



SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	6
1 CANADIAN ATHEIST	7
a Interview with Mr. Dominic Omenai – Member, Atheist Society of Nigeria	8
b Interview with Mr. Ebenezer Odubule – Member, Atheist Society of Nigeria	10
c Interview with Vahyala Kwaga – Member, Atheist Society of Nigeria	13
d Claire Klingenberg on Atheism, Humanism, Rationalism, and Skepticism in Europe	15
e In Conversation with Diane Burkholder – Co-Founder, One Struggle KC	17
f Interview with Zachiam Bayei – Member, Atheist Society of Nigeria	20
g Chat with Bentley Davis – Founder, Reasonscore	23
h Conversation with Agnes Vishnevkin, MBA on Intentional Insights and the Pro-Truth Pledge	24
i Updates on Tanzanian Freethinkers and JichoJipya with Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa’sam)	26
j Interview with Jummai Mohammed – Member, Atheist Society of Nigeria	29
k Interview with Nacer Amari on Humanitarian Activism and Prometheus Europe	31
l Ask Mandisa 1 – Organization, Activities, and Funding	34
m Interview with Pastor Dave Solmes – Lead Pastor, Living Waters Church	37
n On the Difficulties of the Ex-Religious and Finding Their Way	41
o Controversial Figures of Cults	44
p Ask Mandisa 2 – Online Dialogue	46
q Interview with Tanzanian Freethinker Agness Bweye	48
r Interview with a Syrian Freethinker – Yazan	50
s Interview with an Algerian Freethinker – Zilan	52
t Conversation with Felicia Cravens – Founder, Unfakery	55
u Ask Mandisa 3 – Building around Food and Fun	60
v Conversation with Lynn Perrin on Recent Pipeline Issues	62
w Conversation with Pastor Brad Strelau – Pastor, CA Church: Town Center	65
x Ask Mandisa 4 – Online Spaces, Community, and Decorum	81
y Conversation with Dr. Gleb Tsipursky—Co-Founder, Pro-Truth Pledge & Intentional Insights	84
z Chat with Howard Burman – Secretary, Board of Directors, Atheist Alliance International	95
aa Interview with Elisabeth Mathes – Affiliates Director, Board of Directors, Atheist Alliance International	97
License and Copyright	101

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Scott

Canadian Atheist

Interview with Mr. Dominic Omenai – Member, Atheist Society of Nigeria

September 5, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was growing up like for you? Was religion a big part of it? How was religion or faith incorporated into family and community life? What were the social consequences of taking part in non-religious activities as you grow up or later in life?

Mr. Dominic Omenai: I was a Catholic when I was growing up, I was manservant for some time before leaving that to try other religions. Yes, religion was a directing force in my life. Back then when I was growing up, immediately after returning from school the next place to spend time was at the church attending one program or the other, we prayed as a family.

Jacobsen: What were the social consequences of taking part in non-religious activities as you grow up or later in life?

Omenai: The individual that has inspired me in Nigeria who is a humanist is a man named Wole Soyinka a Nobel laureate. Religion is the worst thing that has happened to mankind that prevents a man from using reason.

Jacobsen: Who are some individuals that inspire you in Nigeria? What are some organizations people can look into to organize, strategize, and have a base of operations for activism for the atheist community? Does religion seem net negative or net positive to you?

Omenai: The individual that has inspired me in Nigeria who is a humanist is a man named Wole Soyinka a Nobel laureate. Religion is the worst thing that has happened to mankind that prevents a man from using reason.

Jacobsen: Are there any prominent books or authors as well worth mentioning?

Omenai: A prominent author worth mentioning is Dan Barker, I have read nearly all his books. I have almost all of Dan Barker's books, except *Losing Faith in Faith*. David Silverman's book *Fighting God, What on Earth is an Atheist* by Madalyn Murray O'Hair, *Jesus is Dead* by Robert Price, *Natural Atheism* by David Eller, *A Case Against God* by George H. Smith to mention a few.

Jacobsen: What ones have had the most impact on you?

Omenai: *Natural Atheism* by David Eller has had an impact on me and fighting.

Jacobsen: Are there some atheist books that tend to influence the Nigerian atheist population more than others?

Omenai: I just started the library, the response is encouraging.

Jacobsen: What do outsiders, such as Canadians like myself, simply not get about the atheist and non-religious community in Nigeria?

Omenai: Atheists in Nigeria, struggle with the backlash for being an atheist, if you tell someone that you are an atheist in Nigeria you will be treated cruelly.

Jacobsen: Any final notes? You had something to say about a Canadian friend who deserves kudos.

Omenai: Her name is Elizabeth Mathes, I have known her for some years now. She is married and lives in Canada. She was recently appointed an affiliate director of Atheist Alliance International. She has been my support and helps in the book gathering for my library.

I wish to use these opportunities to thank her and recommend her to the *Canadian Atheist* community as someone trustworthy with a desire to help the Atheist struggle over religion.

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

Omenai: Thank you for interviewing me.

Interview with Mr. Ebenezer Odubule – Member, Atheist Society of Nigeria

September 6, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

His self-description: I am Ebenezer Odubule. I will turn 50 years of age on 14th September 2018. I am a legal practitioner engaging in private legal practice in Lagos Nigeria. I was born into Christianity and was indoctrinated along Christian dogma until 2007. So, I have been an atheist since 2007.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was religion a part of real life? If so, how did religion influence personal early life?

Ebenezer Odubule: In Nigeria, unfortunately, religion is a major part of daily life. We breathe religion; we exhale religion, when you wake up in the morning you are treated to the loud public address system from the mosques calling out on adherents in the daily call to prayers.

Same goes for the churches, undertaking weekly prayer meetings, night vigils and playing loud worship songs to the public space with no consideration given to nonmembers of their faith in the society. You are made to bear with noises associated with religious worship day and night and sometimes throughout the week

The story is not so different in the various levels of the educational institution both public and private, the religious faith of those at the helms of affairs is usually imposed on staffs and students with impunity.

In the workplace also, the impact of religion is everywhere, it is a well-known fact that Nigeria is the most religious country in the world but we are yet to see any significant gains from this religiousity.

On certain days of the week, public many employees of government institutions and agencies will abandon their work from 1.00pm in the name of going for prayers and many will not return back for duty on that day as it marks the beginning of the weekend – so much talk about productivity.

In some private businesses and professional organizations, the religious practice of the head is imposed on the rest of the workforce. Religion is part of work, school, family life, social and political life – it is exasperating.

In the political space also, religion is a key factor. Leadership is not sourced on the basis of an individual's level of competence and fidelity to humanism.

This allows for manipulation and patronage of religious leaders and polarization along religious lines. Corrupt settlement of political cronies via pilgrimage programmes at the pleasure of the President, the governors and local government chairmen across the country

So, it is visible to all, that religion is a substitute for good governance in Nigeria. The people do not have any faith in the political leadership and since god is dogmatically assumed and regarded as a problem solving all-powerful spiritual entity, the majority will cast their burden unto God rather than seeking practical or rational ways to solve problems.

This is not surprising though as strict religious indoctrination encourages segregation. Muslims do business purely with fellow Muslims whilst Christians do business mainly with Christians in many instances.

So from these premises being religious have its obvious social advantages in providing the social and economic pool for followers to leverage for business or even professional advantages and Nigerians knew this and that is why they are jumping on that very bandwagon as survival strategy rather than as an expression of religious faith per se.

Consequently, early personal lives are enmeshed in these dynamics be it social, educational, economic, or political – you are willy-nilly coerced into one form of acceptance of religion one way or another. It is a huge challenge to sound personal development and one that has placed Nigeria in the state of stagnation and misery as it is today.

Jacobsen: What were some early moments of questioning faith for you?

Odubule: started my elementary education at age 6, but I can recall before then, that I often as a child question the veracity of the existence of God as the foundation of the human faith. But religion is crafted in ways which did not allow for disagreement with its dogma.

So you either shape in or you wash out. But then again, we are told that if we rebel, we will burn in hellfire and if we obey God we would go and enjoy in heaven. So for me, the real essence of serving God was borne out of fear and not love. The primordial fear factor – to save our own necks from the scorching flames of hell – very funny.

So, the early moments of questioning faith for me started in primary school. I was seeking answers to the legitimacy of god but not openly because the majority frowns at such inquiries and I had to endure life going to churches because when your parents get ready for churches they compel their children to come along for lots of reasons unconnected with religion too.

I never saw an overwhelming righteousness or fidelity from my fellow Christians when I was religious except for a few devoted individuals.

In my adult life I came to the conclusion that there is a different almighty god for the Chinese people that Nigerians do not yet know, given the firm commitment and socio-economic results witnessed in China, and the gods worshipped in the U.S or Canada is certainly not the same god worshipped massively in Nigeria because the world knew we aren't making the landmark progress that we are potentially poised to achieve in the first place.

When you look around the country you will see overwhelming misery and poverty facilitated by advocates of religion in public life.

Jacobsen: Who are some prominent Nigerians that people should know more about, who are atheist in Nigeria?

Odubule: Apart from my colleagues in organized irreligious communities such as Leo Igwe, it is hard to say one prominent Nigerian is an atheist or not. I have heard people saying that the Nigerian Nobel Laureate, Prof. Wole Soyinka, is an atheist but I am not able to confirm this neither have I seen the professor associating with any organized atheist groups in Nigeria. I can only say someone is an atheist by association for now.

Jacobsen: What are the professional and family consequences of coming out as an atheist in Nigeria?

Odubule: There is still a good measure of culture shock in Nigeria when people get to hear you say you are an atheist. They exhibit shock and surprise. Hence, with the daily influence of religion earlier portrayed.

Some family members will keep their distance, they believe that you are a bad influence on the religious development of other family members. Professionally you are at a disadvantage too, especially when you are in a profession where advertisement is precluded and you would rely on references from a wide variety of sources.

But this is okay by me because the sanity of my conscience weighs more importantly than any professional accomplishment – all my life, I have never enjoyed the degree of inner peace I now enjoyed when I was religious. No more nightmares and surely no more praying, casting, binding and battling any unseen and perpetual enemies.

Jacobsen: What were some of the pivotal moments of becoming an atheist for you?

Odubule: That was during the Atheist Society of Nigeria national convention in 2017 at the University of Lagos. I was impressed at the large turnout and the fact that the crowd are mostly young Nigerians men and women from major parts of Nigeria including the north.

There is a future for secularism in Nigeria. Before my membership of ASN, I had initially thought I was alone in my atheism but now I know better.

Jacobsen: Do the religious have any formal arguments, rather than social reprimands against atheism? What are they?

Odubule: I am not aware of the existence of any rational formal arguments deployed by religious bodies in defense of their faith.

Jacobsen: For a young person who wants to leave religion in Nigeria, how can they do it? What are their risks?

Odubule: This will depend on the family or social background of the young person. We have had challenges with some young adults declaring openly to his Jehovah's Witness parent on the practice of atheism and the result led to ex-communication by friends and expulsion from the family home.

I have also experienced another young male adult whose atheism activities on social media has led his family to declare him insane and he was promptly taken to a mental hospital as a measure to persecute and he was effectively coerced to abandon his conscience and went back into the closet.

My advice to any young person is to wait until they are independent of all parental influences before coming out with their atheism but I am also aware that some families may be liberal in their reaction to such issues hence, a balancing approach is required otherwise the risk of social reprimand is always hovering around such declaration of atheism at early stages and family members often applied punitive measures withdrawing financial and emotional support to the subject.

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

Interview with Vahyala Kwaga – Member, Atheist Society of Nigeria

September 7, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Did you start questioning religion early on?

Vahyala Kwaga: Well, I have been a skeptic for quite some time and this may have been due to a level of intellectual honesty I noticed growing up as a child, in my home. I had the usual questions, as a child, like ‘who created god?’ But none of them were answered from an honest standpoint and I later just abandoned questioning. Much later in my early twenties, I began to think about how a lot of the ‘threats’ issued by the religious seemed not to affect a good number of others that did not subscribe to Christianity. I thought that was weird and began to carry out ‘Thought Experiments’ that addressed those inconsistencies. Those experiments in my late twenties were the beginning of my journey!

Jacobsen: You come from a highly educated household. Did this influence critical thinking and science education early on for you?

Kwaga: Yes, it did. Though I didn’t study any pure or applied science course (I have two degrees in Law), but my parents did take the time to engage us intellectually on current affairs, theology and rudimentary logic. Looking back, they were quite intellectually honest for religious Nigerian parents!

Jacobsen: How are religion and politics mixed in Nigeria? Is it more negative or more positive in general? Please explain.

Kwaga: The average Nigerian is ‘religious’ (by religious, I mean shows ‘piety’ more than kindness and compassion, etc). So, in a country of 190-200 million, the common denominator would be a sense of religion and its vocalisation in public discourse. The mix between religion and politics, I can say, is negative, to a large extent. For example, it is on record that the rejection of the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill by the 8th National Assembly was in part due to religious reasons. Again, the Federal Government still subsidizes religious pilgrimage. And a few State governors have blamed disease outbreak on “Sin” and not research or any empirical study. But this may also be in part due to our anti-intellectual public life.

Jacobsen: In terms of the demographics of Nigeria, how many atheists?

Kwaga: I assume you mean ‘openly Atheist’? If yes, I don’t have the data but going by the number of registered members of the ASN, I would say that Atheists could be about 100. But there are likely far more, yet the numbers would likely not be more than 500-600 nationwide.

Jacobsen: If a young person in Nigeria wanted to leave religion, how would you recommend that they do it? What are the potential consequences and personal, family, and community life for them?

Kwaga: If the person was still dependent on her family for shelter and food, I would advise them to just ‘lay low’ till they get their own source of income. It is not uncommon for parents in Nigeria to deny their children of care upon hearing they are no longer religious. This is not to talk of the emotional abuse and anguish that would follow.

Their families would likely ostracise them and their communities, too. Though I have not heard of any case of recorded violence against the irreligious, but resources are usually denied to them.

Jacobsen: What tends to be the main reason people report for leaving religion in Nigeria?

Kwaga: From my very casual observation, it seems like the argument for the existence of deities does not “add up”. A lot of Atheists on average, read a lot, so they begin to see the loopholes in arguments pandered by their religions. Most come to the realisation that there is no evidence or basis for religious claims.

Jacobsen: Who are some inspiring non-religious figures in Nigeria?

Kwaga: Mr. Tai Solarin was a famous Nigerian irreligious public intellectual. Also, it was “rumoured” that late former President Umar Yar’adua was irreligious, but this information came long after his death. He was a President that a number of Nigerians remember fondly.

Jacobsen: Can you recommend any books on atheism by a Nigerian?

Kwaga: I don’t know of any!

Jacobsen: What seems to be the general trend in the religious demographics of Nigeria? Are there more atheists? Are there the same number of religious people, but the levels of religiosity are declining?

Kwaga: I think that the number of Atheists is on the rise, if the debates and interactions on Social Media are anything to go by. A lot of people are now unashamed to discuss how exploitative the religious institutions are, and a lot of people are more comfortable confronting the logical inconsistencies in religious ‘arguments’. I suppose again, that this may be an indication of declining religiosity, but I don’t know if the interactions I see on Social Media are an accurate representation.

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

Claire Klingenberg on Atheism, Humanism, Rationalism, and Skepticism in Europe

September 8, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

Claire lives in Prague, Czech Republic, with her partner, and dog. First interview with us, [here](#).

Jacobsen: When it comes to the skeptical and atheist communities in Europe, what are the main issues? In other words, the items that come to the fore. That Americans may not know about.

Klingenberg: That is first greatly depending on the European country that we’re talking about. In Ireland, the church has a huge influence over the legislature. The atheist group there, it is fighting heavily for secular legislation, for a secular government.

You can see this distinction in European countries in general. Usually, when there are a lot of influences of the church over the government, you do not have skeptic groups. You have mainly atheist groups.

If the country is secular, it is more likely to have large skeptic groups rather than atheist groups. In Poland, there are mainly atheist groups because that is mainly their issue. It hinges on that.

In Europe, the bigger issues are the popularity of alternative medicine and different forms of alternative medicine. These are often based on different spiritual and religious practices. That is the main overlapping point between the atheist and the skeptic groups.

Jacobsen: What are some of the consequences socially of being an atheist and skeptic in Europe that do not occur in America, and vice versa?

Klingenberg: It is individual. Skeptic has a negative connotation in some European countries. In Romania, they use “rationalist.” Other countries use “free thought.” In Germany, their group name is something like, if translated, “promotion of science.”⁷

Being a skeptic, as in following the skeptical method and philosophy, it doesn’t have any social connotations.

But it can have some in certain countries if the word skeptic in the country that you're using it has a negative view of the word.

Jacobsen: How far back is this difference in terminology, e.g., skeptic, rationalist, atheist, humanist, and so on?

Klingenberg: At least the 90s. Europe is historically divided into before and after communism. After 1989, these groups popped up. Not only skeptic and humanist groups, different religious groups too.

The thing with the word atheist is that it is connected to the communist regime because it was communist. In no way does this mean modern atheism is communist, that would be a wrong assumption.

There has to be a distinction made between what is seen in the word atheist and what it implies. In my country, in the Czech Republic, when you say "Atheist," it means you're against the Catholic Church. It doesn't mean that you do not believe in some higher power.

It means that you're anti-institutionalist and anti-clerical. The atheists in Poland, it means you are anti-Catholic Church and is a statement, a big one, that you do not believe in God. These atheist and rationalist groups arose in the 90s.

That was already given by the context of the words in that particular area or country. I think that this differentiation was there from the beginning. That was the reason those words were chosen.

Jacobsen: Other than the concerns from many European skeptics and atheists, and the differences in terminology. How much more powerful are the religious institutions in the United States than in the European Union?

Klingenberg: In the US, there are so many different types of religious institutions. Of course, there is this overall belief in God. There is this big pressure of the Christian believers, even if they belong to various branches of the Evangelical movement.

From what I can see, it has more pressure than the church has here. Because here, it is an institution like the Catholic Church, which does carry historical power and influence and is very rich. But now the influence comes from the institution, not from its followers. But again, it depends on country-to-country.

However, they generally, it doesn't have a direct effect on the legislature. Unless, for example, it is Spain, Ireland, or Poland.

Jacobsen: What other organizations represent the European Union as a whole or mostly? That people can look to support in the skeptic and other domains.

Klingenberg: The European Council of Skeptic Organizations is the only umbrella organization, which binds together skeptically and rationally oriented groups, regardless of name. But there is also the wonderful group called Centre for Science. It is in Brussels. It does skeptical science work. They are an organization, non-profit. They are not a movement or a group.

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

In Conversation with Diane Burkholder – Co-Founder, One Struggle KC

September 9, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Diane Burkholder identifies as a cisgender, queer, mixed race, Blackfeminist. She has education in both sociology from CSU-Long Beach and Ethnic Studies from San Francisco State University. She's a co-founder of One-Struggle KC, is the founder and lead consultant for The DB Approach, co-moderates the Kansas City Freethinkers of Color & Kansas City Mixed Roots, and serves on the Board Member of Kansas City's Uzazi Village. Burkholder can be found on Twitter here.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your personal background?

Diane Burkholder: I grew up in a manger. I'm kidding. How do I arrive to be an atheist? I did not grow up in a religious home. I went to a Methodist Church with my mother when I was a little young. She said that I spoke to God when I was the age of 5.

My mother considers herself Christian but doesn't go to church and is very critical. In my late teens, I identified as agnostic. In my early 20s, I thought, "Who am I kidding? I don't believe in a higher power."

Only 10 or 15 years ago, I adopted the term atheist, secular humanist, and so on, depending on who I am speaking to so they can understand.

Jacobsen: You were the co-founder of One Struggle KC. It's a coalition of Kansas City activists hoping to connect and help the struggles of oppressed black peoples not only in Kansas City but across the world.

What are some of the issues now from your particular perspective? Why are some issues more important than others?

Burkholder: We started right after Ferguson in October, 2014. We saw a need to talk about issues of police brutality in Kansas City. We are only 4 hours away from Ferguson, but we are not very connected to St. Louis.

A lot of people in Kansas City thought St. Louis was way over there. When you have a black police chief and a black mayor, they thought it wasn't really an issue. The police brutality is a very pressing issue.

From 2005-2016, the paper did an expose. KCPD had killed 49 people without any indictments. Since then, they have killed 6 more people. Then it was talking about how police brutality is how it is linked to other types of oppression for black folk, and how other marginalized communities within black communities: LGBT folk, undocumented folk.

They are even more oppressed under police and state violence. We look at how they are linked. Police brutality kicked this off. We talk about many different issues.

We talk about the way our community is oppressed in various different fashions. Our group is mostly non-believers. We have had Christian folk and other belief systems as part of our group. We are not a strictly non-belief group.

I also facilitate the Kansas City Freethinkers of Colors. That is specifically for non-believers.

Jacobsen: You founded and are the lead consultant for the DB Approach. How does this relate to the other areas of work that you noted, One Struggle KC and Kansas City Freethinkers of Color?

Burkholder: My work history has been advocacy, specifically HIV advocacy. I did treatment care, prevention, and also worked in the evaluation. I have three other folks who are community organizers who I have collaborated with. We work one-on-one with agencies to do anti-oppression training.

We look at policies and procedures and the ways trauma and oppression work at the organizational level and not only the individual actions way. It is looking at all of the ways oppression plays out.

Jacobsen: As well, you co-moderate Kansas City Mixed Roots.

Burkholder: That was founded in 1991. It was a multi-racial family circle. It was a space for multi-racial kids. About four years ago, we changed the name to be more relevant. Some of my co-facilitators grew up in the group.

In the online space, we have meetups for people who are multi-racial, transracial, adoptive families, interracial couples and families, and others; it serves as a space discussion on race. We have a space for people who are non-white.

We have play dates. Those are open to everybody. We have a local chapter of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) here. Three of those organizers are also a part of Mixed Roots. They have a families group. They host and talk about race and racism, specifically for white folk, but they also have a space for white folk who are raising kids of color.

Those are for people with the background who are able to talk with their people group.

Jacobsen: What is Uzazi Village?

Burkholder: Uzazi Village, it was founded to address issues of infant mortality. Some of the highest is black infant mortality across the country. That really plays out systemically with families before a baby is born and up to 1 year of age.

But really, it is looking at the ways black families, straight or queer-identified, are affected: looking at breastfeeding outcomes, access to prenatal care, and there's also the Sister Doula program.

Folks are trained to be really advocates to help moms and pregnant folks during their pregnancy and after their pregnancy with advocacy of care. There is also a breastfeeding class. It is really providing advocacy in the community.

We moved in 2017 down the street from where we previously were. It has a larger building with a second story that will have not only a space for clients, but also community space for other organizations.

Also, we are building a community garden next to the new location. It is operating and expanding above, and being a focal point for black families, whatever shape they may look. It is to have a black-centered space.

Jacobsen: Most of this work is very practical in addition to the advocacy. Something as simple as breastfeeding classes. So, in addition to the advocacy, which is needed, as well as the educational and social initiatives, the foundation is keeping the ears to the ground and helping people with very practical needs.

That leads to the last question. How can people get involved, donate, or help in some other way?

Burkholder: I really encourage folk. If they want to donate to other organizations, I appreciate it. We need all not-for-profit organizations running, as they function off donations. We also encourage people to dig locally into their own communities.

So, depending on people's identity and background, the goal would be to find community groups and organizations that have similar interests. I would encourage people to work as small as their living room as that is how most community groups start, whether an activity or some other means.

I often say the strongest way in order to argue for the community is if you are able to connect with other community members. Particularly with our current administration [Laughing], it is all about harnessing the power that has been taken away from our communities and having people connect with one another, which is a power of ours.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Diane.

Burkholder: Thank you!

Interview with Zachiam Bayei – Member, Atheist Society of Nigeria

September 10, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start from the top, what was family background regarding culture, language, geography, and religion or lack thereof?

Zachiam Bayei: Interesting, I was raised in a Christian family. I speak the English, Pidgin-English, Hausa, Jju languages. The languages I speak, their cultures have greatly influenced me. I am from a village named Akudan, in Kamrum District, Zango-Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna State. I was a Christian, but now am an Atheist and a Humanist.

Jacobsen: Would you consider this more liberal or more conservative as a household compared to other ones in Nigeria?

Bayei: I am from a conservative Christian family. I became an Atheist long before having a University education. I was a skeptic long before I became economically independent from my parents.

I later declared to them that I no longer believe in their God and religion. It was not an easy task. My father is an illiterate and a simple man. He understands me and wished me the best. But my Mom, a retired civil servant refused to give up on me.

She still echoes my coming back to God and religion whenever I pay her a visit at the family house. She said, she still prays for my return to religion.

Jacobsen: What were his primary, middle, and high school, or their equivalent, in Nigeria while getting your education? Was religion a big part of it? Was it formal in the education or informal in the social life, or both?

Bayei: Yes, while growing up, religion plays and still played a major role in my educational journey. In primary school, we were forced to pray during assembly time. A similar scenario plays out during my secondary education too. But at the university, it gives you wings. Nobody forces you to do such primitive rituals.

I already knew what I wanted for myself long before heading into University. I did not find atheists there. However, I found other schoolmates who held irreligious views about Abrahamic faiths. Social media actually gives me a voice to connect with atheists all around the world. I am so grateful for the technology of building bridges all across the world.

Jacobsen: When you reflect on some pivotal moments or arguments, or passages in the Bible that were contradictory, what were those moments when you begin to question it? When did you finally explicitly believe in nonbelief?

Bayei: I long knew the Bible was filled with contradictions and primitive violent rituals inimical to the freedom of the human spirit. In one breathe, the same Bible tells Moses saw the back of God; in another chapter, it says no man has ever seen God.

Moses was said to have written some books in the Bible, how come the same man recorded his death? But when I raised these observations to clergymen and Jesus-fans who often engage me in debates, they often shy away from them.

I had the observation theists hardly sustain debates about their faiths. I often tell them the burden of proof of God existence lies on them not us. Because they said He or She exists, simple they should prove it? This is a herculean task they can't do.

The truth is that many of these religious con artists knew deep down in their hearts God doesn't exist, because of the social supports they get from them; it keeps them in it.

Jacobsen: How does this impact on family life, personal life, and professional life?

Bayei: My atheism has personally made me freer and open to learning. But it has further alienated me and my family from other religious families. My wife is a Christian. We define our differences and still stay together.

She is worried about going to church alone. I always remind her not to cross the line we both agreed. We have a baby girl of 1. 11 years in the union for now. As for my place of work, it has not been easy.

My religious colleagues are aware of my stance on religions, but I try as much as possible to avoid religious debates with them. I just work and go home.

Jacobsen: Can you recommend any books by Nigerian authors on atheism?

Bayei: Really, I have yet to see or read a book written by any Nigerian atheist. But if I see, I will buy and read it.

Jacobsen: What have been the impacts of non-Nigerian authors who are atheists on the atheist community in Nigeria?

Bayei: The impact is enormous. Atheists like Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, etc., have impacted positively on the Nigerian atheists' community. We often draw inspiration from their quotes and share on social media.

Jacobsen: How does the public view the atheist community? How are atheists treated in Nigeria? Is it positive or negative in general?

Bayei: The public views on atheists in Nigerian is a worrisome one. Majority of Nigerians are handcuffed by Abrahamic religions, any idea or ideas that challenge these "sacred" values are not welcome.

The Northern part of Nigeria is more intolerant towards atheists because of their fanatical stances towards Abrahamic religions (Christianity & Islam). Many atheists I know from the north have to take on pseudonyms and identities on social media just to play safe. That is how bad it is in northern Nigeria, but the South, which is more advanced in education, has a liberal outlook towards atheists.

Jacobsen: Who are some inspiring non-religious figures in Nigeria? In particular, what about outspoken women who don't believe in any religion?

Bayei: Really Dr. Leo Igwe, the President of the Humanists' Association of Nigeria (HAN) and Mubarak Bala have been inspiring figures for consolidating my stances on atheism. As for the

public view of atheists in Nigeria, it is like any other in religious communities. They are physically, emotionally, and psychologically violent against the non-religious including atheists.

As for atheist ladies in Nigeria, earnestly, I know of none. Most of them are silent. I only meet a few during our atheist meetups in the country. But I know with time they will be expressive to the world.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in Nigeria and its atheist activism? As per the right to freedom of religion and freedom from religion, the basic premise is not hoping for some inevitable elimination of all religion or discrimination against religious people, but for the equality of the non-religious, in particular, the atheists, with the religious in Nigeria – and elsewhere.

Bayei: I stopped believing in God and his religion when I was 19 years. Today, I am 36 years. It took me time to study and understand my environment. When it is time I can out. I strongly believe economic and social supports are pivotal for atheists coming out for activism. As you can see theist controls almost every go things for life. These are the “weapons” they often used to intimidate and even kill those who do not share in their own version of the truth.

The best way I think people can live a secular life in Nigeria is by separating the state from religion in our constitution. Religion has no basis in our constitution, but the political merchants are refusing to amend the Constitution because they often reap political capital from it.

Religion should be separated from state institutions. This is destroying the quality of service delivery. Critical thinking and inquiry should be encouraged in public schools. It will create doubts in the minds of the students and people about all they have been taught to believe.

It is a natural way to atheism, but the Nigerian government isn’t allowing that.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts based on the interview today?

Bayei: The interview has been incisive and inspiring. Thank you for finding me worthy to be questioned. Thank you for the opportunity once more.

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

Chat with Bentley Davis – Founder, Reasonscore

September 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you get involved in the Pro-Truth Pledge?

Bentley Davis: I was working on how to help people agree more and found the Intentional Insights Facebook page where they discussed the psychology of disagreements. I started volunteering and when as a group we came up with the Pro-Truth Pledge. I was excited because a shared pledge can increase the chances of agreement.

Jacobsen: What is its value to the work that you do?

Davis: If we can find more agreement we will spend less time working against each other and more time working together. Even a small increase in agreements can unlock substantial human resources to make a better world.

Jacobsen: What inspired the foundation of www.reasonscore.com?

Davis: Two of my friends unfriended each other over an online disagreement. I knew the topic would come up as we hung out so I tried doing some research. Everywhere I went I got an opposing viewpoint that sounded plausible. It would take forever to come to a conclusion. There has to be a better way.

Jacobsen: What does the app do? How does it work?

Davis: We are just experimenting right now. People can search for a topic and find all the pros and cons organized and scored. They can dig deeper to learn the reasons for the scores. They can share them with their friends to ease disputes. They can add any missing pros or cons to make sure all information on the topic is available and scored. They can also add their own topics claims and share them. They can also have a constructive debate using the tool.

Jacobsen: How can others get it, build on it, and collaborate with you?

Davis: Right now the best way is to schedule a demo and spend some time giving live feedback on the tool. They can schedule time with me at BentleyDavis.com/meet.

All the code is available at github.com/reasonscore. I welcome feedback and submissions.

I am also working with a larger group at <https://github.com/canonical-debate-lab/paper>.

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

Conversation with Agnes Vishnevkin, MBA on Intentional Insights and the Pro-Truth Pledge

September 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are part of two important initiatives. One, you are the co-founder and vice president of Intentional Insights. Two, you are the co-founder of the Pro-Truth Pledge (PTP). There are important, along with others around the world, of critical thinking and science and evidence-based thinking.

What is your own personal narrative? How did this lead to being the co-founder of the PTP?

Agnes Vishnevkin: The backstory is that I am a co-founder of a non-profit organization called Intentional Insights launched in 2014. The purpose was to share science-based tools for improving decision-making and truth-seeking and to help people have better relationships using science-based tools.

As the year 2016, we found ourselves talking about using scientific techniques to interpret events in the political world including the 2016 presidential elections in the United States with Donald Trump as well as the success of the Brexit vote.

We found ourselves talking about how truth and facts were actually thrown under the bus when these candidates were speaking with these political causes to get ahead. In 2016, we thought of ways to fight back against this culture of lies and post-truth, which was actually named the 2016 word of the year, if I am not mistaken, by *Oxford Dictionary*.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Vishnevkin: [Laughing] Yes, and believe it or not, it is almost two years ago that this occurred [Laughing]. With our knowledge in behavioral science and psychology, my fellow co-founder, Gleb Tsipursky, has a lot of the scholarly background, he led the effort to do a lot of research to see how we can change people's behavior to focus more on facts.

Even though, there is a lot of incentive for people, including politicians and others, to move away from facts and pass opinions off as fact. That is a bit of a long story. That is how the PTP project was launched, by their non-profit. This non-profit is non-partisan and registered in the United States.

Of course, there is a lot of work ahead of us, especially as the co-founder of these initiatives.

Jacobsen: How do non-evidence-based and non-truth-based policy and public discourse poison the ways in which citizens live their lives and make decisions about how the country is run based on, for instance, voting for candidates who make policy pledges? Things like this.

Vishnevkin: When people who are in authority or positions of power make false claims, it is easy for us to trust. That is what we do. We are wired to do that. Because of our brains. A lot of the behavioral science indicates that human evolved not to live in 2018, not in the world of constant news and smartphones.

We evolved to live in the savannah of 100-150 people-groups. Where we may not have lived past our 20s, we have not evolved to live here. Back then, millions of years ago, it was a matter of life and death to belong to your tribe and to be accepted.

Sometimes, you might be rejected by the tribe and may not survive the rest of that month. Now, we are still wired to listen to authority. When someone in a position of authority says something that is a lie, it is easier to trust that person and believe them.

When that person creates policy based on this lie, we have a policy that is not based on something that could actually achieve its goal. It is easier to be misled by our leaders if our leaders make false statements.

Jacobsen: Can an argument be made that lies to the public or non-evidence-based decision-making towards policies that affect the public amount to harms to the public good, in a very real sense?

Vishnevkin: I would definitely say, “Yes.” For instance, if I was a policymaker, or if I was a lawmaker, if my duty is to protect my constituents, then science and evidence bases are the best way to know what does and does not work.

From my perspective, that is the duty of a lawmaker or a policymaker. Of course, politics is not something entirely different. People have a pressure to get re-elected, to get financial support. So, they have incentives to do certain things that are not based on evidence, on science, on facts.

As we know, there are many moral things going on, where policy may be significantly different from what is evidence-based. I would like to live in a world where policymakers look at evidence each time. That is the point of PTP through protruthpledge.org. We have already two peer-reviewed research papers that show PTP takers are more truthful in their public statements.

I am aware that I accept the world in which I live: politicians have many other pressures to do other things. That is one of the big things that we follow through the PTP. People getting away with lying and misleading the public because they have incentives to do that and have no incentives to hold them accountable.

We developed this opportunity for people to volunteer to be more truthful in their public content and statements. So, they would have an incentive for a public place where they can be recognized in order to encourage them to state in their literature and their website that they signed the PTP and for people to comment. We are looking for the grassroots incentive for people to be truthful and focused on facts. We already have multiple lawmakers around the world and in the United States who signed.

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

Updates on Tanzanian Freethinkers and JichoJipya with Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam)

September 13, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam) founded JichoJipya (meaning with new eye) to "Think Anew". He is among the best read – on primary freethinking and humanist sources – African freethinkers known to me.

We have talked before about freethought in Tanzania. They have an in-development YouTube channel [here](#). Some grassroots activism [here](#). Some work or organizations with activism and cultural exchange here: [Galimoto'Kali](#), [Sisi Kwa Sisi](#) ([Facebook](#)/[LinkedIn](#)/[Twitter](#)/[Felix Ntinda](#)).

Nsajigwa has been interviewed [here](#). We conducted other interviews/publications in Blogogate [here](#), Canadian Atheist [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), in The Good Men Project [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and in Humanist Voices [here](#) and [here](#), Tanzania Today [here](#), and Tech2 [here](#).

Here we continue the discussion on the updates over the last few months of the secular community in Tanzania.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How are things with JichoJipya/Think Anew? What are the post-summer updates on the organization?

Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam): We did our fourth JichoJipya Think Anew AGM on 23rd June 2018, once again on self-reliance basis of raising funds for that. The turn up was half, which gave us an impression that many nonbelievers are still shy of coming out and to be known so publicly. However, we had a very positive meeting and agreed on some bold moves for the way forward.

We must keep on identifying, unearthing, and connecting the Tanzanian independent-minded and potential freethinkers, and nonbelievers. On the positive note, there has been noted vigor from the youth.

The team of genuine freethinkers joining us is adding up. Thus, there is a division of labor, which is labor off the shoulders of the original founder Nsajigwa and the other two – to make three.

The youth have decided to “take over” and start by revamping the JichoJipya Think Anew website. They promised to make it active, alive. We are very happy with this development.

Jacobsen: Any major events for the secular community in Tanzania?

Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam): The public day for chimpanzee is marked, recognized! It should be a day to remind of evolutionary theory.

That we are modern humans, are an animal species that evolved – not created as the numerous tribal and religious myths suggested in the past – and that the chimpanzee's are – in fact of biology – our close cousins.

More so in a country that is then taken to be the origin of mankind through studies of anthropology, the earliest findings of modern humankind. The famous biologist of chimpanzee life, Dr. Jane Goodall, has spent almost an entire lifetime here, in Northern Tanzania Gombe National Park, researching on Chimpanzees' life.

It is a positive development to have a day – July 14th – to mark and appreciate the facts of the evolutionary explanation. And there was a maiden public display of messages by a few, of course.

JichoJipya is going to mark it, to take part next time around. It is as important a day as Darwin Day and a visit to the Galapagos island! Hopefully, many freethinkers should be visiting Tanzania just for that, haha! You are welcome!

Jacobsen: Have there been any developments in politics, policy, or civic life around critical thinking, skepticism, and so on?

Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam): While many possible nonbeliever individuals are in the closet, however for the youth, the horizon of skepticism has risen.

You spark an argument to find out that enough youth are doubters, critical thinkers on the question of Theity & supernaturality. Yes, they believe out of conditioning, but they have their own rational doubts!

Jacobsen: With the passing of the elder atheist, Elder Kingunge Ngombale-Mwiru, what does this mean for you, for the passing of the humanist torch?

Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam): The passing of Elder Kingunge Ngombale-Mwiru was indeed the close of a chapter and the beginning of another new era.

It came out that we – JichoJipya/Think Anew – were the only ones who interviewed him correctly of what he was – an independent thinker and a freethinker – and in that way cleared many misconceptions about his life stance and thus way contributing philosophically in documenting correctly his biography.

Ngombale-Mwiru being another of a series of very important figures of the Uhuru era age, being one in the team of Nationalist founders here.

After his death, our interview with him got noticed, and was “shared” around, and even plagiarized! Many ones came to know what a freethinker living without a religion is...not necessarily a Marxist or a communist as an assumption by many implied that was a necessity the case!

Someone got linked to us saying Kingunge's life epitomizes his own, but he thought he was alone. So, he joined our circle on knowing there are others alike, albeit few who are Kingunge like-minded, living good without any religion. More so, the interview got even journalists starting using the term “freethinker” here!

“Wosia wake” Swahili for his final word to us (during the interview) was... “during my time I was alone but you freethinkers now you must be meeting regularly” ...he said that, adding he was very happy to have finally met the Tanzanians of his like-mind, though of a later generation. He advised us to be meeting regularly.

So, it's our aim to see that the Tanzanians “FikraHuru” freethinker's family – be humanists, secularists, and rationalists – meet & socialize more regularly. But first, we have to pioneer and

“unearth” and connect those who are in the closet, to emancipate them from fear and let them realize that they are not alone as nonbelievers.

And going by the population of Tanzania, while, yes, freethinkers are an obvious minority, but they could be sizeable & noticeable if organized...talk of W.E.B. Du Bois “Talented 10th” of any society!

Late Elder Kingunge lived ahead of his time. For us, the middle-aged, we have tried hard to build the foundation for the emergence of genuine freethinkers in a humanist euphraxsopher circle & community here.

Now, the youth have been teaming with us, collectively we see ourselves as the footstep Heirs of Kingunge philosophy, of living without religion, likewise Mwalimu J.K. Nyerere Tanzania very first President’s principles of Secularism for Tanzanians as modern Africans.

We paid tribute to both of them during the AG meeting – together with Ugandan writer-thinker named Okot Pbitek – for being founders of independent thinking to freethinking on Rationalism secularism aspect of modern African life.

Another recent development is that we have again had an interesting interviewed with another prominent individual, this time Emeritus Professor Alex Mwakikoti. A Tanzanian living and teaching in the USA.

The interview shall be out to the public soon. We agreed during the AGM to remake, revamp the website because now the youth team within us are pushing us (in a good way!) to be more vigorous, more open, and active.

They have the know-how on how to use modern gadgets – smartphones as a tool of intellectual empowerment, modern version of Gutenberg print revolution during dark age going towards renaissance, as indeed it is our case stage here in modern times today.

Thus such modern devices for reaching out to the public. We are thankful that now the youth are finding us and joining us. Power be to the youth for the ultimate African humanistic rationalistic renaissance!

Jacobsen: What are the next steps for Tanzania to compassionately, considerately, and democratically move from superstition to rationality, human rights protections and implementation, and science and evidence-based thinking – much more broadly than its current state?

Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa’sam): Next step for us is the preparation to come out and let the Tanzania populace know that there are many more Kingunge like people – independent thinkers and freethinkers living without religion yet ethical, humanistic and that, it is indeed possible to live that way.

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

Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa’sam): Our venture is monumental, herculean. It needs the support of any fellow like-minded – freethinker Humanist Secularist Rationalist family. Any such positive resource support is welcome. Thank you for this great chance.

Interview with Jummai Mohammed – Member, Atheist Society of Nigeria

September 16, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Jummai Mohammed: My name is Jummai Mohammed. I am a Hausa lady from the northern part of Nigeria. I was born into a Muslim home but in a predominantly Christian society. I was born and bred in the southern part of Nigeria which is mostly dominated by Christians.

Jacobsen: How did this impact early life? What was early education like for you? Was religion a part of that education?

Mohammed: I will say being born in a Muslim home in a Christian dominated society tends to shape my being an atheist to this day. As a young girl, I was practically confused by the contradictions in both religions, yet they both claim to serve the supreme God.

I never loved Islam in schools due to the fact that the ustaz in those schools always look and act mean.

The way in which children are beaten up, young boys tied into poles while being flogged mercilessly in the name of punishment made me hate going to Islamic schools; on the other hand, whenever I have the opportunity of following my Christian friends to church, I tend to enjoy the less tensed environment, the songs, the dance and everyone smiling faces and that paved my way into converting to Christianity in the later years.

So, I have practiced and experienced the two most popular Abrahamic religion. Early education for me was fun. I attended a private nursery and primary school. Yes, religion was part of the education. I later proceeded to a church-owned private high school for secondary education. I converted to Christianity while in secondary school, but a closet one.

Jacobsen: When did you first start to begin questioning religion, or were you always an atheist?

Mohammed: I have always questioned religion right from primary school, I always questioned the Bible/Quran stories right from that time, because the stories don't add up. I ask questions like why did God create us, why place an apple tree in the garden when he doesn't want humans eating from it.

However, joining a popular Nigeria online forum known as Nairaland influenced and hastened my decision of becoming an atheist.

Jacobsen: Are women treated differently than men and religions? How is this difference manifested in Nigeria?

Mohammed: Yes, it is a glaring fact that religion preaches subjugation of women and it is very evident in Nigerian society. Women are being treated more like a semi-human or should I say slaves in Nigeria, most especially in the northern part of the country which I come from.

Jacobsen: What has been your experience as an adult atheist in Nigeria?

Mohammed: My experience as an adult atheist is just religious fanatics unwillingness to get close, make friends, or do business with me. I don't live in the north where most atheists are likely to face death threats, I reside in Lagos.

Jacobsen: Who are some prominent male atheists in Nigeria? Who are some prominent women atheists in Nigeria?

Mohammed: Prominent female atheist:

Jummai, Pearl, Neshama, Dorris, etc.

Mubarak Balah, Azaya, Calistus, Juwon, Dr. Leo., Etc

Jacobsen: Can you recommend any books on atheism that are popular within Nigeria? In particular, those that are written by non-Nigerians. Also, those that are written by Nigerians, or a Nigerian.

Mohammed: No.

Jacobsen: What are the main forms of discrimination against atheists, especially open ones, in Nigeria?

Mohammed: Discriminations vary, depending on the atheist environment. In the southern and eastern parts, the discriminations are; family and friends rejecting that person, people not wanting to make friends or involve in any sort of business with one, relationship/marriage breakups. etc..

In the northern part which is predominantly Muslims, atheists face death threats, lynching, and so on, together with what I listed up there faces by a southern atheist.

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

Interview with Nacer Amari on Humanitarian Activism and Prometheus Europe

September 20, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Nacer Amari is the Co-Founder of United Atheists of Europe and Co-Founder of Prometheus Europe. He is a Tunisian humanitarian activist who fled Tunisia six years ago because of death threats from Islamists. He is having financial difficulties to establish an association www.prometheus-eu.com, where he endeavours to assist people who are threatened with the death penalty because of their critical views of Islam in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. We did a prior interview in [The Good Men Project](#) and [Canadian Atheist](#). You can view the donations page [here](#). Here we talk about Prometheus Europe and humanitarian activism.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become a Tunisian humanitarian activist?

Nacer Amari: It has been said; believing some lives have more value than others is the root of all evil in the world. The antidote to despair is solidarity, working to ensure that we all have peace, security, basic services, and opportunities, not because of the birth lottery of which country we are from, but because we are all human. Solidarity is more than charity – it includes trying to change the systems that produce suffering in the first place.

There is a lot of suffering in the world, none of us can do everything, but each of us can do one thing. We can all be humanitarians in a world that needs them more than ever.

This is how my journey in the humanitarian field started. I just loved the fact that we could share happy moments with suffering people.

Jacobsen: What were some of the integral parts of becoming one, at least six years ago?

Amari: While growing up, I was often isolated and lonely, I knew myself to be a compassionate person, but I didn't know there was another dimension to that. This is why I felt more attuned to the suffering of others.

There is a humanitarian impulse that one aspires to which needs to be valued, trying to alleviate the suffering of people in dire need, especially raped women, abused children and ex-Muslims at risk.

Jacobsen: What are some of the main issues for those who are committed to humanitarian activism and experience death threats?

Amari: The work of humanitarian activism has never been without risk (death threats, physical attacks, arbitrary arrests, etc.) and is regularly targeted in government crackdowns and heavily controlled online expression in several countries. The governments across the Middle East and North Africa repress the humanitarian activism both offline and online, in an attempt to prevent or punish reporting on human rights violations or other criticisms directed at them or their allies, often on the pretext that they are combatting “threats to national security”.

In order to change the status quo, humanitarian activists are challenging deeply ingrained discrimination and efforts to abrogate:

Women's rights.
 LGBT rights.
 Rights of minorities.
 Freedom of expression.
 Freedom of belief and conscience.

Jacobsen: What is your main focus at the moment?

Amari: Currently, my main focus is to formally register the association which I founded with my friends, and at the same time I'm looking for sponsorships, campaigns and Financials support.

Jacobsen: You are in the process of founding an organization. What is the organization? What is its website? What are its mission and mandate?

Amari: Prometheus Europe is a social organization that aims to promote secularism in the Islamic world and to provide help for those who risk their lives to get a chance to have a better future.

These courageous women and men are facing the most violent ideology in the history of mankind in order to make the world a better place for the next generations and that is why they deserve all our support. These freedom fighters are the most suitable people who know how to deal with Islam, and the more support they get, the more social change they can make and the faster changes will happen.

The Western world is facing the risk of expanding Islamism in Europe, and to be able to counter Islamism, the best thing we can do is to challenge the main idea of Islam in the very birthplace of this ideology, this is why empowering atheists or secular people in their own (Islamic) countries will reduce fanaticism and extremism there and the rest of the world. During this struggle, ex-Muslims face various types of discrimination, they can be subjected to violence, jail, execution or even assassination. We as activists try to do our best to save ex-Muslims who are at risk, and we will achieve our goals even faster with outsourced support.

In Europe and side by side with our European partners, it is our goal to implement strategic plans to counter Islamism providing the required knowledge, using the right tools and transforming our organization into an organized social movement.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in it? How can they donate time, skills, finances, professional networks, and so on?

Amari: Donations help us come over any obstacles that we face while doing our activism, for example sometimes there are ex-Muslims at risk and they need financial help to flee their country. Sometimes the case is urgent and we need to get them out as soon as possible, without donations we are unable to save them.

Currently, there are four funds you can donate to:

1 – Core Fund – This fund is for our project itself. Donations will be used to improve the structure of the project and implement innovative strategic plans to take it to the next level.

2 – Atheist at Risk Fund – This fund is to save those at risk because of their atheism. Please see the buttons below.

3 – Team Personal Fund – This fund is to help the project founders personally. We would love to work full time on this project, but that's not achievable due to the responsibilities associated with the life of being a refugee. Please see get to know the founders.

Don't want to donate?

There are other ways to support us – you may support us by Sponsoring, donating products or joining us.

Our social media:

Website www.prometheus-eu.com

FB page [Prometheus Europa](#)

FB group [Prometheus – Europa](#)

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

Ask Mandisa 1 – Organization, Activities, and Funding

September 22, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Mandisa Thomas is the Founder of Black Nonbelievers, Inc (Twitter & Facebook). One of, if not the, largest organization for African-American or black nonbelievers or atheists in America. The organization is intended to give secular fellowship, provide nurturance and support for nonbelievers, encourage a sense of pride in irreligion, and promote charity in the non-religious community. I reached out to begin an educational series with one of, and again if not the, most prominent African-American woman nonbeliever grassroots activists in the United States. Here, as the start of the series, we talk about Black Nonbelievers, Inc., associated organizations, barriers facing African-Americans coming into the nonbelieving community, and funding.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's bring everyone back into the fold in terms of what is happening with Black Nonbelievers, Inc. What is it? What are some of its new activities?

Mandisa Thomas: Yes, I am Mandisa Thomas. I am the Founder and President of Black Nonbelievers, which is an organization devoted to increasing the visibility and building the community for black atheists or blacks who are atheists, or questioning religion or who may be leaving.

Also, we are connecting people with the broader secular community. We host a variety of activities including general meetings, support meetings, social gatherings, tabling at various events, and so on. Also, we have the annual convention, which is coming up. It is one of our larger events.

We host guest speakers and bring members, and other attendees and allies, together for fun and educational experiences. Also, we advocate for being out as atheists as well as connecting with others. So, we can turn around the stigma of atheism, and bring people into the community for our voices to be heard.

Jacobsen: For the African-American community, in particular, as we have discussed in other interviews by us, it is one of the less reached communities on behalf of the secular community as a whole.

What are other organizations doing similar activities? Also, what are some of the difficulties that come along with that, especially as it is not one of the communities reached out to as much?

Thomas: Yes, the black community in the United States continues to be highly religious. The new Pew Research numbers show 87% of blacks in the United States identify as religious, which can make the conversation, as well as being open, about atheism difficult.

Because a lot of the politics and community building is centered around the church. That is due to historical reasons as well as the presence of, not just the church but, the historical fact of institutionalized racism in the United States.

It is similar to organizations doing similar work to ours such as African Americans for Humanism, Ex-Muslims of North America reaching out to the ex-Muslims who need community and building supports for those who want to leave.

Also, there are other organizations within the secular community that target specific demographics: Secular Student Alliance based on the building of these communities and groups on high school and college campuses.

Most of the other organizations have the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers. You have the Hispanic American Freethinkers, American Humanist Association, who challenge Church-State separation on a more aggressive level there.

Each organization has their unique focuses. It is similar to Black Nonbelievers reaching out to specific demographics. It shows that we all need it.

Jacobsen: Also, different people coming from a different background of faith, which they left, may have different concerns if they are coming to Black Nonbelievers. For example, someone who has a Sunni or Shia Muslim background may have a different set of concerns compared to the Baptist or Lutheran community.

It may be different when wanting to integrate into a new community of secular people. Do you note differences between the issues people come forward with when leaving different religious groups?

Thomas: Yes, absolutely, one of the major concerns heard by us. Many of our members think that they are the only ones. It is having a highly religious black community and a highly/predominantly white represented secular community.

It can be isolating for the many black atheists. To encounter an organization like Black Nonbelievers show that there is an organized effort to bring out black atheists, people of color, those who can relate to issues in our community.

A lot of politicians and representatives are faith-based, which makes it that much more of an obstacle for many black people to understand that there are more of us out here. Yes, there are specific circumstances for different demographics or groups.

Each of our organizations can help touch, even with ex-Muslims. We have some who have left the Nation of Islam sect of the Muslim faith. Many of our members were not only Christians but Muslims as well.

We catch some intersections there when it comes to leaving the faith or leaving the religion. Also, it comes to the idea of being an atheist is trying to be white. That is, you don't belong to the black community because you're atheist or do not believe anymore.

You do not like all the other things supposedly associated with black culture. Also, we help with the support there within the organization for us.

Jacobsen: Also, in the United States, some of the language used by the government has been "faith-based organizations." This seems like a way to simply weasel around the word "religion," not necessarily having as much of a positive association to some of the American electorates.

As far as I know, this impacts funding for certain initiatives in the United States, from the United States government to certain organizations. Is funding to Black Nonbelievers or

similar organizations in terms of simply operating and potentially expanding that generally is underserved?

Thomas: Yes, but since we are a 501(c)3 organization, we can accept funding from the private sector and the public sector, as well as our members. But I think there is a barrier to knowing our organization is needed for support and visibility.

We are still a young organization. We are 7-years-old. We are growing. We are still looking for ways to increase our funding potential. As far as the government and certain support given to faith-based organizations, yes, I think it would be easier to show.

I think there is a favoritism there. There is an advantage that they have. As far as the progress offered by them, however, I am confident. As our organization grows, we will be able, as a non-profit organization, to reach out for general funding for certain programs, which, in the black community, may be considered mostly faith-based.

We still have to test waters for applying for larger funding. We are at the point of receiving considerable amounts of support from donors and contributors. But when it comes to looking to increase funding, it is looking to not only our own but also to other communities.

We are still looking to expand there, as well as looking into obstacles faced in terms of funding for us.

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

Thomas: No problem! Thank you very much.

Interview with Pastor Dave Solmes – Lead Pastor, Living Waters Church

September 22, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your family background regarding religion? How did this influence personal upbringing if at all?

Pastor Dave Solmes: I was born into a Christian home. My father was involved in pastoral ministry. Since I was part of the family, since birth [Laughing]...

Jacobsen: ...[Laughing]...

Solmes: My family had Christian values. That were biblically based and publicly expressed.

Jacobsen: What was educational background prior to the formal pastoral work?

Solmes: I attended as a full-time student at our denominational Bible college and graduated with a B.Th. and am presently a part-time student with a university in Lakeland, Florida pursuing a master's in Christian Leadership.

Jacobsen: With regards to undergraduate theological training, what are some of the courses covered and courses taught?

Solmes: Courses range broadly from the education necessary for someone to be based in a church-based ministry or a Christian organization. Some things foundational to the degree that I received were theology courses, biblical hermeneutics, theology courses including Christology, pneumatology, eschatology, ecclesiology, and so on.

Jacobsen: What is the tradition or sect for you?

Solmes: I have grown up in the Evangelical denomination if you would or the Evangelical church. Specifically, it was the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, which was where my father had credentials. After graduating from Bible college and seminary, I, as well for 28 years, had been a credential holder and ordained with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada.

Jacobsen: Now, you are the lead pastor at Living Waters Church in Langley, British Columbia, Canada. What tasks and responsibilities come with being a lead pastor?

Solmes: I would be thought of by the membership and congregation as a team or staff leader. We have 17 paid employees on our team. That in itself is a joy. I would be responsible for our local church constitution as the lead pastor, as the chairman of the leadership council.

It has specific tasks and roles. Again, the oversight of ministries and congregational care would probably be the three categories of intention.

Jacobsen: How do you move upward in a Christian church from pastoral training to pastor to lead pastor?

Solmes: There would be a number of ways to respond to that question. One would be based on giftings, natural talents and natural giftings. One would be based on personal interests. One would be based on opportunities that come people's ways to continue to get involved and pursue and take on more responsibility.

There would be also the foundational and educational aspects. The personal preparation for professional education and then the personal development. The foundation for all of those is that God is someone who would move someone's heart into that direction and would – the word often used in pastoral ministry is a calling – be something someone would be responding to, walk towards, God.

That is the one who is ultimately the head of the church. One who is calling people to His side, so we get caught up in His story. We then accept an invitation to be a part of that.

Jacobsen: In terms of formal training, and formal definitions or traits of God, to you, what is God?

Solmes: My response to that would be a personal experience, personal observation, and personal understanding. I have witnessed the gracious presence of God all my life. I would be able to note and describe times when I sense His involvement and His activity in my life and around my life

I observed that in other people. I always think the story of God lends itself to a God that cares for people and has drawn near to people. That is what He has done to me. He has drawn near to me. I have allowed Him to draw near and to provide the work of a Saviour and a directing role within my life and create a purpose for life to live responsibly on Earth and, of course, living on Earth in light of what I consider an eternal promise and an eternal hope.

Scripture lends itself to a God who draws near. The Old Testament of a God drawing near through descending to Earth through Jesus. If you study the book of Acts, you see the pouring of the Holy Spirit of God drawing and being near and continuing the daily practice to be near us and us opening our hearts to that.

So, He cares.

Jacobsen: How do you prepare a service? How do you prepare for each Sunday sermon? How do you prepare other younger pastors or pastors-in-training to be able to speak in public with authority on Christianity's text, the Bible?

Solmes: Church expression and ministry involves mid-week activities. Also, of course, the responsibility of Sunday services or Sunday gatherings. I would certainly be in the middle of that conversation. So, at Living Waters, we make decisions based upon hearing specific team members as we discuss and consider primarily teachings that come by way of a series.

So, we are seldom, as it relates to sermons, one-off sermon givers. The majority of the teaching happening happens in the context of a series. Where it would be a theologically topical series, it would be studying specifically a book of the Bible over a long period of time and drawing application.

Sunday preparation involves conversation to be able to provide a little bit of a liturgy. It involves conversations with other pastoral team members in our worship network as they prepare songs. We organize ourselves around our liturgy to make sense of it, to help invite people into it.

Jacobsen: Churches are not simply physical places or objects. In the same way, a house is not simply a physical object. It is also a state of mind in the way a home is a state of mind. A church is a state of mind in other words. It becomes a community effort to provide for the needs of the community.

In the frame of reference of the religious community, it is a spiritual community. With respect to the provisions outside and around the church, like daycare, childcare, Bible study groups, and others, what are some that are more notable, and maybe not notable, within the Living Waters, in Fort Langley, community?

Solmes: We have two locations. We have a Fort Langley and a Willoughby location. Those participating are interested in being engaged relationally within the community. That often find strides in age-specific ministries or in gender-specific ministries.

In both locations, there is a program and focus on the nursery to youth aged children. That looks different in both. In Fort Langley, we have primary staff that give program and attention and opportunity for pre-teen and teens to gather.

We have Sunday opportunities for children. Every week, there are about 120 kids in the midst of our four gatherings. During the week, there is attention. There is an arts camp in July. All kinds of kids come to it. Beyond that, when it comes to some of the most interesting opportunities, our ladies provide every Christmas with the “Helping Hand’s Initiative.”

We have hundreds of ladies at Living Waters who engage in all kinds of community activities, where they show up with helping hands. All leadership development for women ends up in the fourth segment of it. It is to encourage the expression of finding local community groups and simply showing up with helping hands.

One lady, one at the completion of the network education, hosted in her townhouse complex a meal. She provided a meal and gifts for 8 single moms. She did it all out of her own initiative. We all have involvement in the local prisons.

We have gift baskets or care packages given to incarcerated people. We have actually last Christmas developed or organized a number of hampers, Christmas hampers. Kwantlen reserve became the benefactors of that.

They are our neighbours across the water here in Fort Langley. We are actively involved in giving hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to global partners around the world. We have friends of Living Waters and formal partners. We have 12.

There are hundreds of thousands of dollars are given annually to support ministries, which relate to language learning and benevolent ministry and social justice concerns and university ministries. Living Waters, at the core of it, would be interested in being continually generous and being helping hands to encourage people and honour people – to live responsibly no matter the continent or country.

We are seeking to influence the world and make it a better place.

Jacobsen: I have one, last, very side question. I note one issue as commentary from several pastors. Some of the more prominent ones. They note a decline in “masculinity” within the church. In particular, they note a decline in the men enrolling in the church.

They attend less. They adhere less. Of course, women, globally, are more likely to be religious. However, what is the response, internally, from the Christian church in Canada to men adhering to the faith and partaking of the suggested practices of the faith as well?

Solmes: That’s a great question, Scott. That’s a good question. Your observations are correct. We can talk about causes and strategies. Let’s talk about strategies, men require purpose, clarity, seek to be involved and active.

So, Christianity that does not find expression and activity. When Christianity is expressed in a circular way, I think men tap out, in some cases. I know at Living Waters; we have an egalitarian model of leadership, which says, “Men and Women are equal.” Our denomination ordains women.

Living Waters is at the front end of providing opportunities for women. Not at the expense of men, but to share a male-female expression of leadership. For men, I think it requires involvement. I think that men form relationships differently than women.

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

On the Difficulties of the Ex-Religious and Finding Their Way

September 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Nacer Amari** is the Co-Founder of United Atheists of Europe and Co-Founder of Prometheus Europe. He is a Tunisian humanitarian activist who fled Tunisia six years ago because of death threats from Islamists. He is having financial difficulties to establish an association www.prometheus-eu.com, where he endeavours to assist people who are threatened with the death penalty because of their critical views of Islam in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. We did a prior interview in Project and **Canadian Atheist**. You can view the donations page [here](#). Here we begin a series from a European atheist perspective in an educational series, starting with the conversation of difficulties of the ex-religious in coming out or speaking out.*

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to the difficulties of those ex-religious individuals coming into the more developed economies and the world, what are obstacles for them in their own theocratic countries?

Nacer Amari: Each country presents some other kind of problems for those of humanists, or those who are becoming generally called “unaffiliated” or those who just decide after getting enough knowledge about the world, that they see no further point to believe in the religion they were brought up with. Generally, lands that have no official division of church/mosque and state, pose a much greater challenge for those who revolt against an almost theocratic rule that religious “scholars” exercise in their country. Ex-religious individuals have not only to beware their own neighbours and – as it is common in traditionalistic societies – whole communities against general ostracism, but also fear of going too far against in many cases “unwritten” laws that state authorities are using to avoid too many changes and protests inside the country. So even if state laws are not explicitly stating anything against expressing publicly atheism – it can always become a problem for those who decide to do that, always with the use of some old and unused statue inside the law, even if it is just a pretext.

Jacobsen: What are the government’s and citizens’ reactions to prevent them from speaking out?

Amari: It again varies depending on the country, but generally speaking it follows always more or less same the schema. Firstly, speaking about such things is considered taboo and breaking such taboos with each year of growing up is harder. If someone expresses such statements before being considered “teenager” and still in the phase of being considered a child, he/she is then exposed to firstly blaming and shaming for small faith, later parents are using physical and emotional pressure to make a child comply with religious obligations. If lack of belief is expressed at later stage of upbringing, it is considered being “spoiled” by Western civilisation, or but not exclusively – being possessed by Iblis or by Jinns or by Satan and all other religious explanations are possibly used. It doesn’t matter if it lack of belief is caused by long and real studying of religious texts and historiography about the beginnings of certain religion, or by simply knowing and understanding more how does the world works and observation of incompetence of religious authorities to answer most simple questions that science asks. The

answer is always the same – Western civilization influence, possession or – which is becoming more and more common in developing countries – treating it as part of an undiagnosed mental illness. All that leads always individuals to think that they are the only ones who are lacking belief, not only in their own communities but sometimes in the whole world. That something is wrong with them, if nobody aside them is expressing such thoughts for the same reason – social ostracism. The only thing that can help to find oneself in such situations is simply finding someone who is more honest, at least in unofficial situations and talks, or – what is becoming more and more common – finding out that other people also think so thanks to the power of the internet, also thus helping certain individual to understand that not only he is not alone, but that government and society is based on not only a lie but on “hushing” all talk about this lie by force and by tabooisation

Jacobsen: How can they find people to help them, in part? How can they more or less find their way?

Amari: In current times the best way to find help or at least people to talk about certain ideas – is again – the internet, even to just enable connection between same-minded people inside the very same country.

Jacobsen: What are the ways in which they can become powerful, bold voices to empower their own sense of courage and some bravery in others?

Amari: It depends always from the personality of a certain person, also of the amount of civil bravery they want to express and the amount of risk they want to put into strengthening their voice. Ultimately – speaking openly on all social media sites – can become the most powerful way to influence others or cease this circle of tabooisation of this topic, thus helping to start a general debate in their own societies about religion. Sherif Gaber – openly declared atheist in Egypt – making high-quality short-clips on Youtube by mere speaking his mind is helping to bring down such taboos and with success. The most important voice is never those on the outside of religion-circles, but always those who were once inside, or at least come from a certain culture. The bold voice in their own language in their own community – can help much more than hundreds of voices outside of this community.

Jacobsen: Once in another area of the world more accepting, comparatively speaking, of the secular and ex-religious, how can they find their new sense of identity and place?

Amari: By comparing and deciding for themselves which society have better general rules and let an individual develop. They should take active choice and thus they may become bridges between different communities and by their newly found voice and freedom to express it – they may still through use of their native language – still speak to the community in which they were born. To become small, yet important “lanterns” that are just like in Europe of the 18th century – “bringing light of knowledge in the among corners still laying in the shadows”.

Jacobsen: What can be obstacles from within this new situation for them, once more whether from the new government or the new set of the citizenry?

Amari: They might be – at first – not understanding how those with the freedom to speak, are speaking sometimes exactly for institutions and ideas that caused individuals like them – to firstly run out of their own countries of origins (like sharia laws or use of niqab or acceptance of male-female divisions). But it is again the reason why such individuals are the most important link and voice in Western societies – to speak on behalf of societies of their origin and take the

arguments from those who are trying to find similarities between racism and being just against political or/and religious ideologies.

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

Controversial Figures of Cults

September 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott is the Founder of Skeptic Meditations. He speaks from experience in entering and leaving an ashram. Here we talk about controversies in cults.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's talk controversy today, who have been some of the most controversial figures in the cult world?

Scott from SkepticMeditations.com: By "cult" I assume you mean the colloquial definition: dangerous religious splinter groups.

In my opinion, the Reverend Jim Jones was the most wicked cult leader in the last several decades. Under his "spiritual" leadership 900 men, women, and children disciples committed mass suicide in one single day. Charles Manson was also a cult leader who instigated murders of innocent people. Rajneesh or Osho is also a controversial figure. The Rajneesh Ashram in Oregon was involved in the largest bioterrorism in the US. I recommend watching Wild Wild Country documentary on Netflix. Perhaps Jesus of Nazareth was the most controversial figure of all. Because followers continue to interpret what was written about him in the Bible.

Jacobsen: For those semi-/demi-/hemi-cults, who have been the controversial figures there?

Scott: There's too many to mention, but here's a couple: Marshall Applewhite who lead 40 disciples to ritual suicide so that they could enter a supposed spacecraft trailing the comet Hale-bop. The term "cult" needs to be defined. There's too many to mention. There's political cults, Fascism/Nazism, there are religious cults, which I've noted above and assumed was your primary question. But cults are essentially high-control groups or ideologies that have adherents or followers who are willing to give up everything, including thinking for oneself or even murder, to follow the leader or ideology.

The sensational cults and cult leaders make headlines and news. But cult-like behaviours and attitudes are common and most of us hold some or many cult-like attitudes. For instance, many of us are extremist in our political, social, or religious views. If threatened our worldviews can become excuses for harming others.

Jacobsen: What cultures tend to produce more cults?

Scott: I'm an American. I've travelled to Europe and South-East Asia. Based on my limited knowledge I would say the United States probably has spawned the most "cults". It's an interesting question: Why the United States seems to have spawned so many extremist groups. I think sociologists could better speak to what makes certain cultures produce more cults. The term "cult" is a part of the word "culture". Culture or cults are not themselves harmful. However, there are specific behaviours and attitudes which are harmful when taken to extremes.

Jacobsen: Is the Internet both a good means by which to independently sift for information and critically think but also a bad tool because of the ease of the creation cults?

Scott: The internet can yield much information about everything and anything, including so-called "cults". The internet can also be a confusing place to find credible sources of information about dangerous groups and cults. The internet is like money. It can be a tool of good or evil. As

far as researching particular aspects of cults or cult-like behaviours, I can recommend websites like [Open Minds Foundation](#) or podcasts like [IndoctriNation](#) that focus less on the sensational or entertainment context of cults but more on the underlying psychological and sociological attributes of cult-like behaviours. We are all vulnerable to manipulation and authoritarian controls.

Jacobsen: What is the single worst case of a cult, in terms of harms to the followers, known to you?

Scott: Defining cults broadly as thought-controlling groups I'd say the disciple-followers of Hitler who in 1930s-40s were often fanatically loyal or were manipulated to sacrifice their lives, country, everything—including murder millions of innocent men, women, and children. Hitler and totalitarian leaders like him are extreme examples of authoritarians who promise strength, prosperity, and certainty. Unfortunately, I don't see that humanity has learned to question or challenge authority enough to avoid another Hitler. Currently, we see that many leader-priests in the Catholic Church allegedly abused sexually and psychologically their follower-disciples. I'm not trying to equate the Catholic Church with the Third Reich. But I'm trying to point out that the underlying behaviours of authoritarianism are alive and everywhere in our culture. It's dangerous to assume we are immune to manipulation. Better to be cautious while being humble to realize much of our culture is based on the following authority, whether that's a tradition or ideology, that we could learn to question intelligently in the appropriate way.

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

Scott: Thank you.

Ask Mandisa 2 – Online Dialogue

October 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Mandisa Thomas** is the Founder of **Black Nonbelievers, Inc** (**Twitter** & **Facebook**). One of the, if not the, largest organization for African-American or black nonbelievers or atheists in America. The organization is intended to give secular fellowship, provide nurturance and support for nonbelievers, encourage a sense of pride in irreligion, and promote charity in the non-religious community. I reached out to begin an educational series with one of the, and again if not the, most prominent African-American woman nonbeliever grassroots activists in the United States. Here, we talk about online engagement.*

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: With respect to dealing with the media, which as a spokesperson you deal with a more varied and vast way than other people, e.g., social media, how do you recommend people go about doing it if they are not a moderately famous person but more of an ordinary person?

Mandisa Thomas: We acknowledge social media is a very, very important part of communication with fellow atheists and nonbelievers as well as believers, e.g., acquaintances, family members, friends, what have you.

There are times when social media can be very overwhelming. When you are dealing with different personalities, which can make it difficult for communication at times, interestingly enough, YouTube, for example, I have had the pleasure of being featured on a few shows and interviews.

There is a commandment: Thou shalt not read the comments.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Thomas: [Laughing] because they can be quite brutal, quite condescending. There are people who hide behind avatars and personalities to troll people or to disrespect people. If you are a regular person, or if you are a regular person, who is commenting on YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook, or if you have a channel or a page, I would recommend managing the contents and the comments very carefully.

It is important to set ground rules for what the commentary should be. Whether it is more formal or a little more flexible, it is fine for some pages, which encourage discussion and discourse. The rules may be a little more arbitrary or not as applied heavily, or there may not be as much restriction.

It is important to set ground rules, even if you have a personal page. The types of dialogues tolerated and not tolerated on the page. If someone violates that, you have the right. You should use the right to eliminate people who may be problematic.

Jacobsen: In terms of the identification of those individuals who are asking those questions, who have a sincere intent, and those who are trolls, how do you discern there?

Thomas: It is interesting. The content will give it away. A troll is someone, regardless of the boundaries set or the content, will say whatever they want to say. There are things considered

loaded or that would elicit either a reaction or a response, which would never be to their satisfaction.

Some people will outright make *ad hominem* attacks or slander people. I think everything they're doing is telling from what they say. If you are asked a question, or if you are on a live forum, you can ask for clarification about what they mean.

If they are genuine about the question, they will be more willing to provide more information. But you have some who aren't. That is one way to identify who trolls are outside of them simply making derogatory contents. They are asking questions considered loaded or trick questions.

It is good to ask them to clarify or provide more detail through more questions. You can then gauge if they are sincere or not.

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

Thomas: No problem. Thank you!

Interview with Tanzanian Freethinker Agness Bweye

October 1, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I reached out to JichoJipya founder Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam) about secular and freethinking women. He recommended Agness Bweye. Here we get to know some of the life and views of Bweye.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was personal and family background around religion?

Agness Bweye: I grew up in a family where I have never seen my dad attending any church or mosque, my mom used to attend a nearby church sometimes with me until when I was about 9 and then she too stopped, then we didn't go to church anymore but after growing up with less religious background I was forced to join religion when I was at secondary school because somehow everyone was expected to be a "believer" of a certain religion or belong to a certain denomination. After my high school when I went back home I stopped going to church again until I joined university then I went three or four times to church because I like singing and the choir so much but eventually I stopped for good.

Jacobsen: How did you begin to question religion and, eventually, leave it?

Bweye: I remember when I was 8 I went to a seventh day Adventist church with my older brother and the preacher was speaking so ill of women and people who pierce their ears and the young me whose ears were pierced since my early age felt so offended to the point I started hating everything about that place thinking why they would speak like that just because someone pierce their ears. Fast forward after finishing my high school I felt at ease for not having to please anyone by attending long services while I didn't like them. So for me, religion didn't make sense since I was young I think because I was raised in a less religious family it was not about too much questioning but just my freedom as a human being without any affiliation to church or any other religion.

Jacobsen: Who were important influences for you? Those individuals who paved the path of freethinkers before you. Were there any important books in this journey for you?

Bweye: My biggest influence was my dad and uncles who didn't care about what people thought of them not going to church. About books, I just read different types of them to get knowledge on world matters but my journey is hundred percent influenced by my family and myself searching for freedom of living without adhering to any religious morals or conducts.

Jacobsen: How can other freethinking women "come out"? That is, what are the ways the community can encourage more freethinker women to come forward and become part of the community? Because most of the freethinking community is comprised of men, who have sufficient privileges, in general, socially and economically to be out in public as freethinkers around much of the world.

Bweye: I think the most important thing is self-reflection first, these women should really know who they are and what they want in life because the society especially in my country it is not so friendly to people who are non-believers, they will be called names but once they know themselves and it comes from within they will be courageous enough to persevere and push away all the negativities thrown to them. It's not always an easy task since sometimes it is so

heartbreaking to be judged wrongly simply because you don't believe like others but if it comes from within these women will be as happy as any other and they won't take themselves as losers or sinners.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with JichoJipya and other organizations? What are some of the simple considerations for those women who are unsure about joining the freethinking community/who are beginning to question fundamentalist religion?

Bweye: They can involve themselves through doing activities to society which save humanity from extremism such as helping the need, educating people who are extreme irrational or extreme radical because extremism is a problem which makes people die, kill and it cause all sort of problems. I would tell women who are unsure or those who question religion that it is totally normal and okay they shouldn't doubt themselves because they are questioning irrelevant beliefs and religion because there is a tendency of being too harsh on oneself simply because you are asking yourself questions which touches your core beliefs as a person, and there is also a pain of losing a supernatural power to lean on and think for yourself.

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

Interview with a Syrian Freethinker – Yazan

October 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Note from Yazan before the interview: First of all, I would like to thank you for the opportunity you gave me to talk about my experience through this interview.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to the nature of religion, what seems like the core of it?

Yazan: In my opinion, the core of religion is a freedom barrier and a terrorism founder. It is a mechanism to convert a person from a free individual to a member of an inhumane organization that controls even the clothing and eating of the person with intractable laws. If anyone dares to violate or criticize it in order to update it; he becomes blasphemous, accusing of God, and he must be killed.

Jacobsen: What was family and personal background, e.g., geography, culture, language, and religion or lack thereof?

Yazan: I was born in Syria in a non-religious Druze family.

Jacobsen: How did leaving religion work for you? How did you finally come to the realization of being an atheist?

Yazan: In fact, I wasn't interested in religions before the Syrian civil war. I considered it a kind of traditions and not more but as a soldier. I saw the jihadists. I asked myself about the origin of their beliefs. It was connected to the "Fatwa" of murders and rape, the more I search, the more I resent religions until I found out that it is a collection of myths. It helped us in certain times to explain what we didn't understand, then it was exploited by the owners of power to impose their control and rules on the public.

Jacobsen: If you had any advice for those leaving religion, how would you recommend that they do it?

Yazan: My advice is read well before you criticize and support your words with sources, don't pay attention to the negative fundamentalists' comments and do not endanger your life. More importantly is that being a person who renounces superstition does not give you the right to be arrogant on others and ridicule them personally. We have to respect others regardless of their beliefs, try to direct your energy and knowledge to serve humanity and don't permit religious deposits to control your thinking and prejudice others.

Jacobsen: What are the ways in which the secular can build community and underground networks even in the highly religious nations of the world?

Yazan: I think we need accurate statistics for the numbers of secularists in these countries and provide them with opportunities to organize communication campaigns to define common goals and demands they need to improve their situation and work on the secularization of their communities.

Jacobsen: What are the risks of leaving religion for the secular?

Yazan: The types and ratios of risk to those who leave religions vary according to laws and social classes starting from ostracism, expulsion from work to the fatwas of physical assault and even murder.

Jacobsen: How can atheists come together with other secular people, including the ordinary/moderate religious, to combat the forces of fundamentalism and dogma (who often have repressive political intent)?

Yazan: After getting accurate statistics for secularists who are “ready to make change”, we can create a social communication network as a platform for organizing awareness campaigns and support those who are under threats. It would be the ideal representation of their existence and their willingness to make a change. These communities will also understand that there are others share their nationalities have another perception of society.

Jacobsen: What are your next steps? How can others find organizations and others for some community and solace?

Yazan: Well, I am currently working on the last idea we discussed; it is an attempt to gather as many secular activists as possible regardless of their background in a communication platform under the name “free thinkers.” I take courage to start this project after a series of closures of secular and non-religious sites, pages, groups, and personal accounts because of the amount of fundamentalists reports!

The policy of current applications is to satisfy the largest number of members at the expense of the minority and I see this aspect of oppression and exploitation.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time.

Yazan: Thank you again for this wonderful opportunity.

Interview with an Algerian Freethinker – Zilan

October 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Note from Zilan: First of All: I would like to thank you, Mr. Douglas for giving me the opportunity, that's so kind of you and I really appreciate it.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to the nature of religion, what seems like the core of it?

Zilan: According to what I have experienced here in Southern Algeria, I think that the core of religion is represented to the tribal bonds; it is the primitive system that gives the right to its entire members to determine.

Your personal lifestyle interferes with your decisions, and if you try to refuse their interventions, or even objecting it, that means you refuse the judgments of “ALLAH”, which makes you a pariah of the tribe, and threatened by everyone.

Jacobsen: What was family and personal background, e.g., geography, culture, language, and religion or lack thereof?

Zilan: I am from a fundamentalist Islamic family, living in southern Algeria. The environment here is similar to the environment of the Arabian Peninsula, where the Prophet “Muhammad” grew up.

A desert; where most of his teachings apply, especially the teachings that concerning to the women. The majority here can speak Classical Arabic; they spend the first years of their lives in very rigorous “Quranic” schools, and that’s what I’ve experienced like any girl who lives here; I was forced to wear the “hijab” when I was ten years old, and before I study anything, they teach me the “Quran” without any understanding, I got a modest education, and I didn’t finish my university study because my brother had a lower look for the girls who studying in remote areas, and he believes that only men have the right to study there.

Jacobsen: How did leaving the religion work for you? How did you finally come to the realization of being an atheist?

Zilan: At first I didn’t imagine I would abandon Islam, or even convert to another religion, Because of the indoctrination that similar to brainwashing; despite the physical abuse, when I refused to pray, and the imposition of the legitimate Islamic dress; Islamic religion for me was surrounded with an aura of holiness. I considered the Islamic religion as the ideal system to live, and my freedom is the price that I pay to buy a place in “JANNAH” or paradise.

Dealing with “Allah” was subjected to the rules of buying and selling. Until the appearance of “ISIS”, I didn’t notice the humanity of this god that is influenced by Muhammad’s commercial life. I was 17 years old when I finished my high school studies. I was able to use the internet. I saw what happened with the “Yazidis” girls in Iraq.

I spoke with some of them and this was the first shock, which made me wondered; is it normal for a human to assault others people in this way, only because God placed them in another family who didn’t share the same faith with him.

After that, I began to read “Quranic” interpretations in an academic way, for the first time I discovered the horrible things that it contains. Then I just renounced the Islamic religion. If you take the context of women who are trying to flee religion, what are the difficulties for them compared to men? Are things harder for them? How so? Then I became non-religious.

Jacobsen: If you take the context of women who are trying to flee religion, what are the difficulties for them compared to men? Are things harder for them? How so?

Zilan: Leaving religions is hard, for women in general, and Muslim women in particular, or at least we can say that men can leave their religion more easily than women in my country. Because the woman’s personal choices, her life and even her dress are all things that are governed by laws initiated by religion, and there is no way to gain her independence in this case, except to leave her society and try to escape to a society that respects her and treats her as a human being. Because the community here is considered a woman who tries to get her freedom as a whore or criminal which lead her to negative and very serious consequences that can even reach physical abuse.

Jacobsen: Why do religions seem to have an obsession with the reproductive lives of women and the control of women?

Zilan: Previously when I talk about my religious and ethnic background, I mentioned that Islamic religious teachings are applied to women more than men in my community.

In every Friday sermon, you can hear direct incitement to Violence Against Women on the mosque’s loudspeakers, and everyone hears it without any objection, when we look at the nature around us we can easily figure out that the male is always trying to seduce the female to pass his genes through her. I can see that all religions are an attempt at a coup against this nature, so that the word of man is the highest word, and rejection of attempts to reproduce is the rejection of the will of God.

Humans managed to escape the forest life using their minds. And then they managed to change the balance of reproduction using religions. Men no longer need to tempt anyone or try to be accepted by women. Women’s salvation has become represented by the strength of their beliefs.

Jacobsen: How can women fight back against religious fundamentalism including thorough knowledge of their human rights as women as well as becoming economically independent?

Zilan: Currently writing, blogging and talking in the social media about freedom of choice and coexistence with all groups of society is a stand in the face of fundamentalism especially the voice of women they consider their appearance a shame and disgrace.

The fundamentalist prefers relations of belief over the relations of blood and friendships they do not care if you are the closest person to them they can harm you, what matters is that you share their beliefs. It called the loyalty doctrine.

That’s why I do not advocate showing identity I prefer to use the same methods that they use in secular countries, which is owning power then pressuring to change laws; women must hold on to study and work to produces a financial income.

Once they have an income, they will be able to raise their voices and impose changes in the society. Financial independence creates a space for women to form bonds and friendships with other women have a deep knowledge of their rights and role as a woman who rejects religious extremism.

Jacobsen: What are the ways in which secular women can organize to secularize communities and build coalitions for having women as equals, even in highly religious societies?

Zilan: The simplest way is to lead them to secularization without mentioning it. Because its concept has been distorted in fundamentalist societies we can do this by asking simple questions in women's groups to make them think more about their reality and throw those thoughts in a spontaneous way, e.g., discussing the injustice of society, for example, the beatings, insults of their husbands and families also the polygamy.

They will agree. But once they hear words such as freedom, feminism, secularism and equality, they repel in cooperation with humanitarian organizations. We should work to correct these concepts. Then it will be easy to create receptive groups of secular thought.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time.

Zilan: Thank you again for this interesting interview.

Conversation with Felicia Cravens – Founder, Unfakery

October 5, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start from the top, what was your family and personal background? I am thinking of geography, culture, language, and religion or lack thereof?

Felicia Cravens: I am a 7th generation Texan. I had a typical upbringing with a family that had deep roots in the area, and didn't stray far from the home. I moved 100 miles away from my mom, and that was about as far as all of us were willing to let that separation happen.

When I started out career-wise, it was a mix and a mish-mash of things. I was a Language Arts major, and then I moved into Mass Communications, then Theatre, and then found myself in Accounting. I got my Accounting degree and then worked for various companies.

I decided to be a stay at home mom, which was good for me. I worked for my church writing the worship service for preschoolers. Then I taught drama for an after school program – 8 or 9 years. Then the Tea Party movement arose. I jumped in front of it for the Houston area.

I was the first tea party organizer in Houston. We helped seed some of the groups around at the time, some of whom are still around now. I wanted to help people become politically active rather than driving people to the ballot box for a particular candidate. I was more interested in people becoming informed and then making the decision for themselves.

Then things segued into working on the clickbait phenomenon. My allies and I noticed it happening.

A lot of people we knew were posting the strangest stories on their social media; ones that had no real proof to them. There was no real journalistic integrity in these pieces. We did not know this was a trend at the time. We found a couple of instances of it, and we would write pieces about it on our joint blog.

We tried to educate people on click bait, to show them why they should pay attention. Then the 2015-2016 primary cycles went crazy. There seemed to be a whole new industry around spreading fakery or misinformation. Finally, after the election, I had had enough of people, who I thought knew better, sharing a lot of fakery. That led me to develop my Facebook page Unfakery.

It is designed to catch people who may not be so savvy about journalistic standards, or who might not know what to look for in spotting fakery, or who may not have had taken those classes in college where we learned what good journalistic practices were supposed to be.

I wanted to tackle fakery from the best way possible, to debunk it. I cannot really use Snopes links as a first line of defence. I know what I would get back from people: "Snopes says..."

There is an inherent belief in people on the right that Snopes has a bias. Whether it is true or not, the perception is there.

So Snopes has been discredited among some of the population. That has to be addressed; and it cannot be addressed by beating people over the head with the idea that Snopes has the right answers.

That is the basis for starting Unfakery; that people actually can discover for themselves many things that are fake. They do not need to rely on debunker like Snopes. They can rely on principles that are easy to follow, and figure out that the item they're looking at needs more skepticism or research before they share it. I took that angle to start, and then I stumbled on one of the reasons for much of the fakery on Facebook.

There are foreign-centred profiles and sites attempting to profit off American web traffic, because it pays better than anywhere else. There is an industry based on sharing and "selling" fakery to Americans, in Trump-related groups, for example. I find a lot in those places.

I find people from the Philippines, from India, from Macedonia and Kosovo, from Pakistan, and now from Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Sri Lanka, and, maybe, somebody from the Netherlands. It is weird.

I will explain why that broad spectrum in a minute. I find people with ties to those countries sharing this content to Americans in groups about Trump, whether pro or con. They are making a lot of money doing it.

It is the side of things no one is looking at. People in the media and politics talk about Russians and Iranians meddling in American political affairs, but they are not looking at all the ties to fakers in other countries. Whether they are operating under real names or are using fake profiles, they do have ties to those countries.

My job, as I see it in this realm, is not simply to teach people what to look for, but also to teach Facebook what is going on – to help their algorithms get better at identifying obvious fakery. The fakery seems obvious to me, but they frequently miss it because they don't seem to be looking for it.

Jacobsen: This ties into PTP, the Pro-Truth Pledge. It is around the same time, roughly around 2016, as well as Unfakery. I want to delve into both of those at the same time. How did you find PTP? How did you either found or co-found Unfakery?

Cravens: Let's start with founding Unfakery first, I had been doing a bunch of debunking on my own page, as I could, or on the pages of people where I had found fakery. I realized that I needed a page to keep everything together.

It is over 1,600 likes now. It has not had a fantastic amount of growth. But it has gotten good support behind a good, core group of people who feed information to me, who tell me about fakery they're seeing. They check and balance me. They advise on if I go over the edge on my tone, or if I have a particular creeping political bias. I keep them close for those reasons.

If I was going to be an authority on fakery and things like bias and media and journalism, I needed a team to hold me accountable. It is the same way with parents teaching children. Children will do their chores if they are supervised. As an adult, nobody does that for you unless you put someone in that place.

I decided to do that with this group, with people I can depend on to do those things. They help to build the team and maintain and increase my credibility. In the course of doing those things, I

developed a lot of relationships with people across the internet. Craig Silverman interviewed me for Buzzfeed, I have a good working relationship with Alex Kaplan at Media Matters.

These guys share things I catch on my feed and look out for. Someone somewhere shared something about the PTP, and my eyes lit up. I read about the psychological approach, how you could hack your brain to be more truthful, to be more accountable.

Within a day or two, I signed the pledge, as an individual and as an organization. I was glad someone was looking at the psychological defences that one can employ against falling for fakery in their own lives. By doing this thing, you increase the odds other people will hold you accountable, and you also increase the odds in your own brain that you will think, “Oh, I am being graded on this.” It may not necessarily be in an official way, but you know somebody is watching. We always do better when we believe someone is watching us. We do not want to let people down. We want to make sure we’re honest, truthful, and sharing good information.

Sometimes, that value gets naturally skewed when people apply political principles to it. And though I have been a 20-year veteran of the Texas Republican Party and an activist of that sort, this seemed like a more important focus of my time and abilities, because this is where most of the problem lies. People I knew and trusted to have good sense had been fooled multiple times into sharing this stuff.

Fact-checking was not enough. There has to be a commitment to doing things right, not sharing content before I’ve verified and vetted it – or saying something is my opinion rather than claiming that it is fact. When I saw the PTP, I was ecstatic. I signed it, immediately, and pitched it to everyone I could.

I went to some of my team that I worked with for years about the standards the PTP used for fact-checking – what they considered good fact-checking. When I brought that back to PTP and Intentional Insights, they incorporated some changes based on the feedback. That, even more, made me think this is an organization I could support; the PTP team wanted to change and improve based on this feedback, and they recognized the validity of the feedback.

Jacobsen: In the earlier part of the interview, you mentioned the people who in the past were reasonable in personal opinion that fell for falsehoods both pro and con about President Trump. What is an example of people fooled in the pro-Trump side? What is an example of people fooled on the con-Trump side?

Cravens: You can see people cherry-picking stories to share based on how a story reflected their thoughts about the president. People interested in pushing back against the presidential agenda might have a response or a reaction to a story spun in the media one way on the one side, and spun in the media in another way on the other side.

It isn’t even just fakery, although, I saw a lot of that. There were a lot of people who were just falling for the first or early account of something that might have been revised later: “Oh, it wasn’t really that bad,” or, “Oh, it wasn’t really that good.” There was a lot of that.

There was also fakery around, say, what would happen with Hillary Clinton after the election. There were rumours of people on the Right were seeing in their feed: that indictments of people close to Hillary were coming down, or sometimes it was people who had worked for the State Department who were talking to investigators. Those sort of stories were popping up regularly.

I remember the first post on Unfakery had to do with Mueller. It was a quote attributed to Robert Mueller, but the actual quote came from someone with a similar name. They put the quote from the other person – a Belgian named Robert Muller – with Mueller’s face on it. I added a FAKE stamp to the image and put it out there, and people who saw it got to see that this wasn’t true.

That was when I realized a visual presentation was more impactful than simply a paragraph – or two or three – of text explaining why a thing was fake. I decided to make the images with “Fake” stamped on them, so people could immediately understand this was suspect. Underneath I would add links to things that would help, too.

Over time, I found some things work better to reach people wherever they were. But it usually comes down to this: I take an image of an actual Facebook post and stamp “Fake” on it – and then maybe redact the names so as not to embarrass anyone. It gives people the idea that this is what that fake post looks like, so people can identify it and remember that it had been labeled “Fake” when it comes up in their feed once more.

This is one tactic to fight fakery. And we need to talk tactics. I see a lot of articles and discussions from think tanks and journalists bemoaning and wailing about how horrible fake news is, how prevalent it is, how all over the place it is, what populations fall for it, and what ramifications it has.

But I saw so few people discussing what to do about it; what normal, average, everyday people could do. That is the gap I wanted to fill. That is why PTP is part of the toolbox for me. I think it is one thing average, everyday people can do to pushback. Once they realize there is a problem, they can then move to a solution orientation.

Jacobsen: Looking forward, one issue is the fakery that gets out or the spin that is the first impression taken as truth that gets out. The problem there is now a certain portion of the population, of which that media gets to, will believe it.

It creates a problem in cleanup. Because, in essence, the work that people would do through Snopes, your own work, or PTP, when people get the critical thinking tools or are able to spot those falsehoods.

The preventative tools are helpful. But, in many cases, there is a problem in the cleanup crew aspect of it. Do you have any idea of what the costs are to the public in having to not only deal with the fakery right on its nose as it comes out but also with cleanup as things go along?

Cravens: I don’t think people think it is a problem as much as I think it is a problem. So I am always coming at it from the perspective of “I am far more worried about it and cognizant of it.” What people tend to do in my circles that come across fakery, they send it to me to check it out, or to alert me to it.

That is the highest interaction that I have now with most of the people involved in catching fakery in my circles. As far as the people sharing it to me, if they are sharing something novel to me, it is, apparently, because my circles are well-curated now. I don’t see a lot of fakery from people organically in my feed.

When I see fakery now, it all comes from actively going to look for it. I have very skewed biases as to how much is out there, where it comes from, how many people are involved in seeing it, and the level of damage it does.

But I do have a theory about the idea of what happens when fakery is shared in Facebook groups. Let's use the Pakistanis feeding fakery into Trump related groups on Facebook at Americans as an example. When you see calls for those indictments that are imminent but they never develop, or people about to receive their comeuppance, or the article is phrased, "So-and-So Got Revenge in the Best Way," such as, "Sarah Sanders Putting This Rude Reporter in Their Place at a Press Conference."

You see those headlines. People hear this sort of thing. They start to base opinions on things someone never said, statements attributed to them that never happened. They base opinions on events that are always just around the corner, but that never quite materialize. Psychologically, I find that damaging. Whether this ever gets cleaned up or not, it will have a huge and lasting negative effect.

This happens in the United States, with people creating fakery factories to make money – which is bad enough. But we also have other countries using the tactic of targeting Americans with fakery for financial or political profit. I think it is like a water effect.

If you give enough water enough time, it will wear down stone. I think people's souls are not even that solid. This sort of thing seeps into them. These fakery-based opinions calcify in someone's brains. It also solidifies the attitude and tone in which they are presented. I think of it like a game of "Your Mama" politics – just hurling insults back and forth as the Red Team and the Blue Team.

This whole "Your Mama" politics tone makes people more comfortable in presenting in this tone online with one another. What happens, though, when this occurs in real life? What happens when they adopt this uncivil phrasing in their life about politics.

What does that do to us long-term as a people, where we cannot have critical and important conversations about solving problems, because we are too busy insulting the other guy? That is my biggest fear.

Eventually, not only will we be unable to talk about the same facts, or agree that something is a fact, which is already happening. But we will not even be able to be in the same room with someone with differing views to have the same discussion. That is petrifying to me.

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

Ask Mandisa 3 – Building around Food and Fun

October 7, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Mandisa Thomas** is the Founder of **Black Nonbelievers, Inc** (**Twitter** & **Facebook**). One of the, if not the, largest organization for African-American or black nonbelievers or atheists in America. The organization is intended to give secular fellowship, provide nurturance and support for nonbelievers, encourage a sense of pride in irreligion, and promote charity in the non-religious community. I reached out to begin an educational series with one of the, and again if not the, most prominent African-American woman nonbeliever grassroots activists in the United States. Here, we talk about building around food and fun.*

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to some of the issues of hospitality, as it is called “Southern Hospitality,” what are some things you like to do for those who come to give talks, come to conferences, in the Atlanta, Georgia, area who are nonbelievers and hoping to contribute to the community as a speaker?

Mandisa Thomas: When I invite a guest, I bring them to a local restaurant and attractions, which are really, really nice to experience for those who travel from out of town. Being an organizer myself and someone who invites speakers, and welcomes people, to the area, whenever we have visitors here with BN in the Atlanta Area.

One place I like to go is Mary Mac’s Tea Room. It is a historic restaurant. I has been dubbed “Atlanta’s Restaurant” by one of the governors a while ago. It is a tourist trap. It is really, really good. I like to incorporate this into the events. It is good for meetups.

It overall incorporates a good opportunity for atheists and nonbelievers to come together over some good food and to have a good time.

Jacobsen: What have been the benefits to people who are coming into the community with this type of hospitality? Because some of the laments of some in the community, the secular community more generally, is not having a community as a baseline.

Thomas: Correct, a community can be built simply. It can be as simple as going to the favourite restaurant or coffee shop. It is doing it consistently. It cannot be a one-time effort. It has to be something that you are incorporating monthly, weekly or as much as your time allows; one of the things that have been good for me when I take people to this restaurant.

I like the look on people’s faces when they are enjoying the food.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Thomas: It is really, really amazing. It is your southern cuisine. It is the fried chicken, the shrimp and grits, fried green tomatoes. You do not go there if you are trying to eat too healthy. But it is a really, really good experience.

Sometimes, it is nice to have the atmosphere where people can let loose and open up, let people know the experiences they’re going through. It is finding the like-minded people. It is exploring the camaraderie. It is connecting on the basic, human levels. What better way to do that than over food?

I think that part is really, really important because it is something that is often missed. Atlanta is a really good space for that. Not everything has to be monetized. But I do like to incorporate the more historic restaurants in the area that has really good food. It is a very, very enjoyable experience. It is important for us to provide more enjoyable experiences as a part of the community building so that people will continue to return and continue to participate.

They will, hopefully, continue to volunteer and take part in the activities that we do.

Jacobsen: I really like the idea of food as culture, food as a community builder. Could this be a way to build bridges with some of the religious community? For instance, I understand you gave a speech in a church, recently.

Thomas: I gave a speech in a United Methodist Church. That is correct. The pastor is a nonbeliever from what I understand. This is in Austin, Texas. Food, absolutely, is a great way to build community. Food and music are really, really great.

One of the things we like to incorporate in BN is part of the black experience. I love hip-hop. I love R&B music. I love jazz. We want to incorporate that love of music and creativity which many other atheists and nonbelievers share.

It is important for us to understand that many atheists do not come to their perspective simply by reading the intellectual books or the intellectual side. It is good to find other good things that people like; that we share.

I have found other nonbelievers that rap enthusiasts, even if we have disagreements about the content. We find that we share this in common with a lot of believers. There are many things we share in common.

My love for music is shared on Facebook. I have believer and nonbeliever friends who share that. We will discuss that. It is a good way to break down the barriers. In fact, one of my good friends – a good colleague – who is a pastor. We have even dined at Mary Mac's Tea Room, which is, again, one of my favourite places.

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

Conversation with Lynn Perrin on Recent Pipeline Issues

October 7, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

“Lynn is the parent of two adult daughters and grandmother of a 12 year old boy. She was a very mature student who got Bachelor of General Studies degree from the University of the Fraser Valley and Master of Public Policy degree from Simon Fraser University in her 50s. She is a public policy analyst and have used federal and BC legislation to access information for 20 years. Music, recreational fishing and working in the soil feed her soul.

She first encountered Kinder Morgan contractors near her home when they were clearing trees in the greenspace near her home, and she became aware of the expansion proposal. She was also present at the public meeting after the 2012 Sumas Tank Farm spill. She was feeling very vulnerable to the risks from a diluted bitumen spill at the time that PIPE UP Network was formed and became active at the time of its inception. Belonging to a group of like-minded people has significantly increased her belief in the power of people to take care of each other – no matter how challenging our opponent is.”

Source: http://www.pipe-up.net/lynn_perrin.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Since the end of Spring and running into the end of Summer, what have been the updates for the PIPE UP Network regarding activism around pipeline issues, e.g., the Kinder Morgan issue, and others associated with it?

Lynn Perrin: Of course, it is interesting. We are interested in Kinder Morgan being put on hold, on the construction back in March and using the BC government's and BC Supreme Court case as an excuse.

They have known all along, both Kinder Morgan, the Trudeau Government, and the Notley Government, that all these appeals in the federal court were going to be ruled on between the end of June and early September.

So, they also know that for the majority of cases. First Nations are successful. So, that was one, I think, thing that they knew what the federal court could rule, but they decided to deflect and then use the BC court case.

One thing that I found out in about in June was that Kinder Morgan Houston was trying to avoid any kind of liability if there was a spill from the leaky old pipeline. What had happened was that they were trying to wiggle out of one of the conditions – Condition 124 – was that they had to have \$500 million cash (Kinder Morgan Canada), they had to have \$1 billion in insurance.

This is for the old Kinder Morgan pipeline and not the expansion. According to the *Pipeline Safety Act*, there is an unlimited liability if Kinder Morgan Houston was upheld. I have done some calculating on how much it would cost to clean a spill.

It could easily be \$2 billion. I used the calculations for the Northern Gateway hearings. I did not pull that out of the air. That was also an issue for Kinder Morgan. The National Energy Board were standing firm on it.

They were trying all sorts of things to get around it. That was when they said they would put the construction on pause. They were unhappy and they felt there were starting to be enough things that could cause them some difficulties.

A lot of us, of course, have been working on divesting, getting people to divest from Kinder Morgan – including myself. In fact, I am an alumna of the University of the Fraser Valley. I have made sure to ask the alumni association to make sure that they have not made investments in Kinder Morgan.

As a member of the Vancouver City Savings Credit Union, I sent a motion for their annual general meeting, asking that they not invest in Kinder Morgan and also look into their overall fossil fuel investments.

That passed at Vancouver City's AGM back in early May. VanCity is a big financial institution. Fast-forward to May, Kinder Morgan is still saying they are not willing to proceed on construction. The Trudeau Government saying they would put taxpayer money forward to purchase a leaky old pipeline and the construction that had been done on that to that point.

For the life of me, and a lot of us, we cannot understand – for the life of us – why the Trudeau Government wants this expansion to move forward. When the Tar Sands itself is worth less than 10% of Canada's Gross Domestic Product, why something worth so little getting seen as so important to the Trudeau Government?

So, many of us after Trudeau mentioned the intent to purchase; we have been trying to ask them to really think hard about it, to really look at the facts of it. Not only the economic facts but also the environmental and human health risks.

So, you cannot seem to get through this wall of Trudeau and Notley. You cannot seem to penetrate it with the facts. It was the same with the National Energy Board. PIPE UP was an intervenor there.

We were putting facts forward; we were asking genuine questions. For the most part, Kinder Morgan was allowed to put forward any fantasy that they wanted. It was taken as the absolute fact. Even their economic argument, I really regret that I didn't go to the National Energy Board export data before that hearing was over.

Because even now, if you look at the export data of the National Energy Board, I looked at it today. If you look the markets for diluted bitumen beyond the United States, there are none. The most that has ever been shipped outside of the US was in one quarter – a 3-month period – in 2012. It was 22,000 barrels per day. Something like that.

Trans Mountain Pipeline has 300,000 barrels per day capacity. Why only 22,000 going to the non United States if their supposedly getting such a higher price per barrel if they shipped beyond the United States?

I looked at the 2017 full year data today – not a single barrel was shipped anywhere other than the United States. I look at the 2018 first quarter – January to March – and not a single barrel went anywhere other the United States. So, where are these markets?

I looked at documents. Let's talk jobs for a minute, I saw a letter from the President of Kinder Morgan Canada to the Mayor of my town, Abbotsford. The Lower Mainland would be the place for the main jobs: 2,500. But Jim Carr talked about 15,000 jobs; same with Notley and the Trudeau Government – for this area.

So, we are keeping a close eye on things. Because in the past, we have seen Kinder Morgan say, "It is maintenance," when it is really construction; it has happened in more than one area. We have been keeping an eye on it.

There are Indigenous people on the northern segment and in the Fraser Valley keeping an eye on it, and on Burnaby Mountain.

Also, another thing that got people upset and caught their attention was the spawning deterrents on those five watercourses. Just before the federal court hearing, Kinder Morgan submitted a letter to the National Energy Board saying that they intended on using that insane method of preventing salmon from spawning on 26 watercourses.

It was just before the federal court decision. We are still working on getting DFO documents for the original placement. We are still pushing the Department of Fisheries and the BC Ministry of the Environment to penalize them for doing that.

So, that is also what has been going on.

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

Conversation with Pastor Brad Strelau – Pastor, CA Church: Town Center

October 9, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I wanted to explore some of the world of different Christian leaders, small and big. However, I wanted to report less on those and more in their own words. These will be published, slowly, over time.

This, I trust, may open dialogue and understanding between various communities. Of course, an interview does not amount to an endorsement, but to the creation of conversation, comprehension, and compassion.

“Reverend Brad Strelau is a father of two (Caed & Aurielle), husband of one (Lalainia), a fan of English Premiere Football (Come on, Everton!!), always has 4 or 5 books on the go, and is an avid whistler!

He was born and raised in Vancouver, B.C, and resides in the Tri-Cities, ministering as pastor of CA Church: Town Centre in downtown Coquitlam (Evergreen Cultural Centre).” Here we talk about his life and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your personal sect of Christianity?

Pastor Brad Strelau: I am part of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church started in the mid-to-late-1800s by a guy concerned mostly about missions work, in China. It was not a church until the 1970s.

It was a missions organization. His big thing: he wanted to cut out the divisive things about denominations. If you believe most things most Evangelical denominations believe, he would say, “You’re welcome into the organization to reach the lost with the Gospel.” [Ed. not a direct quote.]

So, even today, the way the C&MA or the Alliance works is most Evangelicals or Protestants can join in. We do not have a lot of beliefs that have been divisive in a lot of ways. If you come from Nazarene, Baptist, Mennonite Brethren, they can call this home, e.g., the music and language are familiar.

Jacobsen: What will be a contrasting sect of Christianity to the Alliance?

Strelau: Any church that says, “We are not concerned about anything outside of our walls.” We are a missions-oriented church. It is social gospel, helping widows, orphans, and those in need. But we also believe the Message – the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ – is important.

We do not only do physical things. We do things that are life-transforming all over the world. Now, we have people in Turkey giving the Gospel but also helping them start a business. Some of the women are starting a business. We have groups in Zambia, New York [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Strelau: Brooklyn, probably the most dangerous one, Mexico, and the Philippines, those are the ones done now. It is always growing. Our main impetus is that we are meant to proclaim the Gospel and go everywhere in the world to do it.

It has always been the goal of the Alliance church. Others who say, “We will hunker down until Jesus comes.” It is the opposite of us. But we are not perfect followers of Jesus.

Jacobsen: There are those most insular in terms of community. There are those more open in terms of community. There are those who reach out to family and friends in terms of evangelization. What would this amount to here?

Strelau: It would be both. When I am preaching on the weekend, I try to remind and encourage people. Jesus is not only best for them and living out the Gospel is not only best for them. It is best for their neighbours, people they meet at Starbucks, and people at school.

We should be reaching out on the individual level and sharing the Gospel and going on mission trips. It is not good enough to go to Turkey and say, “People need Jesus.” You have a neighbour who has never had anyone explain to them who Jesus is either.

All of it. It is from top to bottom, the Gospel. It ought to take over our lives. In the West, we have Gospels that divvy up. Check it off. You read the *Bible* and went to church. Done!

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Strelau: There is Hinduism in India. It can be completely transformative, but not always in a healthy way. The understanding is that this is not something only held in private. It is brought into the public sphere. We believe it is so life changing and changes history.

This is not something that you simply hold down in private. It is brought into the public square. It is so life changing and changes all of history. It ought to take over every aspect. To say, “It does not impact how I do business,” does not make sense.

Jacobsen: What are some difficulties that arise in each of these evangelism areas?

Strelau: It would be assuming our understanding of the Gospel applies elsewhere. For instance, in the Gospel of John, there is a story of Jesus meeting a woman married 4 or 5 times. In the West, the story is that she slept around and has been with different guys.

That is a Western interpretation. In Africa, they will interpret that as a story of a woman treated badly and who needs to be taken care of; we need to make sure we are bringing other interpretations of what the Gospel is about.

We need to remember this is the Hebrew culture that first gave us the Gospels. We will often assume. There is the story of the Prodigal Son. The prodigal son goes away. He spends all his money and there was a drought.

The West, we will focus on spending all his money. In Africa, they will say the problem was that there was a drought. We don’t understand drought! It changes everything. That is an important aspect. Our culture is not the ‘proper’ culture to interpret Scripture.

We have to interpret Scripture as it was meant in the first place. Then we have to apply that to the culture in which we find it.

Jacobsen: There is a history of improper inculcation of the Christian faith. At the same time, some who came out of it, e.g., the Indigenous community, formed, more or less, an Indigenous Christianity.

People like Dr. Terry LeBlanc, Dr. Raymond Aldred, and the late Rev. Richard Twiss talk about this.

If you look at the statistics, about 2/3rds of the population identify as Christian, if you look at Indigenous communities, there are about 2/3rds who identify as Christian.

Strelau: That is interesting.

Jacobsen: If we look at the New York case, they will focus on the prodigal son's waste of money. If we look at the Zambian case, they would focus on the drought. In a Canadian context, where Indigenous, how would this, in another parable, be interpreted within that context?

Strelau: That is a good question. I do not know if I have an answer for it. That is difficult in a number of ways. If we are bringing the Gospel to a First Nations culture, there is a lot of native spirituality.

It is how the Earth is seen and how the world is seen. In the same ways, like other countries, there are no cookie cutter ways. No book to say, "This is how you reach the Indigenous." Dare I say it, it takes time to know people.

That has been a failure of Christianity in the past. We have had these ideas if you just walk people through these 6 passages...

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Strelau: I grew up in the church. We had a booklet in the 80s called *The Four Spiritual Laws*. Same with gravity. You cannot fight gravity. It will always pull you down. But that there are spiritual laws. There was a little booklet to carry around and share with people.

It is always *such* a natural way to open a conversation with people [Sarcasm]. There is *The Roman Road* going through the Book of Romans. It is a way of going through things in a cookie cutter way.

It is saying, "I am going to declare this to you. I am going to have no clue as to who you are and what you walked through." Many have walked through horrible situations, as many of the Indigenous have; horrible situations through the church.

It is in the name of Jesus, too. I need to know who you are before I think you will listen to what I say. I think this is where we failed as a culture, a Christian culture. Anyone [Laughing] who tries to share the Gospel on Facebook. Nothing ever evolves on Facebook. It devolves.

Jacobsen: Almost as bad as YouTube comments.

Strelau: Is there a lower level of humanity than YouTube commentary? Maybe, if we watch the news, but!

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Strelau: I think the surest way in any culture to share the Gospel is not to bring them to the professionals, not to herd them into the church. The best way, most personable, most realistic way, is if someone has a question or a problem with the church.

It is to sit down and have coffee as if we are human beings.

Jacobsen: For instance, if I remember right, Dr. Terry LeBlanc makes a split between an oral culture and a print/written culture. If you use a book like *The Roman Road*, that would be taking a booklet to a, more or less, oral culture.

Terry LeBlanc, I believe, talked about two things. If you look at the Old Testament and New Testament, it is a Middle Eastern and written culture in terms of what is produced with a text.

Indigenous is more land-based learning. It is an oral culture. At the same time, both had an idea of Creator with one and the other with God. But it is a single thing behind everything. However, it comes from different frameworks.

He would take the perspective, in a sense, of both taking a monotheistic lens. At the same time, it's an orientation of when is an appropriate time in history for the Gospel to reach out to people, in God's providence. It is almost a preparation in time.

"Mistakes were made at and after arrival, but! If given time, there will be the arrival of the Gospel to a culture seeped, for thousands of years, in a view of the world as created by a Creator and comfortable with mystery and an interconnectedness of all things."

There is not a systematic theology in the Indigenous tradition. There is a Creator. Then there is an innumerable number of interrelationships between things.

It is different than the carving up model of the West with systematic theology with the requisite literate culture as part of it. So, the Indigenous Christian framework works within this context.

Strelau: If we learn anything from the Gospel, it is that Jesus wasn't sitting in front of thousands of people reading Old Testament texts. He was telling them stories, which was very familiar. It has to do with what the things people were very familiar with, e.g., rain, planting, a son walking away from inheritance. It was culturally relevant.

He would talk about the Good Samaritan as the enemy of the Jews. He was calling them to something strong but doing this with story. He was, in some ways, maybe different than what they were used to – as they were reading the *Torah*. It is reading stories and seeing if they resonate.

Although, Jews and Christians traditionally have been called "People of the Book." We can learn from Jesus, one of the best ways to reach people with the Gospel and the good news is through the story. Maybe, it is something lacked by us.

Jacobsen: Regarding personal and family background, what was it? As well, when did you become Christian?

Strelau: I was born into a family, which was Christian. I have been going to church since I was a fetus. It was a conservative German church. I have memories of angry, German faces correcting me. I am sure they were trying to help.

My memories of growing up. The two strongest memories are of my father. They are him kneeling next to his bed at night to pray. If he disciplined me too harshly, in today's standards he did not at all, he was not a harsh disciplinarian.

He would apologize to me. I inherited prayer and humility when it comes to having made mistakes, which is good for marriage. I say, "Sorry," almost every day [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Strelau: I was given a great heritage. At first glance, I came to faith at 6 or 7. However, someone follows Jesus through everything! No 6-year-old knows this. When I was 16, I was mulling over what I thought I believed.

I decided. I cannot inherit the faith. It has to be my own faith. I had to do my own searching and praying. I thought this is good news for me. Coming out of high school, we learn this in high school. But this does not change us.

We are told to find our identity and to find purpose. To know that my purpose and significance are given by God and out of my control, I do not have to run the treadmill of being a perfect person or trying to succeed in business.

That is, God has already proclaimed, “You’re loved. If you’re wondering, look to the Cross.” It became personal for me. I was 17. I was reading the Book of Romans. I was reading the Psalms. I saw this love and forgiveness.

I am not ashamed to say it; I was weeping. I prayed, “God, I want this to be my faith. Jesus, I want to follow you.” That is how that happened for me.

Jacobsen: What seems like the common experience of coming to faith?

Strelau: It always depends on how heavy the burden was for the individual. There were some guys who attend our church, who walk through recovery and addiction. They burned a lot of bridges. Their identity has been tainted. They see themselves as broken.

They take every mistake and then throw this on themselves, “This is fundamentally who I am.” The Gospel comes and says, “No, first of all, there is a Creator. He loves you. He wants to take all of it. He forgives you.”

Psalms says that God takes our sin and throws it as far away as the East is from the West (Psalm 103:12). It throws our sin into the lake of forgetfulness and remembers it no more. If I have hurt a lot of people, we all have this sense, whether we admit it or not. I have not only sinned against a fellow human.

But there is also something spiritual going on. “God, nothing else will do. I need your path.” I think that experience compared to the boy growing up in the Christian family will be far more significant. I had coffee before coming here. That is their background. It is seeing God work in their life.

It is seeing a smile on a face that was tainted and broken. It is welcoming them into the community. We are intricate people. To say that we can give some cookie cutter version of the Gospel to someone, I need to know them first and know them before I can tell them about Jesus.

I, first, ask someone who does not like church, “Tell me the Jesus you don’t like.” Then we can look at how he revealed himself and then see if we both like that Jesus. The way people experience the Gospel and the way it is delivered is individual.

It is tailor-made for each of us. God sees your heart; God sees my heart. You are not the same as I am. There is an aspect of the Gospel that you need. There is an aspect of the Gospel that I need.

Jacobsen: From within the community, what are the ways people lose their faith?

Strelau: You are familiar with the “Nones,” right?

Jacobsen: Not the ones in the convents.

Strelau: [Laughing] the N-o-n-e-s, I think that is how they are spelling it. There is a scare. People who were in a church. Now, they see themselves as one of the Nones. If you look at the research done on them, they moved away from the church.

If you look at the polling done over the past 10-20 years, you will see people saying, “I identify as Christian. I go to church.” But then, if you continue on some of the questions, “Is the *Bible* the inspired Word of God?”

“No.”

“Is the Jesus the Son of God?”

“No.”

Those are the people who move into the Nones. Of course, they weren’t buying into it in the first place [Laughing]. If people are given a Gospel, that says, “If you follow Jesus, and your sins are forgiven, it will be great. There will be clowns and balloons. It will be great.”

Nowhere is that promised in Scripture. Jesus says there will be trouble in this world but have hope as I have overcome the world. This is leading somewhere. There is hope. People will leave the church if they believed that when they followed Jesus there would be no troubles.

But God uses struggles and trials. When we come out of the other side, we stretched and grow ourselves. When people buy into the Gospel that says, “Everything will be great. Your kids will be perfect. You will never have any financial problems,” they will leave.

We are so good in the West about compartmentalizing the Gospel or living for Jesus and the life that He offers.

But if we take a version, that says, “You can have my hour on Sunday morning but the other 6 days are mine,” many people when Jesus wants to move into sexual ethics, anger problems, and so on, do not like it.

Those people will move away from the faith. That has become more exciting to them than Jesus. If we love the world more than Jesus, of course, [Laughing] and if he wants to move more into our territory, then we will lose them.

I had discussions with people who had pretty bad moral issues – not even to push it. They say, “If you do not accept me as I am, then I am out of here.” When we are truly challenged, we will give up the faith.

What that is, it is a faith that looked big but has been paper thin, compared to one that is simple and has deep roots. I blather on man!

Jacobsen: When it comes to leading a community, what does an average service look like?

Strelau: Yes, this would be specific. It is different than the high church. We meet out of a gym. It cuts loads of people out. They do not want to be there. We will start our service by welcoming people into it. There will be some worship.

In our church, it is an electric guitar, bass, and drums, which is not uncommon now. We will have a couple songs off the top. We will pray for our children as they go to their own kid’s church. There will be announcements of the community – how we can help them and they can help us.

There is a break in the service – shake hands and ask people how they are doing. Then a 30-minute message from myself or whoever is preaching. A song and then some words of benediction, then coffee and hanging out for half of an hour, because we have to tear it down in the morning.

We have the “Table.” We bring tables. People bring buns and soup. It is not ours passed the one day. So, it is different in building community.

We try to have one time per month where people can stay afterwards, where they can laugh and get to know each other – especially for new people.

It is not just Sunday mornings, but it is *Bible* study groups. They gather over the tri-cities. We dig deep into what was talked about on the weekends. Or we walk through something like a Christian book club. Although, some go deeper than that.

It is what our week looks like. For me, as the pastor, I am meeting with the people and the leaders in the church, and checking in with people. The new people and the people on their way out, the hurting people. I try to concentrate on them, as I cannot focus on everybody.

If somebody is new, I want to focus on them. If someone is hurting, I want to focus on them too. We live in a culture that is not big on community. The fact you and I are not texting other people while we talk is counterculture right now [Laughing].

To say, “We are going to have a community.” It is a big deal. What I have found, recently, I have been thinking through this.

When you get a text message, the most – and this is research, and you probably already know this – exciting part of the text is the noise and not the actual text, even if it is a positive one.

Same if I order something on Amazon. The exciting part is the anticipation. So, it is a phone cover, great. I found, with a community, this works differently. If at home, people have less anticipation, but the payback is greater when it comes to community.

But compared to other things in our lives, it is a bigger payoff. I believe that we are not meant to do life alone as an individual – and as a church.

We are not meant to do life alone and to walk into the chaos of the world and to think you’re alone and not have people praying for you, and asking how you’re doing.

It is a dangerous way to live life. It is probably why so many people are anxious and depressed and broken. We want to fight against this as much as we can by helping each other, especially as people of faith and to walk out into a culture that says, “Keep that to your hour.”

We cannot do that alone. It would be impossible and detrimental to ourselves.

Jacobsen: Have you ever taken part in interfaith or interbelief dialogues?

Strelau: Not in a formal way, but all the time, especially in our culture. But you mean in an official way. I, myself, have not, personally. We, as a church, did an event called “Love Our City.” It is not just our church. It is anybody, religious leaders and others.

It is taking a week to take care of the tri-cities, whether it is cleaning up or painting things in the park. As for dialogue, sitting down with other faith leaders, I haven’t done it.

Jacobsen: Anyone in local churches who have done it?

Strelau: I do not know that I do. It is not to say that they haven't.

Jacobsen: If you're dealing with the people hurting or feeling broken, how do you go about consoling someone in terms of feeling broken? A young person who does not feel secure in themselves or an older person who, recently, lost someone.

Strelau: First, I want to tell them there is a lot more going on than the page they are on. Their life is a full book. I believe and preach that we find our full purpose when we find ourselves in God's story compared to writing by ourselves. That can be tedious and dangerous, to travel life alone.

So, I try to put people in the middle of the story that God is writing and try to encourage them there. Then I talk about the love of Jesus.

Anytime we try to do that without introducing people to the community we are failing. The reason Jesus brought the church was that we are not meant to live as individuals.

One of the failures of the church is in the very error there. We have a handful of singles at the church. They feel as if they need spouses; some of them do not. But either way, the church should be a place to find community and belonging. People in the church have lost people.

A year-and-a-half ago, someone who goes to our church lost her husband to brain cancer. It was quick. There were some hospice visits and praying. This last week, she was speaking at a women's event at the church. She talked about how this event drew her closer to Jesus.

The difficulties in finding community. "Where do I fit now?" She has found comfort. You cannot throw nice verses. They have to be invited into the larger story; otherwise, it will fall on deaf ears.

Jacobsen: Some in the religious community, broad base here, will be aggressive about "we don't want any non-religious people in the world."

I see this happening in the opposite case. Non-religious people saying they want to eliminate religion or get rid of religion with the implication of no religious people.

I do not feel or think those positions are appropriate, especially in the light of, as we noted off-tape, freedom of belief and freedom of religion.

People have a right to be free from non-religion or free from religion, or freedom to believe something or freedom to not believe something.

To be in a position to eliminate either, it goes against those human rights. You cannot live in a country bound by international human rights and national human rights that permit those freedoms – and then allow them for oneself and then not another person or group.

In that, to me, it is a trend line. How do you think we can build more communication between communities and, maybe, even within communities to lighten up – on that particular strand? They are not big, but they are a problem.

Strelau: One of the issues, we see this everywhere. Wherever faith communities are working to speak in the public square, where people say, "Keep the shouting out until Sunday morning." I think one of the issues is that we need to understand the meaning of the word "tolerance."

Tolerance used to mean that “I do not agree with you, and you do not agree with me. That is fine. We want to live in a civil society.” That is not what tolerance means anymore. Now, when people use the word “tolerance,” if I disagree with you, then I am intolerant.

The fact of disagreement creates intolerance. It cuts down any form of conversation. You see this in politics, very strongly in the United States [Laughing]. We do not need to mention any names. If I have given someone a label, you say something. Now, I think you’re a racist.

Anything you say about immigration; I will not listen to it. You have nothing to say about it. People will look at a Christian. They will label me homophobic, Trump-lover – shoot, I said it! Anything I say has lost any validity. There is no use in having a conversation with me now. Christians do this with people of none-faith too.

The understanding of what it means to be tolerant is important, to live at peace in a pluralistic society. YouTube is big on this: “Watch this guy DESTROY this guy!” I do not mean they ‘destroyed’ them. They had a good response. But it is a battle ongoing.

Martin Luther, loosely, said, ‘All of us are beggars telling other beggars where to find bread.’ It is a good and humble way for Christians to approach a culture that is broken, hurting, lost – we believe – and does not agree with us.

You have to remember; we are nothing great. But we believe that we found bread and want to share this with people. Do not think that you get some higher moral ground. Scripture says in Philippians. We ought to live in unity.

We take our model from the humility of Jesus Christ, who we believe was enthroned from on high and took on human flesh.

He knew it would lead to the Cross. That is humility. Christians’ engagement with the world ought to be humility. I do not see that everywhere. We can hold our feet to the fire as Christians. We can hold our own feet to the fire.

Jacobsen: Same with non-religious people. The idea: you want to “DESTROY” religion for many people. It becomes not even a matter of faith.

It is simply an important tradition in their lives. Some of the Jewish community. Their “faith” amounts to simple practices, which they feel warm towards.

Strelau: It is a cultural thing. Would you say, I am asking you a question; has there been a bit of back peddling in the atheist community when it comes to that rhetoric with Dawkins? There has been a pullback on getting rid of all religion.

Jacobsen: With Dawkins, he gave a TED talk. He introduced the term “Militant Atheism.” This was in the 2000s, I believe. David Silverman, he was the leader of American Atheists. He invented “Firebrand Atheism.”

The two strands of “strident atheism” come with Militant Atheism and Firebrand Atheism. Now, technically, Sam Harris wrote the first book. He started writing on September 12th, 2001. He was talking about how faith is bad. So, it was a reaction to the terrorist incident. For him, he probably started the movement.

It may explain why he is the most quoted. Dawkins, though, introduced the term Militant Atheism. Between Dawkins and Dennett, Hitchens and Harris, and a bunch of others, women are less noted in the community.

They took on the garb of various forms of Militant Atheism. Militant Atheism, in some ways, can be a synonym for New Atheism. It does have an evangelistic tone to it, at times. Other times, it has a directness to it.

That can be taken as offensive because atheists didn't talk much in the public fora. Even within the non-religious community, they are quite small.

You can have 16% of the Canadian population and 16% of the global population, for that matter, being non-religious, in some older data.

The 7 out of 7 on the Dawkins scale would be a small number out of the 16%. So, Firebrand Atheism seems like a sub-brand of Militant Atheism. The harshness and directness of modern atheism tends to come from the New Atheism.

That splits into Militant Atheist & Firebrand Atheism. It is a question, "How direct are we going to be in the current period?"

Something not noted in the community about Christopher Hitchens, sorry folks. He almost always had a drink with him. To me, he seemed like an alcoholic. He was out there in terms of debates.

He could quip well. He was articulate. At the same time, he was able to speak in an aggressive and unhinged tone at times. Others are trained, professional scientists or philosophers.

Daniel Dennett is a trained philosopher, and active. Dawkins is a trained biologist, though inactive as a professional biologist. Harris is a trained neuroscientist, though inactive as a neuroscientist.

More the New Atheist community than the general atheist community; it is embedded in the larger culture. Being embedded in the larger culture, things like the #MeToo movement and others do influence how things play out.

Ironically, if you look at the Roman Catholic leadership, if you look at the New Atheist leadership, if you look at the Intelligent Design leadership, all of them or most of them are white men.

There are Ayaan Hirsi Ali and others. There are some bishops who are African. But in general, within North American & Western European contexts, those tend to be the dominant populations for those, ironically.

There are demographic issues. With a lot of the modern movements that are outside of it, and, arguably, much bigger, there has been a pushback on different sides.

That has caused an attitudinal transition. Where people are looking at different orientations, the New Atheist community, there are a lot more ex-Muslim men coming from Iran, Bangladesh, and other places.

Where these men have more freedom of movement and women have fewer degrees of freedom given less economic independence, so the men can leave, it is making the community more different.

Also, it is bringing different narratives into the community. That changes things too. It seems to be the case. In any early community or early movement, you will have a specific demographic as a majority.

Within that, it can make or cause a bit of an echo chamber. Because many of the old guard atheists, Isaac Asimov, Carl Sagan, and Neil deGrasse Tyson. Although, Neil deGrasse is more public science educator and an agnostic – so I take that one back.

Those old guard atheists tend to have a different tone, more conversational. Now, I don't necessarily buy the stereotypes of people like Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett – of course, they are different.

However, they will have that, at times, narrow focus, even inadvertent and acknowledged – as in advertent.

Some quotes/paraphrases will be 'almost by accident focusing on Islam,' by Harris. It depends on the person. It depends on their educational background, so their expertise.

As with different communities, and leaders, they will have their pluses and minuses.

So, it helps that there is a trained philosopher – Dennett, a trained biologist – Dawkins, a trained neuroscientist – Harris, and a someone who was out doing field work in investigative journalism – Hitchens.

It does help provide a broader base on knowledge in terms of leadership. However, it is a small community. I do not know if we could name more than two dozen moderate to major figures.

It's also dealing with a smaller pool of the population. So, the narratives are smaller. I think, as a result of being enmeshed in the larger culture and getting washed out of it, things rise and wash out of it.

They find more of their puzzle piece fit in the larger conversation of the culture. So, as that happens, as you get an early movement blossoming and more levelling out of their tone, there will be mistakes in the conversation, the dialogue, or the debate.

One of them, to me, seems to be in the elimination of religion. Because it overlays regular democratic life with a sense of there being an inevitable progress or trend line in history.

In a larger sense, in a 2,000-year history, or a 4,000-year history, or, at least, a 250-year history, there has been a trend towards the progress of better lives, longer lives, more fulfilling work, and more free time to do stuff like this.

At the same time, the idea that there is some inevitable narrative of less religion or people getting more reasonable. For instance, our genetics has not changed in the past 100,000 to 200,000 years in any significant sense.

We are the same species. The people who would wipe their butts with bark and eat moss (joke).

So, why would a species with the same hardware built around tribalism, ritual, superstition, and other things differ in any significant sense when we look at kids who will imbue things with essences and animism? Things like this.

Only with lots of formal schooling will they have a sense of method and rigour, and logic, and “multi-logical” thinking found in science. These are capabilities, but these are not the dominant strains of the ways of our thinking.

If you look at the number of fibres running from the front of the brain to the “emotional” part of the brain – if you will, they are fewer in quantity.

But if you look at the number of fibres running from the emotional part of the brain to the front of the brain, it is vastly more.

We are capable of logical and scientific thinking. But those are not our primary modes of thought. That is for all communities to bear in mind. Because we will default to tribalism.

Strelau: Also, you mention all the benefits we’ve had over the last 250 years. We are more depressed. We are more anxious. There are more questions being asked that can’t be answered. There is a spiritual-emotional brokenness that seems to have come along with it.

It could be because we have pushed a lot of the spiritual to the side. We say, “We do not need that. Let’s become modern. Everything will be fine.” In this wake, we are creating spiritual and emotional brokenness.

Along the lines that you’re saying, anything saying, “Let’s walk through this.” To dismiss this, we have a whole group of people who are broken and hurting.

They cannot put their finger on it. That something more is here than our devices, which needs to be answered and fixed. Often, we will medicate this in other ways.

Jacobsen: That sense of community or need for some, almost, ritual in life.

Strelau: I think there is a need for ritual in life.

Jacobsen: If someone is going to a church and taking of the Eucharist and taking of the ‘body and blood,’ that is, in itself, a ritual. If you look at science in a very stretched sense, it is almost like a sense of a systematic ritual to go through an experiment.

There is this empirical sensibility. Maybe, this is part of the reason science was able to emerge in the first place.

It was able to adapt off something that was 98,000-99,000 years of our history, minimum, and then make it this systematic process. So, on the community, this pops up in the non-religious community too: Sunday Assemblies, Secular Church, Oasis Network, and so on.

So, I see more in common than not, in terms of practice and in terms of the need of the community for people.

Strelau: That is the first thing that stood out to me about atheist churches. You can deny a belief in the existence of God. You can deny what we believe to be true, what Jesus said and did. But there is definitely something in our essence, which says we want to be in community.

That there is something valuable in that. Yet, it is continually battling with something taught to us. The idea of the individual and making your own future and following your heart and so on. It is diametrically opposed to living in a community.

Jacobsen: It is a mono-lensing of the world. It seems like a problem of the time. It seems like a problem in the political debates.

It seems like a problem in terms of how we see social problems. It would be the problem with people unable to partner up if they want to do it.

If people think, “I have to be an independent individual in a relationship.” It does not work that way. You don’t want to work on a dependent relationship either.

Strelau: You do not want the Jerry Maguire, “You complete me.”

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Strelau: That will never bring health.

Jacobsen: The interdependence is the healthier perspective. It would be why people would be having relationships and communities, and societies. Because these are more robust than an individual.

However, the ability for an individual to get through and on with their life is part of their personal fulfillment as well as their ability to contribute to a relationship, a community, or a society.

Someone can master something: a craft, a leadership position of a community, and so on. They can provide service to the community. But they also live in interdependence in the community.

The ability for us to get a coffee requires someone to stand behind a counter and have some early life skills:

“How do I provide this customer with the best service? How do I make other people happy, make them feel good? How do I also get paid? How do I get someone to some form of a banking system? Why do you need a banking system? You need a common currency, so people can agree on values of things and so on.”

It is quite a deep concept because it is so deeply embedded into the society. The interconnectedness of things. Even though, people might talk about a rugged individual. There may be more rugged individuals than others.

But in general, our livelihoods in a democratic society are built on an interdependence. The balancing act of voting, who falls in where in terms of who wins and loses in an election.

That is based on who votes and does not. That is an interdependence on everyone coming together and voting on who best fits their interest.

It’s not that everything falls into the place exactly as you wanted, even if you got the person that you wanted.

It’s the best for the most in the sense of a democratic vote. Some people get some things they want; others get most of what they want; some get none of what they want part of the time.

Sometimes, you will be the most. Other times you will be the some, and the none.

Strelau: [Laughing] Well done.

Jacobsen: What are the problems of the community, right now, for communities of faith – Evangelicals in particular?

Strelau: I think part of what we said was I think being told to be a part of something is met with suspicion. So, you can commit to coming every week, commit to coming to a group every week. We have been told – as we have been saying – that you do not need others.

It is the opposite of what we live out every day. The intricacies of living in a society are based on living with others. For the most part, people are willing to live their lives with their family.

Rather than say, “I am going to be part of something bigger and something that will bring health – physically, emotionally, spiritually – to our community.”

Whenever we, Christians, get off the path of our mission, Matthew refers to this as the Great Commission; Jesus’s disciples, He says that He will be with us *always*. I am reminded of *Star Wars*, “The Force will be with you always.” Anyway!

When we understand that is the goal of the church, it is to move out from ourselves and tell others the good news. Then, whenever we decide that is not our mission anymore, that is when people are less interested in going to church and misunderstand what church is about.

People think, “This music does not speak to me.” It was never about what humans think. It is about going and giving something to God. It is going to church to, at least, not do something for yourself is a good act.

People who call themselves Christians and get off the Great Commission and wish to see it redeemed, top to bottom; they will decide this community is not that important.

It is important to note. That is what the term “church” means. “Church” is an *ecclesia* (in Greek) meaning “a gathering of people.” It wasn’t until the German translation of Scripture used “a physical building” with *Circe* or *Kirke*.

When we call people to be a part of the church, we are saying, “Be a part of this community, which has been changed by the truth of the Gospel and brings health to our community.” That is a great mission.

If I think Christianity is about me getting a good deal with Jesus, so I can get out of here when I die, it is a small version of what God has called us to.

A much better story is God wants to bring us in to being a part of the redeeming part of communities for the health of individuals and the health of communities. It is a boring story. It is not that interesting. The one God calls us to is far more interesting.

When people buy into that and want to live with and in the community, it is much more attractive.

Jacobsen: What is the main barrier to dialogue between Christians and atheists today?

Strelau: That is a good question. One of them will be when followers *forget* the *Bible* is not a science book. It is not trying to prove anything [scientific].

For instance, when the Book of Genesis was written, the Creation account is, mostly, talking to Hebrew people who grew up in Egypt and who believed things about gods in charge of the river, the trees, and so on.

When Moses is explaining that God created all things, that is an affront to everything they learned in Egypt. It is not trying to say, “This is 7 days,” which is fine. That does not matter to me. Some Christians are staunchly against evolution.

Some do not have a problem with it. If Christians focus themselves on the most important aspect of their faith, that Christ was who he said he was. He lived, died, and was resurrected. If that is true, it changes everything. If it is just a story, it is one thing.

Paul goes out of his way in 1 Corinthians 15, where he said I am not the only person saying this. 500 people saw this. People in Jerusalem – ask Mo on the corner. He saw the resurrection of Jesus. If that is a true historical fact, it changes everything.

If I am against evolution, I can have the discussion. But this does not change my faith if I have been a staunch Seventh Day guy. Then all these facts come in all of the sudden. I say, “Oh! Evolution is true.” It does not shake my faith because my faith is based on Jesus Christ.

It is not based on whether the Book of Genesis is literally true. That is one thing. Specifically, with atheists and Christians, Christians, and atheists, need to understand what needs to be held with a closed hand and what can be held with an open hand.

7 days of creation can be held with an open hand. It does not matter to me, whether it is real or not real. When people push on if Jesus is who He said He was, that is where things get hardcore and the truth of our faith.

Jacobsen: In Canada, when people say, “Atheist,” they mean the Christian, Islamic, or the Jewish God, the Abrahamic God, usually.

Strelau: That is what they are rejecting.

Jacobsen: Typically, people are coming from a Christian family background, usually, given the population.

When they say, “I am an atheist,” it becomes shorthand for “I am not a Christian. I am not a Muslim. I am not Jewish.” There will be outliers within the bell curve of definition.

Noam Chomsky retorted in one interview on what he is being asked to deny with the “a-“ prefix, obviously, emphasized on “atheism,” as he is an atheist.

At a minimum, I mean “a-“ for the literalist interpretations of purported holy texts for some theism or a Theity.

Usually, it seems to mean that when I am in conversation with people. Their image is some interpretation of a literalist Judeo-Christian-Islamic Theity – Yahweh, God, or Allah.

What do you find Christians tend to mean when they say, “God” – say 3 traits or types?

Strelau: My goodness, I hope they take their definition from Christian and Jewish scriptures [Laughing], the *Bible*. I do not know if 3 is enough: all-powerful, all-knowing, Jesus was God in human flesh, He is Creator of all things and sustains all things, and so on.

Now, atheists should want this to be true, even if they do not think this is true. God took on human flesh because he loved humanity so much and wanted to have a relationship with him. He is a just and holy God.

But he is also a God; a God with justice and holiness tempered by His love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

So, regardless of how I approach Him, the garbage of how I have blasphemed Him, how I have hurt my fellow man, one text says He is faithful, trustworthy, and will forgive you (I John 1:9).

There is no question when it comes to God. He will forgive you. He will not say, “Nah, forget about it.” The Cross of Jesus says, “I will forgive you.”

If there is any question if our God is just and holy, or if he is loving and caring, all answers are found on the Cross. There, we see the brutality of sin, the ugliness of it, what it deserves, but we also see the love and grace of God.

I think whether someone is a Christian or not; they should want that to be true.

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

Ask Mandisa 4 – Online Spaces, Community, and Decorum

October 15, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Mandisa Thomas is the Founder of Black Nonbelievers, Inc (Twitter & Facebook). One of the, if not the, largest organization for African-American or black nonbelievers or atheists in America. The organization is intended to give secular fellowship, provide nurturance and support for nonbelievers, encourage a sense of pride in irreligion, and promote charity in the non-religious community. I reached out to begin an educational series with one of the, and again if not the, most prominent African-American woman nonbeliever grassroots activists in the United States. Here, we talk about online spaces, community, and decorum.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Happy Monthiversary on the series! [Laughing]

Mandisa Thomas: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: In some prior work, we talked about problem characters in community, atheist and otherwise, who cause trouble. It could attitudinal. It could be behavioural. This could be witting or unwitting on their part.

My question: how do we deal with people who have problem attitudes or behaviours in the community? Do we take a zero tolerance policy? Do we take 3 strikes and you're out policy? And so on.

Thomas: I think that there is a multi-part approach to it. I think there are multiple characteristics and approaches to it when it comes to leaving religion behind. I think it is good to establish boundaries and guidelines from the beginning, so people understand certain behaviours will not be tolerated towards others.

At BN is establish, from the onset, that we are pro-LGBT, pro-community building. We try to stay away from excessive arguing and namecalling and such. If you are anti-social and want to come and argue and debate, that is tolerated very little.

We have established those guidelines from the beginning. We have had to remove people from the online spaces. We have had to allow some people to leave the organization as a result. We try to give them some chances.

We try to talk to those members where there may be an issue. If it continues, by the guidelines of the organization, we will ask someone to manage the process.

Jacobsen: In an online space, I heard of an interesting solution. The notion was the removal of anonymity of identity. In other words, if someone says something, they own it. They have their name identified with it.

So, we know who this person is, what they stand for, and why they believe it. It may reduce the vitriol and aggression that can come out from the knowledge that people can get off the hook because they are anonymous. Is that a thing? Is it already in place?

Thomas: Yes, I know on facebook. We try to; if someone is standing by those words that they say, we will hold them accountable for it. Accountability is very important in trying to help people overcome learned behaviours and characteristics due to indoctrination.

We try to stay away from trying to drag or indoctrinate people who say something in error, which they may not understand. We try to handle that more internally. It is more of a learnable moment for those individuals.

But there are certain individuals simply because they are atheist and relinquished religion; it doesn't mean that they care about anything else. If they want to stay in our space, there is an encouragement to review those behaviours.

If it conflicts with the organization, then we ask them to go elsewhere.

Jacobsen: You mentioned upbringing. Do some behaviours arise more from a religion foundation when people come from an unhealthy upbringing with a literalist interpretation of a holy text?

Thomas: It often stems from a religious upbringing. Also, it is societal. We live in a very patriarchal and sexist, and misogynistic, society. So, a lot of us even though religion is the foundation; it is not the only factor.

Myself growing up, I experienced a lot of adults in my life raising me to be strong and independent as a woman, a female, and a young lady. But I noticed that there are still heavily male-dominated stuff.

There is a tendency to lean on what the men will say. There is a lot of that when people are leaving religion behind. There is a privilege when it comes to being male or even being white and male – white privilege, male privilege.

People may be unaware of it because of upbringing. They may be ignorant of it. We try to challenge people, so they are more aware. That the God concept is not necessarily the only thing they need to let go of.

Jacobsen: There can also be the nuanced areas, the gray areas, here as well. If someone takes on board the idea, which has a lot of validity to it, but they forget the line between assertiveness and aggressiveness, then they post something online.

How do you parse that line? Or two people have differing opinions, both valid. One is asserting, "This is what I believe." The other is aggressing. They are being personal and mean.

Mandisa: I have this phrase, "It's what you say but how you do it." Someone may have all the correct and factual information. But if their delivery is a turnoff, or it is a hindrance, then no one will hear them.

If I see there is a conflict on my page or within my groups, I try to intervene or advise that a more tactful approach would be better. It does not mean that it always has to be gentle or nice. "Tactful" means objective and considering both parties.

It does not mean that since you're saying it; that you're right and they're wrong. Many atheists suffer from the social disorder or a bad case of Foot In Mouth Disease [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Mandisa: There are often times when you want to refrain from saying it. It comes from gauging people and knowing when to engage people and when not to. We do not always have to bombard people with information all the time.

Empathy is something that more of us can benefit from, knowing why someone believes something. It is putting yourself in their shoes. If someone said this to you, how would you like it? If you would not like it, then be considerate of the other person you're talking to.

Many people do not think about things until it happens to them. It is being proactive and thinking about how you would perceive someone simply bombarding information on you. There are things going on in our lives that we are not ready to hear in the moment and could, certainly, wait until another time.

It is us having the capability of thinking and reasoning more, where there is nothing wrong with reasoning how to adjust your approach when necessary.

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

Conversation with Dr. Gleb Tsipursky—Co-Founder, Pro-Truth Pledge & Intentional Insights

October 15, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Gleb Tsipursky is the Co-Founder of the Pro-Truth Pledge and the Co-Founder of Intentional Insights. He is the CEO of Disaster Avoidance Experts, Inc., the bestselling author of The Truth-Seeker's Handbook: A Science-Based Guide and the author of more than 400 articles and 350 guest interviews. Here we talk about his life and views.

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

Dr. Gleb Tsipursky: I was born in Moldova, which is a small country in Eastern Europe. It is well-known as one of the least happy places in the world. So, I am really happy my parents moved to the United States when I was 10. I grew up in New York City.

My parents were different religions. My mother was a Christian. My father was Jewish. Neither were super religious. Moldova was part of the Soviet Union/Soviet Bloc at the time. It was conquered by the Soviet Union in WWII and liberated in 1991.

It wasn't a religious place. It wasn't friendly to religions. I did not grow up religious. I grew up in New York City, a cultural hub of everything. I went to New York University for my undergrad.

Then I got a graduate degree at a couple of places and graduated with a Ph.D. in Behavioural Sciences from UNC-Chapel Hill. I got a job at Ohio State as a professor. Recently, I left the position because of discrimination over my mental illness and pushback against activism with the Pro-Truth Pledge (PTP).

My expertise is in decision-making: how people make decisions, why they make decisions, and how their decisions bad/wrong. Often, their decisions because of poor information: garbage in, garbage out (GIGO) is the famous computer term.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Tsipursky: It is a big problem. That's when I became passionate about figuring out why people believe foolish things and make bad decisions based on foolish things. About 4 years ago, I founded the organization Intentional Insights.

It's a non-profit, which I co-founded with my wife who you already interviewed. In my ample spare time, I do speaking for corporations in decision-making, how to prevent bad decisions. I did not want these ideas to be limited to college students or high paying corporate clients.

That's why I co-founded Intentional Insights with her. About 2-ish years ago, when the primary election was starting in the US, Brexit was happening at the same time. We of the organization's leadership saw the worst decisions were happening in politics.

That's where the most garbage was going in. We put most of our resources to fighting this information in the political spectrum with the PTP. So, that's my origins [Laughing].

Jacobsen: One follow-up question on that: if I may ask, and no need to oblige an answer...

Tsipursky: ...if I don't want to answer, then I won't [Laughing]...

Jacobsen: ...[Laughing] Okay, good, what was the mental illness? What was the form of discrimination?

Tsipursky: The mental illness is anxiety and anxiety adjustment disorder. It is the technical diagnosis that I have. The difficulty is that when I feel pressure and stress. I, often, experience a great deal of fatigue.

My body shuts down. I find it very difficult to function. I feel really overwhelmed. I have a lot of physical symptoms, e.g., my head gets tired, major headache, chest tightness, and other stresses. The worst is the physical fatigue.

That is how my anxiety is embodied. The discrimination is that when I asked for a leave of absence, which I was supposed to be granted quickly for medical reasons. My supervisor pushed back hard against me taking a leave of absence for mental illness.

Then on the next opportunity, he tried to fire me. He said my teaching went from excellent to terrible. The year before, I had a teaching rating, by him, of 4 out of 4. 2 is acceptable. 3 is above expectations. 4 is way above expectations.

The next year, he gave me a 0. It is terrible and way below expectations. He tried to fire me on that basis. He wasn't able to. Because it was really blatant. He was overruled by his superiors. Then over time, he placed black marks in my record; until, he could fire me.

It was 3 months ago [ed. As of the middle of September 2018].

Jacobsen: What are some common mistakes made by people in even the simplest decisions of life?

Tsipursky: Sure. A common mistake that I tend to talk to people about. When you're offered either a chance of straight out \$45 or 50% chance of winning \$100, what would you take, Scott, for example?

Jacobsen: I would take it. I don't know. I would take the \$45.

Tsipursky: There you go. Most people take the \$45. But, of course, 50% of \$100 is equivalent of \$50. Most people fall into the situation throughout their whole lives they make this series of decisions, which results in the loss of 10% of their income, for example.

Let's say, somebody's making \$35,000 per year. That means they are losing \$3,500 per year through bad decisions of the sort you just made.

Each time, we think about this sort of topic. This is a clear, simple example, where people make poor decisions all the time. Another example is relationships. People spend way too much time in a relationship, which is problematic, challenging, and abusive.

It is called sunken costs. People spend lots of money and time, resources, emotions, and so on, and stay in the relationship much longer than they should. It is another example of where people make bad decisions.

Another example is the halo effect. When you like on characteristic of somebody, you tend to like all of their characteristics. Let's say someone comes from the same area of the country as you, you have a similar accent and culture.

You will tend to like the person more and hire them for a job, regardless of how well they can do the job. It is the basis of racism, sexism, LGBTQ discrimination, and so on. It is all based on our evolutionary background.

Some of these things are based on tribalism. We lived in small tribes. We like people perceived as belonging to our tribe. It is a problem. The \$45 vs. \$100, in the tribal and savannah environment, we could not save resources for the future.

It was wiser, from a survival perspective, to avoid losing the \$45 than to take chances at winning larger amounts of money. Now, in our current environment, we can preserve resources for the future.

But we don't think and feel that would intuitively lead us to the right decision. This is the thing discussed at Intentional Insights. It helps people make better decisions in their careers, professional lives, and so on.

We can talk about the PTP later. All the areas of life where we make decisions, which is pretty much the decisions made every day in our lives.

Jacobsen: With respect to some of our evolutionary baggage, these are typically bugs and not features. They amount to the built-in hardware of the central nervous system.

When I think about some of the research around neuroplasticity, how effective are these interventions if done earlier in life when neuroplasticity is a bigger factor in the life course of a brain?

Tsipursky: In terms of neuroplasticity, we have research the brain continues to develop throughout life. Neuroplasticity when younger is not as important as we originally thought.

Jacobsen: Interesting.

Tsipursky: Yes, recent research shows people later in life, they can still make a significant change later in life because brain cells continue to develop. They are certainly most effective when you're younger.

This is a field of research called Rationality. There are two aspects of research. One is intelligence, i.e., ability to solve problems. It is hard to change. It is incredibly hard to change our baseline level of intelligence. Rationality is our ability to overcome our intuitive, inherent, emotional tendencies, which cause us to go in the wrong directions.

We can do this by using our willpower. We can use our knowledge and use our willpower. If you have ever made a decision to go on a diet, and if you choose to not eat sugar, in our evolutionary environment, why are we driven to eat sugar?

Because our evolutionary environment, in the savannah, it was important to get as much sugar as possible to survive. In our current environment, you can get Twinkies [Laughing] anywhere. If you feel yourself resisting the second cookie or the second piece of chocolate cake, that's when you feel the more advanced aspects of the mind, which is feeling the willpower.

It is using willpower and cognition to resist the gut reactions and intuitions.

Jacobsen: Does the phrase willpower amount to a folk psychological placeholder for executive function?

Tsipursky: No, “willpower” is a specific term. There is an executive function. It is your thinking. Your willpower is the ability to implement something going against intuitions. If you look at research by J. Baumeister and others, they use the term “willpower” in research settings.

It is a resource. It is mental energy. We can drain the mental energy. For example, if you have a situation where you had a stressful job interview, you will be much less likely to resist the second piece of chocolate cake.

Because your mental energy, which we call willpower, is drained by that time. You can have an intellectual determination to resist the second piece of chocolate cake. But you will find it much harder if you are drained or low energy or low spoons [Laughing] – in the folk saying.

That one is a placeholder. This is compared to if you are fresh at the start of the day and nothing problematic has happened.

Jacobsen: How much is intelligence heritable?

Tsipursky: Intelligence is very heritable: Intelligence versus Rationality.

Jacobsen: An adult versus a child’s level of heritability.

Tsipursky: I am not sure what you’re asking, child versus adult levels of heritability. Are you talking about nurture versus nature?

Jacobsen: Yes, how do the ranges shift from childhood to adulthood? Because you’re dealing with a more fixed organism – it would seem – as an adult than as a child.

Tsipursky: I don’t have the statistics on intelligence at the top of my mind. It is certainly the case when children change their intelligence. Children’s intelligence can be changed at a much greater rate than the intelligence of adults, a greater percentage.

Whereas rationality, what I am talking about, e.g., emotions, intuitions, choosing not to go with your gut, can be something children and adults change relatively easily, as an adult, you can decide to go on a diet and effectively [Laughing] change your behaviour.

You can choose not to fall for sunken costs, where you throw good money or good emotional resources into a bad relationship. Or you can choose to make the riskier but wiser choice of \$100 versus \$45. That is a learnable skill-set.

Jacobsen: Right. Something also comes to mind. When you’re using the term intelligence, there will be at least three floating definitions around that for people. I don’t know, precisely, what one is at the moment most established or substantiated.

I am thinking of Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory, Tripartite Intelligence of Sternberg, as well as General Intelligence or IQ.

Tsipursky: Here, I am talking about what people generally consider General Intelligence. The ability to solve problems, to address issues and solve problems, using your thought processes, basically. It is a very nacho definition of intelligence. Some people are quicker and more able to solve problems than others.

Jacobsen: Instead of giving someone the WAIS-IV and give them the Raven’s Advanced Progressive Matrices, no matter the country, it would be a consistent cross-cultural measure of what you mean by general intelligence, IQ.

Tsipursky: I don't know enough about the cross-cultural aspects of the matrices. But I anticipate that you're probably right. But I don't have enough expertise to know. Generally, an easy thing is to give people a puzzle to solve in any culture, as long as they don't have a basic familiarity with the puzzle from their cultural setting.

Some people will solve it quicker. Others will take longer. So, that's an example of what I mean by intelligence. It is hard to change. Rationality is relatively easy to change. It is, in many ways, more influential on the ability to succeed in life than intelligence.

Jacobsen: That leads to some questions. People want to know, "How can I become smart?" Of course, the first part they want to know, "How can I do it easily?" Also, begrudgingly, "If I have to, how can I increase it the hard way in the small amount that I can as an adult?"

Tsipursky: The most important thing you can do as an adult is examine your decision-making processes. We are taught in school to math, geography, and history. Those are noble and important topics. We are taught how to make decisions and how to avoid the common errors that lead us into disastrous relationships. That leads us into losing a great deal of our money.

Let's think about all the people who bought their houses in 2007, thinking the housing prices would keep going up [Laughing]. That is a disastrous decision. We know people with high levels of intelligence make disastrous decisions.

For example, there are studies that show people with a higher level of intelligence are, very often, more fixed in their opinions than people of lower intelligence. Why is that? They can rationalize their opinions more.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Tsipursky: This is even if those opinions are not correct. Intelligence can be dangerous in some specific contexts. That is why having rationality, having the ability to figure out why you're making the decisions that you're making – how can you best fit your decisions best with what reality is like and what your goals are.

That is a protective, quick way of increasing – what people would generally refer to as – smartness. Your ability to figure out how to achieve your goals using your cognition, using your thinking, if we use that definition.

I would recommend people do something. On Wikipedia, it has a good section of cognitive biases. It is the decision-making problems made by human beings. Folks can look at that. I wrote called *The Truth-Seeker's Handbook: A Science-Based Guide*.

It is available on Amazon. It talks about, basically, the kinds of decision-making errors of human beings and how this can affect us. It is another resource. In general, Keith Stanovich has a good test on rationality. What is your current rationality type? How to improve it?

There are a number of resources. People can check them online in book format.

Jacobsen: Now, for the PTP, I interviewed Agnes. She is one of the co-founders. As well, you are one of the co-founders. Why is it more important from that point in 2016 forward to have this pledge come out?

Tsipursky: Our society has an information ecosystem that is simply broken. People are getting more and more of their information online. So, the recent poll shows over 67% of adults are getting information on social media.

Many of them are getting lots of information on social media. We know from studies that people who get their information on social media. They believe about 80% of news that is accurate that they hear. They also believe about 75% of the information that is false that they hear.

There is a difference in the rates of false news versus real news. They believe it is only 70%. The difference here is who has a bigger megaphone. It is not whether the news is true or not. We know false news spreads up to 10x as far and fast on Twitter as real news.

We know the top 20 false news stories for the 2016 US election and the 3 months before the election had 8 million engagements on Facebook – comments, like, and shares. Top real news stories only had 7 mill engagements.

This is an incredibly scary world we live in Our democracy is going down the tubes because people are believing falsehoods. Very many people are believing lots and lots and falsehoods. Because they are believing falsehoods, they are making terrible decisions.

Democracy is based on the premises that citizens, ordinary people, can figure out what is the best thing for them to vote on in an election. If they believe falsehoods, they can't make the decision in any reasonable shape or form.

It is terrible for the future of our country, of our countries, of the globe. This is a problem going around in all countries that are democracies right now, not simply the UK or the US, or Canada. It is happening around the world.

Look what is happening in India where lynch mobs have been killing dozens of people because they believe misinformation about child kidnapping, it has a huge, huge impact on our lives. It has a huge impact on our political systems, on our public discourse.

Our democracies are dying because of the situation of misinformation. That's why an important thing we could do right now in the current world we're living in is fighting misinformation in social media, which is where people are getting most of their information.

Jacobsen: Outside of social media, what are some other sources of simply bad information, of which much of the people believe?

Tsipursky: A lot of bad information people are getting is from digital media. Unfortunately, journalism is also very broken right now. Not because traditional journalists are doing something bad, but because anyone can set up a website online and call himself or herself a journalist.

Therefore, the people right now, the mass public, do not know what critical journalism is like, how journalism functions. They are seeing more and more false stories from people claiming to be journalists.

Therefore, journalism is suffering a slow death. That is what is happening to the future of journalism. People are seeing bad information in online formats, which they think are credible. When people on online websites, there was a study by Stanford University on savvy high school students.

It showed when they go on the online sites – I think it was *Slate*, about 80% of them cannot differentiate between an article written by *Slate* versus paid advertised content put on a website by *Slate*. These are high school students.

These are savvy people. There was a recent Ipsos poll. It showed most Canadians believe they can find what is fake or misinformation. So, it was something like 60% of people believe they can spot it. That is not the case.

Most people, according to another Ipsos poll showed, cannot spot fake news or misinformation. There were six pieces of fake news. Less than half of the people could spot the fake pieces. More than half of the people had less than 50% of the results correct based on the poll.

We see the very clear evidence. People are getting fooled left and right on online settings. Online settings are dangerous. It is more credible with traditional, mainstream media. The online venues of mainstream media are fine.

If you have the local newspaper in the town, and if you read the online version of that, it is fine. If you have the cable or radio, or something like that, which is credible and been around for a while, it is likely to be fine.

Because journalists who are working there are still holding to the professional ethical standards. Those are the venues that have more credibility versus new online venues that anybody can set themselves up as a journalist.

Jacobsen: Now, I want to touch on evidence and science, and simply naturalism as an undergirding philosophy for all of that. For instance, we do have people in denial of history. Others in denial of essentially scientific truisms in accordance with the authoritative experts via the consensus of the field.

People who spend their lives in it. I am speaking of climate change denial, Holocaust denial, Young Earth Creationism, the anti-vaccination hysterias with the idea that vaccinations cause autism, anti-GMO-ism, and so on.

These ones have direct impacts on the potential life trajectories of youth who may have gone into successful careers in science. Also, it harms the public, where we can find even children, for instance, in the case of vaccines dying because of bad information.

Tsipursky: Yes, it is terrible.

Jacobsen: The work you do through the two organizations that you co-founded is crucial. Same with similar organizations like the Center for Inquiry.

That work to help the public in terms of getting proper information out, determining what is credible information and not, and getting more established and credible scientific perspectives out to the public, especially the young.

Because the earlier the information is imbibed and critical thinking is taken on as a heuristic for understanding the world, the better over the longer term the decisions they can make and outcomes they can statistically have in life as well.

It is literally, in some cases, a matter of life and death, or just simply, as you noted, potential \$3,500 lost every year in earnings. What are some effective means by which to combat non-scientific views and anti-evidence-based thinking?

Tsipursky: So, this is a very important question. One of the really important things that we talk about. Let me talk about Intentional Insights first and PTP is, of course, part of it. We who are science-minded and try to think critically and rationally communicate badly to people who are not science-minded and who are not thinking critically and rationally. Why is that?

Because we tend to lead with data. We tend to lead with facts. We tend to lead with statistics. We don't lead with what changes people's minds, which is emotions. Emotion, research shows, motivate people who aren't analytic, who think and behave in certain ways.

If we come with facts and statistics, then say, "You're wrong, here's why." They will pose a defensive posture and dismiss what we say. If you bring this to someone who is analytical and a critical thinker, they will say, "Oh, I'm wrong. That's interesting. Tell me why. Let's debate about this. Let's get this going."

Whereas, people who are not analytically minded will feel attacked by these things. The way to approach it; it is not to use facts and statistics right away, but using curiosity. It is figuring out, "Where did you get this information? What makes you believe that way? What causes you to be a climate change denier?" Not phrasing it that way, of course.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Tsipursky: "What closes you to non-belief of the evidence?" Then having an exploratory conversation, your goal is not to flood the person with information and statistics but to explore how their information think process works and to show them more effective ways of thinking.

The underlying thing is not the specific subject. Someone who is an anti-vaxxer will often be a climate change denialist and a young earth creationist, and so on. The way is to change it. It is to change the thinking style of the person.

Helping them to understand more effectively, it is not as sexy as getting someone to not be a climate change denialist, but it is much more effective in the long-term to help that person understand what is credible evidence, where do you get your information, and so on, using curiosity.

That is the first part. How do we communicate with these people? Second, the PTP is the essence of critical thinking and media literacy. If we look at these behaviours, anyone who is checking this out can go to protruthpledge.org.

They can see the behaviours, what they're like. The 12 behaviours that compose the PTP:

Verify: fact-check information to confirm it is true before accepting and sharing it

Balance: share the whole truth, even if some aspects do not support my opinion

Cite: share my sources so that others can verify my information

Clarify: distinguish between my opinion and the facts

Acknowledge: acknowledge when others share true information, even when we disagree otherwise

Reevaluate: reevaluate if my information is challenged, retract it if I cannot verify it

Defend: defend others when they come under attack for sharing true information, even when we disagree otherwise

Align: align my opinions and my actions with true information

Fix: ask people to retract information that reliable sources have disproved even if they are my allies

Educate: compassionately inform those around me to stop using unreliable sources even if these sources support my opinion

Defer: recognize the opinions of experts as more likely to be accurate when the facts are disputed

Celebrate: celebrate those who retract incorrect statements and update their beliefs toward the truth [Ed. This is from <https://www.protruthpledge.org/>.]

Now, a really effective tactic that people who are science-minded, who are analytical, have found is going to the website, taking the pledge themselves, and encouraging those in their lives who are not so analytical and science-minded to take the pledge as well.

Then they can talk about why these are helpful behaviours to follow, to not lose \$3,500 [Laughing] every year and to not make these really bad decisions in relationships, health, and in their politics.

Using these network effects, the psychology of network effects, where you model the behaviour that you think other should show in a way that would benefit them if they show this behaviour.

Jacobsen: Does this relate to the work of Alberta Bandura with Social Cognitive Theory, with the Bobo Doll experiment?

Tsipursky: Tell me about the experiment, I am not sure I am familiar with it.

Jacobsen: If I remember right, he has a child, A. A sits in a room. The experimenter rolls in a television and plays a video. It is either an adult or a child. I forget which in the video with the adult or child beating up the doll in one condition, however much you can.

Then they roll the television out, like the ones we used to get as kids. The experimenter brings in that doll that was shown in the video. I believe the child there has a higher probability to do whatever was done in the video to the doll. It is the conveyance of violence.

Tsipursky: Yes, it is called the framing effects. Where you're creating a framing from a previous recent context, you're more likely to behave in a certain way. That is an aspect of what we're talking about. More influential experiment in what is called network effects.

Where if you engage in pro-social behaviours or generally beneficial behaviours, others, around you, will as well. For example, if you quit smoking, there is a 67% chance of likelihood, according to research, that your spouse will quit smoking.

Jacobsen: That is high.

Tsipursky: There is something like a ~30% chance your close friend will quit smoking. That is the network effects, which I'm talking about. That is a powerful way to impact the social network. The same thing in terms of donations.

You will see websites: if you donate, your friends are 10% more likely to donate. It is network effects.

Jacobsen: So, it is the messaging and the modelling as the two big ones. When you went from Moldova to New York City to go to NYU for your undergraduate, did that worldly set cultures in one place expand your perspective and provide a means by which to view the parochial upbringing everyone has and give you a distance perspective on it?

In a way, it could facilitate critical thought about the peculiarities about one's upbringing. Does being exposed to a lot of different kinds of people from different types of backgrounds with different kinds of belief help with critical thought?

Tsipursky: Yes, it certainly helps with critical thought. The observing of the diversity of perspectives. Many people who grow up in a single culture, a single cultural setting, don't understand that there are other cultural settings that are valid. That is legitimate.

They feel very confused by observing those settings. I have often observed that with my students in college. People who come from a background where they never had exposure to people who are different than them, who live in a small town and then they go to college.

They see many other people who are very different but who are good people and who have morals that are fine. That don't steal from them and beat them up because they don't belong to the same religion or the same part of the country or something like that.

Or they don't have the same skin colour. People become more tolerant of diversity and more introspective and understanding that different people, even if they're different, does not mean that they are worse.

Jacobsen: The phrase is "anti-scientific." But I suspect many people if given the proper tools they would agree with the scientific method. Maybe, it is non-scientific ideas. People with non-scientific ideas such as the ones mentioned before.

Those tend to come from conservative. For instance, Climate change becomes a liberal hoax. I believe according to Conservapedia. Evolution becomes some liberal college conspiracy.

The literal reading of the Book of Genesis in the Bible or counting the genealogies as Bishop James Ussher did, becomes the basis from which to state, "This is the age of the Earth." It was a Thursday in the afternoon in 4,004BCE or something like this.

Somewhat with anti-vax things too. On the progressive-liberal side, there are anti-vaccine views or "anti-vaxxer" views as they're called. There's anti-GMOism based on select pickings of studies.

What are some other false beliefs that liberal-progressive types have akin to the ones traditionalist-conservative types have?

Tsipursky: The anti-vaxxers and the anti-GMOs are major ones. Another one is that George Bush was behind September 11th attack.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Tsipursky: So, there was a state conspiracy. These are the things that you tend to find.

The bigger principle is something that goes against their tribe. There is a certain sub-component of people on the Left who are very much woo-woo, spiritual, Mother Earth, Gaia. That's where the anti-GMO and anti-vaxxer ideas come from.

Another related idea would be things like all-natural foods are better than “artificial” foods. There’s nothing inherently good about hemlock [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing] we can always ask Socrates.

Tsipursky: Yes, exactly.

Jacobsen: The joke there being: Socrates only asked questions.

Tsipursky: Yes, that is going to be another mythological thing. Another is organic things are better than non-organic foods.

Jacobsen: Not true.

Tsipursky: There are some organic foods that will be better. Most of them are going to be not better. For example, some foods, like strawberries, tend to absorb a lot of chemicals through their skin.

If you’re buying strawberries, you might consider buying organic things. Things like apples. You can wash it off. They are not going to absorb chemicals through their skin. It is better for your money to get regular apples.

Whereas, some people say, “You should only eat organic food.” There’s going to be a lot of those things with spiritual Mother Gaia woo-woo in liberal circles that will be quite harmful. You will also have a lot of problems where people do not pay attention to research on economics.

Things like minimum wage. Whereas, a lot of liberals tend to think all efforts to raise a minimum wage will be good for people. Whereas, in certain settings, the raising of the minimum wage will result in substantial job loss for people on the lower income scale.

So, it is actually going to be worse for them.

Jacobsen: Right.

Tsipursky: So, you have to think about where are the diminishing returns on the raising of the minimum wage.

Jacobsen: One example that comes to mind. Or, at least, an example – for which I am having source amnesia – is raising the minimum wage for a cashier or clerk at McDonald’s in a province in Canada or a territory in Canada, or a state in the United States.

Then these cashiers, the business says, “Let’s get rid of them and replace them with machines to do their jobs because they’re cheaper and run 24/7.”

Tsipursky: Yes, at some point, it becomes more financially profitable for McDonald’s to replace cashiers with machines. At a certain point, it becomes, in the not too distant future, cheaper for truck companies to replace truck drivers with self-driving robots.

All of these are things that we need to think about when we are making economic policy that sounds like it is more economically just, or sounds more economically just, but will hurt the people we are trying help.

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

Chat with Howard Burman – Secretary, Board of Directors, Atheist Alliance International

October 15, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Howard Burman is the Secretary in the Board of Directors for Atheist Alliance International. He earned a Ph.D. in Dramatic Literature and Theatre History. He is a Fulbright Scholar. He was a believer in early life. He became a doubter and, eventually, a committed atheist in college. Also, he founded Santa Cruz atheists. Here we briefly talk about his life and work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start from the top, in terms of the family background in religion, what was it?

Howard Burman: My mother attended a community church—essentially Congregational protestant. My father didn't attend except maybe Christmas eve. I went to Sunday School there and eventually became President of the Christian Endeavor youth group.

Jacobsen: How was religion or irreligion incorporated into personal early life?

Burman: I can't recall ever discussing religion with either parent—or anything remotely spiritual for that matter. Church/Sunday School took up an hour each Sunday. Other than that, nada.

Jacobsen: Were there pivotal moments in the development of your philosophical view of the world and your place in it?

Burman: No, nothing specific. While in College my doubts about religion turned into complete denial of anything supernatural—ghosts and gods included.

Jacobsen: When did you find the atheist community?

Burman: Some years back I joined a local Brights Meetup. From there I looked into other non-believing groups. Then I founded Atheists of Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties.

Jacobsen: How did the discovery of this community lead to knowing more about Atheist Alliance International?

Burman: It didn't directly. I was web surfing when I came across the old AAI website. It looked promising.

Jacobsen: How did you earn the position of Secretary? What tasks and responsibilities come along with the position?

Burman: I applied for a Board position and after an interview, was offered a couple of possible Board positions. Secretary seemed to be the best fit. I handle the traditional secretary duties—record keeping, etc. as well as act as liaison to various other organizations such as the UN, and the Council of Europe. I also spearheaded the re-writing of our bylaws which have completely restructured the organization, and oversaw the creation of the AAI video which is on our website and on YouTube.

Jacobsen: What are some of the exciting new initiatives, campaigns, and projects of the affiliates ongoing for Atheist Alliance International in 2018/19?

Burman: The biggest initiative is the creation of an Universal Declaration of Atheist Rights. We anticipate it will make a major contribution to the lives of all atheists.

Jacobsen: For those who wish to become involved, how do you recommend that they do it?

Burman: Visit our website to see what we are about. There are ample opportunities to volunteer.

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

Interview with Elisabeth Mathes – Affiliates Director, Board of Directors, Atheist Alliance International

October 19, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Elisabeth Mathes is the Affiliates Director in the Board of Directors for Atheist Alliance International. She studied psychology, communication science, and public relations at the University of Vienna. She lives in Canada with her husband and three children, where they run a logging company.

She is an outspoken atheist, anti-theist, and secular humanist. Mathes interest is in the Bible, critical thinking, the history of Christianity, logic, and the sciences. She holds fast to the separation of church and state.

In addition, she is responsible for book collection in Canada for the 'Book Drive for the World' project. She can be contacted on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/elimitez>.

Here we briefly talk about his life and work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start from the top, in terms of the family background in religion, what was it?

Elisabeth Mathes: Well, my parents are Protestant as most of my extended family members, so I was baptized Protestant as well.

Religion has never been a topic my parents talked much about, and they are also no staunch believers in the bible being 'the true word of the one and only true God' (as far as I know, they have never even read the bible from cover to cover), at least they never brought it up.

Nevertheless, I and my two younger sisters had to go to church with them almost every Sunday and they were also good friends with the pastor and his wife.

I used to find church to be extremely boring and I couldn't stand the hard wooden benches I had to sit on for more than one hour, and so I was very glad that I was finally free to decide to go to church or not after I had received the protestant Confirmation at the age of fourteen.

When I was a kid, I also attended Sunday school, where we sang Christian songs and read Christian cartoon books among other things, which I pretty much enjoyed.

All in all, I would say that despite my family considering themselves as Christian, going to church on a regular basis and participating in several church activities, religion did not play a major role in our family life.

Jacobsen: How was religion or irreligion incorporated into personal early life?

Mathes: I recall that my grandparents, especially my grandmother, who shared the house with us, talked about God on various occasions and would even threaten me and my sisters with hell when we were disobedient or caught lying.

Although I have never believed in the personal God of Christianity and never took the bible stories seriously, my grandmother's repeated mentions of 'God will do this, God will do that if

you do this/ don't do that' definitely had an impact on me. It took me decades to shake off the feeling that I am constantly under surveillance by an invisible being.

Jacobsen: Were there pivotal moments in the development of your philosophical view of the world and your place in it?

Mathes: Yes, and both had to do with the books I read. At the age of fifteen, I read 'The Power Of Your Subconscious Mind' from Joseph Murphy, which opened up a new, everything-is-possible view of the world, but it also opened my mind to accept and believe unsubstantiated claims and magical thinking.

In the following years, I would become increasingly interested and engaged in esoteric concepts and New-Age teachings such as crystal healing, Tarot, Numerology, Astrology, guardian angels, Reiki, Aura, reincarnation, karma, telepathy and many more. I believed that everything that happens, happens for a reason and according to the 'great wise plan of the universe'.

I trained my mind to always spot the good and positive side of everything, always looking for the hidden meaning, the mysterious purpose of everything. And no matter how bad or meaningless something actually was, I was always able to see the good of it.

Many years later, my thinking had become so irrational and delusional, that I was convinced to be able to communicate with extraterrestrial, spiritually and technologically high advanced beings from the Plejades, Sirius and Arcturus via telepathy.

I read a lot of articles and books about ETs and the various conspiracy theories that claim a worldwide cover-up of the fact that ETs have been on and around the earth for millennia.

I felt so very special because I knew things the majority of the people don't know. At around the same time I used to participate in discussions about the ET- and UFO-topic in a popular German Mystery-forum.

This was the place where I first came in contact with the 'bad skeptics', who not only never became tired to tell me that I'm wrong but also why I'm wrong and who patiently and incessantly pointed me to the actual facts. I started to doubt my worldview thanks to these rational people.

But what finally made the cut was Carl Sagan's book 'The Demon Haunted World'. It started a process of almost two years of diligent research of every single belief about the world and my place in it that I held.

I wanted to find out the truth, the only truth and nothing but the truth and what is really there, so I also had to be brutally honest with myself and I eventually admitted that I had been wrong for a very long time.

Finally, I had turned from a gullible, ignorant and scientifically illiterate believer into a logically thinking, scientifically literate person who values reason and facts.

Jacobsen: When did you find the atheist community?

Mathes: During my quest to find the truth, especially while researching the God-question in more depth, I inevitably stumbled across the atheist community at some point.

One person definitely played a remarkable role, and without her, I may have never dealt with religion and the arguments for and against a god or gods in the first place. She was my neighbour five years ago and a very faithful evangelical Christian.

I think, the first time I have learned that an atheist community exists at all, was when I was looking for compelling arguments against the Christian God and the bible being his word.

Jacobsen: How did the discovery of this community lead to knowing more about Atheist Alliance International?

Mathes: I have been on social media for several years and came across AAI's posts. I then read their website for more information and eventually signed up as a member, because their goals aligned with mine.

After Dominic Omenai, the initiator of the Book Drive Around the World in Nigeria, had told me that he contacted AAI to ask for support for his library, and because I felt that wanted to do more than just posting memes on Facebook and participate in discussions in atheist groups, I decided to become an active part of them. I had one of these famous 'This is it!' moments.

Jacobsen: How did you earn the position of Affiliates Director? What tasks and responsibilities come along with the position?

Mathes: In a quite unspectacular way: I was asked, if I would like to apply for one of the open board member-positions, applied for the Affiliate Director position and was approved by the board.

I see it as my most important responsibility to maintain a thorough and updated record of the atheist/humanist organizations and groups around the world. Other tasks are the recruitment of new affiliate members, contacting existing members and supporting their organization and respective projects and campaigns.

Jacobsen: What are some of the exciting new initiatives, campaigns, and projects of the affiliates ongoing for Atheist Alliance International in 2018/19?

Mathes: One of the exciting projects AAI currently supports is the Nigerian campaign: The State Governor of Akwa Ibom State is promoting a project to build a mega-church and contributing state funding.

Our affiliate, the Atheist Society of Nigeria, are trying to demand the cessation of this project and the contributions made by the government to be publicly disclosed via a court ruling.

Another campaign worth mentioning is the Universal Declaration of Atheist Rights: We will work with our affiliates and with atheist/humanist groups around the world to draft a simple but clear declaration of atheist rights—a catalog of the specific rights and freedoms necessary to ensure the principle of equality in matters related to non-belief.

The Declaration will then be taken to the United Nations and hopefully be tabled as a proposed UN resolution.

One of the long-term projects that AAI supports is the Book Drive Around the World: In cooperation with our affiliates, volunteers and book donors, we aim to establish as many libraries as possible in highly religious countries, where atheism, critical thinking and scientific knowledge are being opposed and actively suppressed.

The first library of its kind with books on atheism, science and critical thinking is going to be established in Nigeria. The second one will soon be started in Ghana.

Jacobsen: For those who wish to become involved, how do you recommend that they do it?

Mathes: There are several ways to become involved. Individuals have the option to join AAI as a member, volunteer or a board member. We are always looking for active support, and every atheist, who wants to contribute their knowledge and skills is more than welcome to join us.

I would recommend to read the 'Get Involved' section on our website to see what would be the best fit and simply fill out and send in the application form <https://www.atheistalliance.org/aai-membership/>.

Atheist/Humanist Organizations are also very welcome to join us as an affiliate member by filling out the application form: <https://www.atheistalliance.org/affiliates/>.

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

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