one's knowledge claims on observation or experience does not belong to any culture or race. It is human and universal.

Although the ways that cultures account for this value may be different, that does not mean that the values are absent or alien, they have not been sufficiently emphasized. Africans must begin to account for the place and presence of critical inquiry and scientific method in their cultures.

They need to embark on scientific research and experiments and publish and share the results with the global scientific community. These research projects could be tailored to help discover cures for diseases that kill Africans or to highlight solutions to problems that plague the region.

Jacobsen: Who are some great critical thinkers, scientists, and humanists in Nigerian history?

Igwe: There are actually many of them. They include Tai Solarin, Sheila Solarin, Mokwugo Okoye, Beko Ransome Kuti, Wole Soyinka, Steve Okecha, Nkeonye Otakpor.

Jacobsen: What can inspire the youth to take on those subjects, such as chemistry, physics, and biology, to build this better future for Nigeria?

Igwe: Young people want to know that there are opportunities and resources to study these subjects. The challenge is that some youths who want to study science subjects may not have the resources to learn them. They may not afford the money to go to school. Some may go to school but the schools may not have qualified teachers to handle the subjects.

The schools may not have libraries and laboratories, and where these facilities exist, they may not be equipped. To get youths to study science subjects, there should be schools where these subjects could be properly delivered. There should be scholarship opportunities, well-qualified teachers and well-equipped libraries and laboratories. There should be incentives; the government should ensure that there is some social capital in studying science.

Jacobsen: Who are some public science communicators in the country now?

Igwe: The only one I know is Prof Steve Okecha from Ambrose Alli University. There are actually others who are doing a good job whom I do not know.

Jacobsen: Have you had the privilege of becoming friends with personal heroes in science, critical thinking, and humanism?

Igwe: Yes, I have and I found it inspiring how they, ordinary people, accomplished extraordinary feats. Becoming friends with them or getting to know them personally deepened my admiration for them!

Is Nonconformity Required to be Humanist in Our Modern Societies?

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 23, 2017

Is nonconformity required to be humanist in our current society?

Humanism is a philosophy of life that considers the welfare of humankind — rather than the welfare of a supposed God or gods — to be of paramount importance. (American Humanist Association, 2017).

As existing social, political practices draw largely on views that consider the welfare of a belief system to be of paramount importance, there is an intersection in the efforts of humanists and nonconformists. To be humanist is, and has been through time, to be a nonconformist.

Humanists are few. Where are they? They're scattered. Some may not even know of their individual perspective on the world — as if the distant scent of love on the horizon. You know it's there, but you can't quite find it — and then it goes away.

But humanists are around. Why so few humanists, though? I think one variable or factor is time. It hasn't had time to catch like wildfire as with the Abrahamic religions, for examples.

Also, as with the stated differences with atheists in the past and into the present, the transition is the explicit, open statement, "I am an atheist." (Translation: 'I don't eat babies, give the 'evil' eye, or stand at the right side of the Satan in the Left hand path.')

As a young explicit philosophy, maybe tacit in earlier times, humanism, as with ethical culture, is more open, in the countries which permit it, than probably ever. This openness may differentiate this time more than the eras in which prominent atheists lived such as Voltaire.

That means prior eras of atheists didn't have the luxury of talking openly. The upcoming generations of atheists have an increasing platform. There are fewer heroes in the movement too, which is another outreach barrier.

The population, generally speaking, is more educated. More education will, statistically, translate into less religiosity (Pew Research Center, 2017). As with the more educated population — correlation is not causation but, the higher the birth rate then the higher the new number of children indoctrinated into the faith.

Richard Dawkins made this point, originally as far as I know. You do not have Muslim or Christian children. You have children of Christian or Muslim parents. That's where the social and familial privilege of religion exists in another domain.

The ability to label and inculcate the children with the title prior to the child's critical faculties have been built. That means, more or less, the religious family with this social and familial privilege having a higher birth rate will have more adherents in the long-term because the children of Christian or Muslim, and so on, will be labelled as the religion of their parents — out of tacitly abusive custom and norm, universally asserted as an implicit right.

There will be a decline in the number of global freethinkers, as in religious “none,” over time, as a percent of the global population of the religious grows, at least into 2050 (Pew Research Center, 2015).

The birth rate for the religious, simply even taking into account the Christianity and Islam examples, is higher than the nones. It seems tautological.

If a group’s collective birth rate is below replacement — 2.1 — and the other group’s birth rate is above replacement (and your group’s), then, in the long run, the group’s with the highest birth rate (above replacement rate) will be the ones to grow — with those having the highest birth rate having the highest new numbers per capita (Lipka & McClendon, 2017).

Pressures in nonconformity and being a “prudent” nonconformist involves outward and inward conformity. When reflecting on the outward conformity, there are the clothing someone wears. Their means of self-presentation is one form of conformity.

If in home life, in a place of worship, in the workplace, or in another country, the style of one’s hair, the coloring of the makeup and hair — if any, and the appropriateness of the clothing will be evaluated by others.

Conformity means fitting in; clothing is part of fitting in, or dress writ large, e.g. makeup, hair, and dress. Conformity can be in the spoken and written as well. Is this individual speaking, not necessarily the truths but, the ‘proper’ norms and attitudes as reflected by their speech and writing?

It could be as subtle as the introduction and send-off of an email, down to the specific vocabulary one uses in the aforementioned places, e.g. “in home life, in a place of worship, in the workplace, or in another country.”

Also, the partaking in the social practices of the culture for ease of interaction, security, prevent erroneous assumptions. Inward is a little different in style, but the same in content. One of the strongest forms of inward conformity may be the inculcation of the beliefs of the society in internal speech.

So if someone has completely imbibed the truisms of the culture, whether public, academic, or what have you, then things best not written or spoken may in fact best be unthought or not felt.

Then there are issues of media presence too. How many open atheists are there, for a sub-demographic example? If you take Reverend Gretta Vosper, she has been pilloried and praised in the media. She is an openly atheist reverend in the United Church of Canada, which may hold the title of the most progressive church in Canada.

The most prominent noted prejudice against non-believer comes from social life. So, it becomes harder to measure, but can affect future life success in a realistic sense, e.g. job prospects, social encounters, relationships.

This leaves a quandary for the non-believer, “Do I keep everything private or live honestly?” Tough choice. If the boss has a holy day, or day of observance, on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday, then the employees may, more than chance, have to observe this, not in personal but, professional life.

That means the employee is, in a direct sense, engaging in parts of the observance with the employer. So, what does this mean for the limits of nonconformity? Should we accept a certain limit in our nonconformity?

No, but only if we are willing to accept every consequence that follows for the implication that this sacrifice will result in future progress. This is a lot to ask of most people.

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die. (*Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2017*)

Yes, if our life is at risk, then personal safety and basic survival of loved ones are important because, at times, lives are at stake for nonconformity, especially for one international second class: the irreligious.

The irreligious are given the death penalty in many countries for rejecting the divinity of holy figures, the authoritativeness of religious authorities, the inerrancy of holy texts, the rightness of asserted morality, and superiority of those upholding the dominant mythological doctrines.

Keeping in mind, that nonconformist views, in a society that shares everything with everyone, that humanists must be ready to defend their sentiments at any point in the future, no matter when or how genuine the sentiment.

What can be done, practically speaking? You, yes you, can use outward conformity and inner nonconformity for activist purposes. In a way, this is a means of the direct and indirect articulation of humanist ideals, through your way of living while remaining practical about the reality of the obstacles set for the secular types.

So, I leave you with a question:

Do we have an obligation to use our privilege to draw attention to the promotion of humanism?

References

American Humanist Association, (2017). What is Humanism?. Retrieved from <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/definition-of-humanism/>.

Lipka, M. & McClendon, D. (2017, April 7). Why people with no religion are projected to decline as a share of the world's population. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/07/why-people-with-no-religion-are-projected-to-decline-as-a-share-of-the-worlds-population/>.

Nelson Mandela Foundation. (2017). "I am prepared to die.". Retrieved from <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/i-am-prepared-to-die>.

Pew Research Center. (2017). Educational Distribution. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/educational-distribution/>.

Pew Research Center. (2015, April 2). The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

African Humanist Youth Days (AHYD) 2017 Report

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 24, 2017

The 2nd annual AHYD 2017 event took place in Lagos, Nigeria on the 7th and 8th of July, 2017. The event was hosted by the Humanist Assembly of Lagos and Sponsored by IHEU and IHEYO.

The theme for this year's event was "African Youth for critical thinking and active Humanism". It was attended by African humanists and Executive members of African humanist Organisations from Jicho Jipya Think Anew group from Tanzania, Common sense Humanists, Humanist Association of Ghana and Humanist Service Corps from Ghana and The Atheist Society of Nigeria, Nigeria Humanist Association and Humanist Society of Northern Nigeria from Nigeria and also attended by the IHEYO Chair of the African working group and President of the Humanist Association of Ghana, Roslyn Mould.

The event was broadcast live on the IHEYO African working group facebook and twitter pages as well as the Humanist Assembly of Lagos' Facebook page.

Speakers for the event included Dr. Leo Igwe speaking via video call on iDoubt: Critical Thinking, Dogma and African Enlightenment in an Internet Age and Dr. Olatunde Olayinka Ayinde, Humanist, Psychiatrist and Social Critic speaking on Religion and Critical Thinking In Mental Health Practice in Nigeria. Michael Osei-Assibey, Organizing Secretary of the Humanist Association of Ghana also gave a presentation on Critical thinking.

The IHEU's Director of Advocacy, Elizabeth O' Casey gave her presentation via video call on Humanism, the IHEU & Advocacy issues in the African Region.

All the delegates gave presentations on their groups' activities, challenges and resolutions since the onset or revival of their groups, Activism and Advocacy projects as well as plans on furthering their work. Achievements of Humanists were celebrated and lots of information shared on how to use strategies in the promotion of critical thinking.

An Award was presented to Dr. Leo Igwe by the IHEYO African Working group in recognition of his outstanding dedication and commitment to the promotion of Humanism in Africa and certificates were awarded to volunteer team members of the IHEYO African working group who have supported and worked with the Chair for the past year. Award ceremony is initiative started by the Chair, Roslyn Mould and supported by the IHEYO President, Marieke Prien to motivate and show appreciation for the hard work of African Humanists.

The AHYD presented a good opportunity for African humanists to meet and network most of whom met for the first time and to start working relationships to build the African working group and the African Humanist Community. The event gave a platform for many across the continent to be informed on social and political issues across the continent and how Active Humanism amongst the youth can be used to help advance positive change in their various countries.

An Interview with Cayman Travis Gardner — President, University of North Alabama SSA

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 26, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is family background — geography, culture, language, religion/irreligion, and education?

Cayman Travis Gardner: Family background is where one derives a majority of their childhood moral compass. Depending of where in the country one grew up in, (Bible belt vs. northern states) they will be subjected to a number of cultural and religious factors during childhood. These factors can guild one's life in terms of faith, or lack thereof, which in turn guild the rest of their opinions and moral reasoning.

Jacobsen: What is the personal background in secularism for you? What were some seminal developmental events and realizations in personal life regarding it?

Gardner: Personally, I was raised in a semi-religious Christian household where there were irregular, but forced, visits to church. Church always gave me anxiety as I have never agreed with the philosophies of the Bible. I considered myself Agnostic for much of my adolescent years, beginning when I began to understand independence from religion and what that really meant for me. But when I got to college I began to discover more about myself, as everyone does, and started to determine my exact ideals and how I wanted to support them. I familiarized myself with some philosophies about religion itself and this led to my declaration as an Atheist as I found problems with Christianity and religion as a whole that I could no longer associate myself with even partially, as I was as an Agnostic.

Jacobsen: You are the president of the University of North Alabama SSA. What tasks and responsibilities come with the position? Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Gardner: UNA Secular Student Alliance has opened many doors for myself and others in the group for self-exploration in the means of religion. We hold weekly meeting where we discuss a topic pertaining to religion and faith in our community/university, the area we live in and ultimately in the U.S.A. as a whole. These discussions often open the minds of our group members as well as myself. Alongside weekly meetings we have an assortment of events that we orchestrate on campus to spread awareness of Secularism, have open forums with the public on campus, and attempt to gain new members. For example, one of our events in Spring 2017 was named "Ask An Atheist Day" and we set up a table in one of the most popular buildings on campus all week and allowed any and all to ask our members any questions about Atheism or Secularism. This event is very helpful for bridging the gap between the Atheist and religious communities here at UNA.

I perused the title of President of UNA SSA because I could see no higher duty in my community for opening minds to the Atheist, Agnostic, freethinkers, AND religious individuals alike.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Gardner: Our weekly meetings are also used as a safe place for secular individuals to escape the hyper-religious culture of the south that we live in. I have no better feeling than knowing that my meetings and events help others and myself in this fashion.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more valuable tips for campus secularist activism?

Gardner: Specifically, in the south, we as Secularists and Atheists are not the most liked individuals on campus. However, in the growing culture of acceptance of LGBT groups and other social “outliers”, our Secular group is growing more accepted by the day. In contrary to this, some believe that by UNA SSA holding an event such as “Ask An Atheist Day” in such a public space, we are attempting to infringe on their religious freedom or in some way are attacking their religion. While of course this is not true, it is important to understand as a group that holds events such as these that some individuals believe this and you may be on the receiving end of some hate. Do not be discouraged by this, our organization exists in part to spread awareness of Secularism and promote friendly discourse between differing opinions, thus resulting in coexisting peacefully.

Jacobsen: What have been some historic violations of the principles behind secularism on campus? What have been some successes to combat these violations?

Gardner: Generally speaking, UNA is a Christian majority campus where many organizations and groups are united under the umbrella of faith. There have been times where a Christian organization has set up their advertising tent in front of the residence halls. This is a breach of secularism on campus because the individuals who live on campus are subjected to experience their attempts to spread faith as they see it, making them unable to avoid the tent since they have to walk by it to return to their dorm. There has been relative success with this issue as the organizations have not done such advertising since.

Jacobsen: What are the main areas of need regarding secularists on campus?

Gardner: I believe the main requirement for Secularists on campus is a space to feel welcome. Having a group of friends or individuals where they can feel safe to not “hold their tongue” so to speak. As anyone does, we too desire a place to feel safe and welcomed.

Jacobsen: What is your main concern for secularism on campus moving forward for the next few months, even years?

Gardner: Specifically, here at UNA, my worry is the cessation of having an SSA on campus after I leave in a couple of years. Our group numbers hover around 10–15 active members. Before I became the President there was a crisis within UNA SSA and the group’s continuation was threatened by the absence of a President. Thus, I became the President and have done my best to grow the group while also providing a successful organization for our current members. I am happy to say that we have done a great job so far with this goal!

Jacobsen: What are the current biggest threats to secularism on campus?

Gardner: The biggest, most current threat to secularism on campus is stigma. The stigma surrounding Atheism both historically and currently, though diminished, causes many people to assume our organization has ill-intentions. We are here to provide a healthy outlet for our members as well as spread awareness through de-stigmatization.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Gardner: Stigma once again. The ideas of a few radiate through friend and social groups who think alike, thus propagating stigma.

Jacobsen: What are the main social and political activist, and educational, initiatives on campus for secularists?

Gardner: Sadly, the UNA Secular Student Alliance is the only organization providing for Secularists in campus currently. In the future, I would like to see a growth in either number of groups or size of the UNA SSA to better help those who are possibly questioning their faith.

Jacobsen: What are the main events and topics of group discussions for the alliance on campus?

Gardner: Our events often focus on educating the public by spreading awareness. Our discussions often relate to injustices among social groups or individuals based upon their defining traits (gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.) and how those injustices differ among the Secular crowd, and the religious crowd.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved and maintain the secular student alliance ties on campus?

Gardner: Through attending meetings and participating in events individuals can help UNA Secular Student Alliance with our mission as well as become a part of a welcoming group on campus.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Gardner: It is truly a new world, one where acceptance of groups or ideas that are not shared among the majority populous is growing. However, even though acceptance is growing, this does not mean our work is done. Many individuals emerging from their childhood, finding adolescence and/or emerging from their adolescence finding adulthood are searching for answers. We are able to help these individuals in their own pursuit of defining their faith, or the lack there of.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Cayman.

An Interview with Kaeleigh Pontif — President, Yuba Community College SSA

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is family background — geography, culture, language, religion/irreligion, and education?

Kaeleigh Pontif: I was born and raised in Houma, Louisiana. As you can imagine, growing up in the southern bible belt has a certain set of challenges. The south takes cultural preservation very seriously, despite how archaic some of the traditions may be. For the first 16 years of my life I practiced as a Jehovah's Witness. Growing up, bible study always came before school work. We attended the kingdom hall two or three times a week, and frequently preached door to door. I graduated from H.L. Bourgeois High School in 2011, and moved to Marysville, California in 2013. I will graduate from Yuba College this December, and plan to attend Sacramento State University in the spring of 2018 where I will study environmental science.

Jacobsen: What is the personal background in secularism for you? What were some seminal developmental events and realizations in personal life regarding it?

Pontif: There were many times in my religious upbringing where I attempted to ask questions to those teaching me. I was always told I was concerned about the wrong things, or that I simply had to pray on it. Between the ages of 15–18, there were many arguments with my family concerning my religious position. I began to feel like the Jehovah's Witness religion had practices that I simply did not agree with or wish to participate in. It became harder to get me to attend. I so badly wanted to find the right religion since I had doubts about my own, I joined numerous Christian clubs at my high school in hopes of finding the right path. As I'm sure it has begun for many atheists, at some point you realize things just don't make sense. With all the cruelty and suffering in the world, I could no longer believe in an all knowing and loving god. I also noticed the hypocrisy among many of the religious, and numerous biblical contradictions. I denounced religion and deism altogether and stopped attending church. I felt depressed due to the lack of community that I once had with church and family. I started to pay attention and learn about all of the atrocities committed in the name of god and religion, and wanted nothing to do with doctrine. In Houma, where I spent the majority of my life, I knew of no such meetup groups where people discussed philosophy, religion, humanism, etc. I felt like that area had no opportunities for me, be it personal or professional, so I decided to move to California. After a couple months of living in Marysville, I did a quick google search for atheist groups in the area and found the group Sac FANS on meetup.com. Within this group, there was an atheist book club which I attended regularly, Sunday Assembly, a secular congregation, opportunities to do volunteer work in the secular community, and so much more. I met some of the best people I know through this group and have had many rewarding experiences because of it.

Jacobsen: You are the president of the Yuba Community College SSA. What tasks and responsibilities come with the position? Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Pontif: That's right, I am the president of the Yuba College Secular Student Alliance, I founded the group in January 2017. Because this is the first semester we've existed at Yuba, I've had a little more responsibility than one typically would. I organize and preside over meetings,

activities, and events, maintain our web presence, book speakers, coordinate volunteer and service work, and other fun outings for the group. I choose to pursue this line of volunteering because I find it to be extremely necessary. Unfortunately, many people don't realize how participating in certain religious practices and beliefs can be harmful to others. One's religious beliefs might cause them to vote in favour of anti LGBTQ rights, against reproductive healthcare, against certain environmental policies, etc. When I start to tell people about the SSA, the first question I usually get is, "What does secular mean?". Because young adults are oblivious to the most fundamental word concerning our government, is just a reminder that I have lots of work ahead of me.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Pontif: In the short amount of time that I have been an officer with the SSA, I have had several rewarding experiences and the opportunity to meet some truly amazing people. Our group has had some great discussions about women's rights, indoctrination, secularism in the government, etc. All of these discussions left attendees with a better understanding of the topic and a desire to do something about the issues. Because I recognize the injustice reflected by certain religious practices, I feel that I have a responsibility to shed light on them and do something about it. When I lobby for secular values, volunteer at outreach events, I get a huge sense of fulfillment in knowing that I served my community in a way that benefits everyone. I believe that when I do better, we do better.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more valuable tips for campus secularist activism?

Pontif: Great question, I'm still picking up on a few tips myself. So far, I've learned that the most useful form for secular activism is simply talking to people. When I learn that a student is intimidated by the word secular, despite knowing what it means, I'm able to open up a conversation and help them better understand how everyone benefits from secularism, not only nonbelievers. As long as people are scared to initiate conversations regarding secularism, it will always be a taboo. I encourage others to discuss religion and humanism on campus and generate those discussions that can lead people in the more enlightened direction. I often remind people that we were not here to condemn religion, but rather discuss it and its effects on social structures like government and education.

Jacobsen: What have been some historic violations of the principles behind secularism on campus? What have been some successes to combat these violations?

Pontif: Personally, I haven't experienced any major violations of secular principles on campus however, there have been a couple of minor issues. Last year I had a professor who spent valuable class time preaching the Mormon religion. I'm fully aware of academic freedom and a professor's right to teach the class as he/she sees fit however, this was without a doubt a violation of those privileges. On more than one occasion I kindly asked him to discuss this matter before or after class time with anyone who may be interested. Despite my attempts, he continued to preach about flying serpents, Jesus Christ visiting the Americas, evidence of the earth being 6,000 years old, and so on. I decided to contact an associate at the California Community College Chancellors Office to assist me with a formal complaint to the dean. Although he continued preaching the following semester, I knew I had an obligation to speak up for secular values like the separation of church and state. Because many academics feel like they can utilize a public classroom to impose their religious beliefs on others, this is an ongoing issue, and I can only hope that students defend themselves and their rights.

Jacobsen: What are the main areas of need regarding secularists on campus?

Pontif: I feel like secularists are needed on campus to erase the stigma that we are not or cannot be kind, caring, contributing members of society. Student groups like SSA, are a way to reach out to students who may have questions about religion or non-belief. Many campuses have Christian or Muslim clubs and we need secular clubs to remind people that we are a diverse nation. Many secular groups like to show people that we do good for goodness' sake, not in hopes of being rewarded or in fear of being punished.

Jacobsen: What is your main concern for secularism on campus moving forward for the next few months, even years?

Pontif: I suppose my biggest concern is student involvement. Yuba Community College is rather small and is located in a rural area, so we didn't expect to rally or anything. Many students are focused on their studies and don't make much time for extracurricular activities. I'd like students to know that they can focus on school work and still advocate for secular values. If we don't do it, who will?

Jacobsen: What are the current biggest threats to secularism on campus?

Pontif: Frankly, I don't see many threats to secularism on campus. I think if you have students who are willing to gather around the cause, you're good to go! There can be some push-back from administrators or other students, but legally you have the right to make your voice heard. Groups might deal with their posters being defaced or something of that nature, but I think that makes what we do even more necessary.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Pontif: As long as people are ignorant to what secularism is, there may always be threats against the movement. The current political landscape is trying to impose barriers for secularists, but I think we will ultimately prevail.

Jacobsen: What are the main social and political activist, and educational, initiatives on campus for secularists?

Pontif: All students should get involved with social, political, or educational activism. I think it is very important for people to learn about the resources available to better their overall experience. Other means of secular activism have led me to become involved with the SSA. I know that having these groups on campus can open many doors for student involvement, not just on campus, but in the community as well.

Jacobsen: What are the main events and topics of group discussions for the alliance on campus?

Pontif: Our weekly meetings are centered around discussion topics such as, women and religion, indoctrination, and LGBTQ rights. Throughout the semester we managed to get two phenomenal guest speakers to come out. In January, we hosted Mandisa Thomas, president and founder of Black Nonbelievers Inc. She spoke about religion in the black community and certain issues associated with that such as slave mentality, and socioeconomic setbacks. In May, we were honored to have president of California Freethought Day, David Diskin, speak to us about better understanding atheism and its history.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved and maintain the secular student alliance ties on campus?

Pontif: First, you have to make your group known and let people know that such a group even exists. To do so, I would suggest frequently putting flyers around campus letting people know when and where the meetings are held. At the end of the semester, many people told me they would've loved to join our group, but hadn't heard of it. Communicating with your school's club organizing office can help with promotion and web presence. Do something fun with your group, have a pizza party and feature a debate or movie. Engage in an activity with another club on campus, participate in a campus cleanup or fundraising event. Another way to maintain ties on campus, is to have an interfaith activity or event.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Pontif: Being a positive force in the community allowed me to channel my passion for humanism into real life actions, rather than into prayers that never get answered. Don't just sit back in frustration of all the absurdity and inequality in the world, do something about it!

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Kaeleigh.

Weekly News Briefs (Canada)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 1, 2017

“The number of police-reported hate crimes against Muslims jumped by 60 per cent in 2015 compared to the previous year, according to Statistics Canada,” CBC News: Politics said, “New data released Tuesday show there were 159 anti-Muslim incidents reported to police that year, up from 99 the year before.”

The National Council of Canadian Muslims vice-chairman, Khalid Elgazzar, described 2015 as a “difficult year” for the Canadian Muslim population. Terrorist attacks in France and previous PM Harper’s making wearing a veil, at citizenship ceremonies, a “central issue” for the election campaign made things more difficult for Muslim-Canadians.

Elgazzar said, “The Canadian Muslim community bore the brunt of sinister political rhetoric surrounding the federal election which painted Muslims as terrorists or terrorist sympathizers as well as being anti-women.”

Notley says climate change policy should help working people

Global News said, “Alberta Premier Rachel Notley tried to reassure bigwigs in the energy industry Wednesday that her government will strive to ensure the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion gets built despite political opposition in British Columbia.”

Notley spoke at the Global Petroleum Show, which is in Calgary, Alberta. She noted that the current NDP Alberta government doesn’t speak much on oilsands — and this threatens jobs for Alberta. Notley described that an effective climate change policy should help working people.

She also stated many families lack work, are stressed about mortgages, and do not have sufficient time for “climate change action.” Her statements arise as the BC NDP and Green party are building an alliance, which may form government and could halt Kinder Morgan’s pipeline expansion.

Science World in Vancouver Hosting and Innovation Festival for Canada’s 150th Birthday
The Globe and Mail stated that the idea of a Planet Nine could simply evaporate, or “wink out of existence.” Planet Nine is a hypothetical astronomical body in the Solar System, which weighs about 10 times as much as the Earth.

This is big science story in 2016. Two astronomer teams made proposals as to its existence, and so began research into it. This was a proposal to explain uncommon patterns of several small objects past the known planets in our solar system. A team was working from data out of the Canada-France- Hawaii Telescope. They failed to find supportive data of it. As it turns out, the “Canadian-led study suggests the planet could be nothing more than a statistical fluke that vanishes when the numbers are looked at differently.”

Canadian biotechnology is on an upswing

According to The Globe and Mail, one biotechnology startup in Montreal “has secured a huge early- stage financing.” It is targeting the development of technologies to be able to reduce the occurrence of cancer.

It is called “precision oncology.” Repare Therapeutics Inc. is led by Lloyd Segal, who is a Montreal biotechnology executive. Repare was co-founded three research scientists from Mount

Sinai Hospital in Toronto and New York University. They raised \$68 million. Canadian biotechnology has been in decline, but the biotechnology industry in the country has been on an upswing. Segal said, “Our focus is on putting our heads down and developing great drugs...without the constant cycle of fundraising.”

An Interview with Wendy Webber

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 3, 2017

Audio interview has been edited.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was there a family background in non-belief?

Wendy Webber: Yes, and no. My dad was raised Catholic. My mom was raised Jewish. I am a mix of both of those coming from those families. We didn't practice in my home, but I was exposed to religion and religious practice in my larger family.

Jacobsen: What was it like growing up in the community?

Webber: Where I grew up in southern New Mexico is a very Hispanic, Catholic community. Obviously, there are other religions present, but it is mostly Catholic. Religion was around. Personally, I didn't find the lack of religious belief to be a problem.

I didn't lose friends over that. For me, it was a fact. It didn't matter between my friends and me.

Jacobsen: Eventually, you found yourself at Yale Divinity School. What was the experience there?

Webber: I got a Master of Religion there. I was studying theology of oppression and reconciliation with an eye on religious history. It was interesting to be a non-religious person at a school that was founded as a Christian seminary. Most of the people at the school were religious. But not everyone. There was a group of non-religious and non-theistic folk.

We started, or revived, a humanist, atheist, non-theist organization on campus that we wanted to use to have a social space and for conversations about being non-religious on an otherwise religiously oriented campus. It was also a way to engage the rest of campus the way the different religious groups on campus did by hosting educational or social events. It was great. We organized some great events.

My experience was, by and large, me being another student on campus. There were certain things that came up. I had one class where we were meant to write a paper that was about prayer in our own tradition. This subject doesn't really exist, for me. I had to go to the professor and talk about it. It didn't go over well [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Webber: We compromised by my writing about Judaism.

Being there as a non-religious person wasn't perfect. There was some pushback at times. I think there is a bit of a divide between people who wanted it to be a Christian school and others who want it to be a more inclusive school — having other beliefs represented.

So, I don't think most of the issues I faced there were as much about being non-religious as about being non-Christian.

Jacobsen: Also, you helped found the secular organization. I came across a phrase I had never come across before. It was inter-belief dialogue rather than interfaith dialogue. This is more inclusive for the whole suite of irreligious or non-religious sets of worldviews.

So, I was heartened to read that. How did you go about building that community? What initiatives did you take on?

Webber: We did lunchtime conversations, for people to talk about their belief journey. We invited people who were religious and who weren't religious to talk. We also did a thing, which is common at interfaith events, called speed-faithing. You sit across from someone who has a different belief system than you, then you talk about what your beliefs are and why for a few minutes then move on to speak to another person.

One of our most popular events we did while I was there was a practical inter-belief workshop. This was focused on the challenges in having an inter-belief event. Things like if you host one of these events on Friday nights a lot of people won't be able to make it because of religious obligations. Practical things like that.

We made a point to make sure that it was very inclusive of non-religious people in the language we used and discussions we facilitated. We challenged the participants to be careful about the language they use. "Inter-belief" brings more people to the table. Things like "people of faith or no faith," when you're talking at an interfaith event is more inclusive than "religious people."

We had a waiting list to get into the workshop our first year. We not only wanted people to know we were there, but also let people know about to deal with non-religious people being in that space.

Jacobsen: When you reflect on the situation for the non-religious, or humanists, in America today, what do you see as one of the main concerns?

Webber: [Laughing] I don't want to speak for everyone. We are a diverse group of people, so I know everyone has their own concerns. And each of us weighs the different concerns facing our community differently. For me, a major concern is that humanism is not for everybody. If you go to humanist events, more often than not, white men dominate the space. We need to figure out ways to let the humanist community be more inclusive. Which means not just being inviting, but listening — really listening — to women and people of color and letting people be humanist in ways that make sense for them.

That's a major concern I see inside humanism. As humanists within the larger culture in the US, a major concern I have is the perception that just because someone is not religious they are a bad person. That perception must change. I think that's why it is important to do social justice work as a humanist. I mean, to do social justice work like community service visibly as a humanist. To show people in my wider community who might condemn me that, "My humanist values are why I do this. I am here as a humanist." It helps people see that we're good people.

For me, these are top issues the humanist community faces. There are a lot of different ways to address these issues. For me, addressing them is about seeking out non-white humanist voices and doing community service and other social justice work.

Jacobsen: Something of concern to many humanists are human rights. In particular, the US situation now with women's rights — in particular, women's rights. What is the state of reproductive rights in the United States?

If things are looking direr, what can be done to make sure they are both more solid and well-implemented in the country?

Webber: To be honest, reproductive rights is not the number one issue at the forefront of my mind. I am not saying it isn't important, but it is not something I have been focusing my time or energy on.

Having said that, my answer to your question is that I think we need to have more women voices in the conversation at the policy level and in political and media discussions. We keep having all of these meetings about reproductive rights, policy, and law with not a single female voice present or if women are present their voices are not given adequate weight. Where men who clearly don't understand female anatomy are making decisions about reproductive health policy based on their, frankly willful, misunderstanding.

It is part of a bigger problem of women being silenced or not having their voices heard. There are so many ways to get at this issue. We need to get more women's voices at the high level. We need to get more women's voices at the local level — holding local office. We need to teach our children — not just the girls — not just that women have rights, but how those rights continue to be violated and how to be part of the solution.

Most importantly, we need to face and address the fact that historically and continuing now, the negative consequences of these reproductive health policies affect women of color disproportionately.

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

Webber: For me, I think humanism is about equality of all people. That is really the basis of humanism. That can manifest in a lot of ways. The humanist movement, for me, isn't simply about getting rights for humanists.

It is about supporting all minority and oppressed people in gaining that equality, not solely humanists. We should as humanist to support movements like Black Lives Matter, issues like reproductive rights for all people with uteruses, and oppressed communities like Native and LGBT people. Importantly, not just giving lip service, but lending support with our money, actions, and voices — following their lead.

All of these different things are part of the humanist movement.

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

Webber: Thank you!

License and Copyright

License



In-Sight Publishing by Scott Douglas Jacobsen is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Based on a work at <https://medium.com/humanist-voices>.

Copyright

© 2012-2019 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen and *In-Sight Publishing* 2012-2019. Unauthorized use and/or duplication of this material without express and written permission from this site's author and/or owner is strictly prohibited. Excerpts and links may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to Scott Douglas Jacobsen and *In-Sight Publishing* with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.