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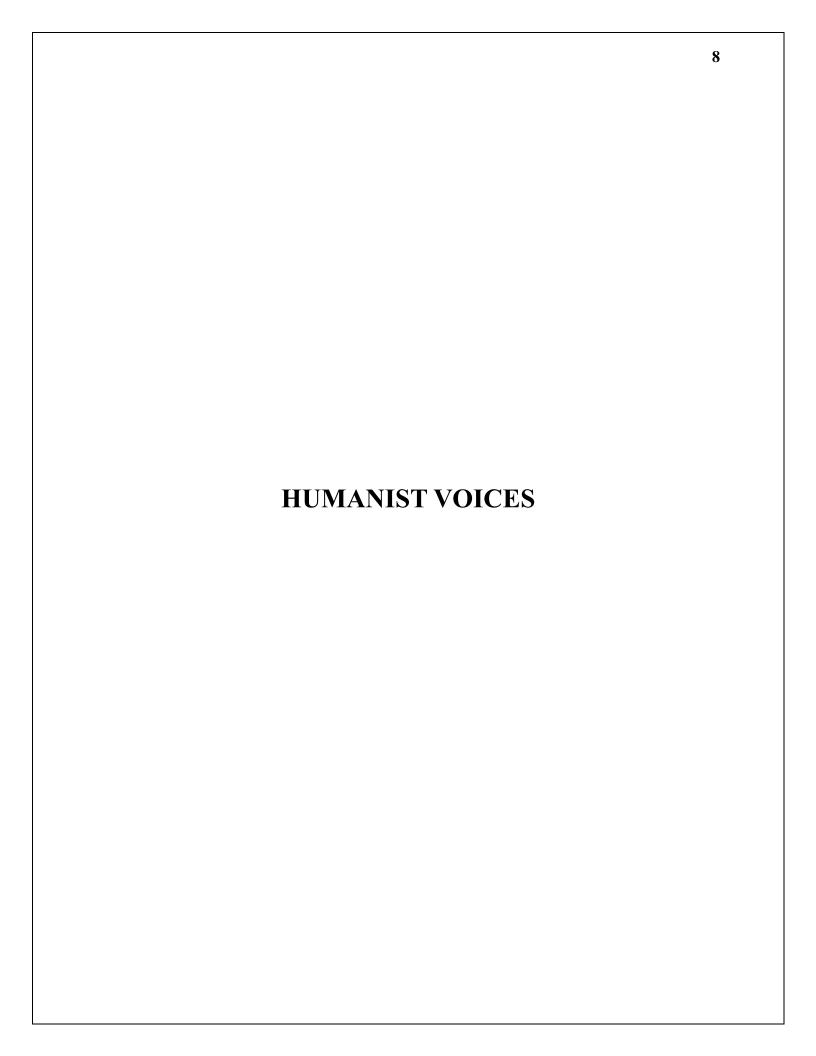
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Scott



Germany Legalizes Same-Sex Marriage

June 30, 2017

Anya Overmann and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Good news in light of Pride Month!

Lawmakers in Germany voted on Friday, June 30th to legalize same-sex marriage. Germany is the 14th country in Europe to pass a measure for marriage equality. The 13 other European countries to have passed marriage equality laws are:

Denmark
Finland
France
Iceland
Ireland
Luxembourg
Netherlands
Norway
Portugal
Spain
Sweden
United Kingdom

Belgium

The Netherlands was the first to pass same-sex marriage equality in 2001. Finland was the last one before Germany to approve same sex marriage or marriage equality. This comes in the wake of a free vote provided by Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was against same-sex marriage.

The vote was 393–226, for-against, which is pretty much a supermajority. The vote was for "marriage for everybody." Merkel's Christian Democrat, Jan-Marco Luczak, said, "It would be absurd to try and protect marriage by preventing people to marry." Germany's first same-sex marriages are set to be celebrated early this coming fall.

This is a significant development given Germany's role in the EU and in the world in general. It is both an economic power and a cultural one too. With such a decision, it can be predicted that other European nations will follow suit.

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An Interview with Chris Debo — Meeting Facilitator, SMART Recovery

August 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have an association with SMART Recovery. What is SMART Recovery? What is your relation with it as an entity?

Chris Debo: I am a meeting facilitator with SMART Recovery. I facilitate a weekly meeting in Northern California. SMART Recovery is a science-based recovery program that provides proven, practical tools and techniques for dealing with the challenges a life in recovery presents. It is based on the psychological modalities of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), as well as other modalities.

Jacobsen: Why is the organization important?

Debo: SMART Recovery is important for a number of reasons. It brings the teachings of Albert Ellis and others to people in recovery. It provides a secular, proven approach to managing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in order to improve one's outlook on life, reducing the need to resort to maladaptive behaviors and substance use for "relief" from the stressors of life.

Jacobsen: What are some notable and touching experiences in working with them?

Debo: Well, in being a meeting facilitator, I've had some notable experiences with attendees. I've had people thank me for providing them with useful tools to deal with difficult situations. These are tools that we don't learn growing up in this society.

I recall in particular one woman who thanked me for helping her to realize how her harmful eating habits are a learned behavior, a way to cope, and that she could replace them with healthy alternatives. I've also witnessed people in meetings finally "get it," understand what their addictive substance or behavior is for them: a coping mechanism. The penny drops and a look of understanding beams from their faces. Those types of events are extremely gratifying.

Jacobsen: How does your own background tie into them? What lead you to SMART Recovery, and the absolutely wonderful and magnanimous Shari Allwood?

Debo: I myself suffered from many years of substance abuse, primarily alcohol. Booze was my only mechanism for coping with life, good and bad. It worked every single time in a predictable way. Finally, I realized that I needed to make a complete change in my life. Having had little success with a traditional 12-Step approach, I searched online for alternatives to traditional 12-Step programs and came across SMART Recovery. This discovery changed my life.

After being sober for a time, I decided that I should give back in some way to the community, so I took SMART Recovery's Facilitator Training and became a facilitator. This experience has been incredibly gratifying for me. I could help others see that there is a way out of their addictive, and destructive, behaviors, while strengthening my own knowledge and use of SMART Recovery's program.

Jacobsen: With your current position (if applicable, what is it...), what are your tasks and responsibilities?

Debo: At the moment, I am training to start a new career. At 45, it is a challenge. Overall, though, my goal in life is to achieve healthy balance across all aspects of life. I have a chance to do this now that I am solidly in recovery. SMART also has shown me how to prioritize long-term benefits over short-term satisfactions.

Jacobsen: How does a science-based and non-faith-based — with or without religion as a component — treatment work compared to faith, religiously oriented, treatments?

Debo: This program offers practical solutions. Change your thoughts to change your emotions. Take responsibility for your future. Take charge and own your recovery and your life. Don't rely solely on others or a "higher power" to save you from yourself. Live for today and the future, not in the past. I've never seen faith save someone from addictive behavior, at least not in the long run.

Having had experience with AA, I can tell you that these programs are based on taking your power away from you, taking your responsibility away from you. You are forced to look backward at all your negative behavior and consequences in order to scare you from repeating those mistakes. It is based in shame. You don't learn anything practical to help you in the day-to-day. Your higher power will save you. Nope. I stayed sober for five years, but I was miserable every single day. With SMART Recovery, I can be content and occasionally even happy. Hah.

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

Debo: I would not be living the life I am living without SMART Recovery. I will be forever grateful to the organization for helping me to learn what I need to know to live a healthy and fulfilling life.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Chris.

Debo: My pleasure! Thank you for giving more exposure to SMART Recovery!

A Compendium of Crimes and Criminals of the Eastern Orthodox Church — Part 1

August 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I doubt this is comprehensive, nor is it representative of the positives of the church either; it is reportage on the reports from the news. I didn't see a compendium, so decided to write one.

Another purpose for this catalog is because of the lack of news play about the Eastern Orthodox Church compared to the Roman Catholic Church, and its trial of Galileo, and torture, hunting of witches, and the Inquisition, and the child sexual abuse scandal, even Bruno, of course.

But what about the second largest Christian sect in the world boasting over 300 million members? In many of these cases, I believe the secular and ordinary religious stand in solidarity, moral alignment. So let's begin:

According to the *Greek Reporter*, a priest, <u>Adam Metropoulos</u>, was convicted of sexual abuse on four counts. Forgive the direct language and emotional tone in the latter portions of this sentence, but the sexual abuse equates to rape, Metropoulos raped.

His sentencing, circa, April 27, totals 12 years in prison. Ann Murray, the Superior Court Justice, stated that she also sentenced him to "3 years of probation after he gets out of prison" and would have to "register with the Main Sex Offender Registry for the rest of his life."

Murray noted the impacts on the victims was "great" or significant. At the trial, a former altar boy from St. George Greek Orthodox Church testified. The former altar boy was 23-years-old, and reported being sexually assaulted by Murray.

This was during sleep overs at the Metropoulos's home. The Greek Report noted that "police found pornographic images in the offender's computer," which portrayed "a family member that he would secretly film in the nude, as well as other photographs of different people, some of them children."

On the day of the arrest, the Greek orthodox diocese in Maine made a suspension of Metropoulos. In Metropoulos's defense, he stated that he never had intercourse with the teenager, but that he touched the alter boy, at the time, in an inappropriate way while he was asleep.

Interview with Jamie Del Rosario Martinez

August 7, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family and surrounding culture like growing up? I know memories can fade and become distorted. However, there are themes, which can help set the groundwork for our discussion here today.

Jamie De Rosario Martinez: I was a product of a broken family, eldest of 4 siblings, I was a battered child being beaten from small to no reasons at all getting punishments even if it was not my fault, I have a womanizer and a gambler dad and a Martyr mother and community full of Iglesia Ni Cristo (INC) members, all my relatives from my mother side are INC members and so do we. I was forced to stop from school at the age of 14 so I could work and bring my siblings to school since my father doesn't want to take that responsibility I started working as entertainer in japan at the age of 15 using fake passport etc. to look like 19yo. To earn money only to be confiscated by my father and leave me with only 500 Pesos (\$10) this routine continued until my father permanently left us to go with another woman.

Jacobsen: When did you begin to question God?

Jamie: When I was 16 I was excommunicated from INC and I found out that my cousin reported to INC that I was working as entertainer in Japan. And they judged me without even asking my side they accused me of doing things that is against the will of their god they accused me of selling my flesh to Japanese men which made me really mad and made me realize that they are so judgmental, I worked abroad to be able to send food for my family and to be able to send my siblings to school.

Jacobsen: How did you find HAPI? What is its main goal? Why is it important to build irreligious communities, especially in hyper religious countries?

Jamie: I was in a Reproductive health law Rally with a friend in Baguio when I met this group of young guys from HAPI they were so kind and gentlemen, during lunch time our leader told us to go back to the bus and have lunch but me and my friend went to the cr first and when we get back to the bus there are no more pack lunch left for us to eat having only enough money to go back home me and my friend went out the bust to by biscuits while we are falling in line some HAPI members saw us and asked if we already had our lunch and we said No because there are no more lunch for us in our bus, surprisingly they offered me and my friend a free lunch it was like WOW how kind these guys are to a totally stranger like us then I asked them do HAPI has FB page or group that I could join and the rest is history

HAPIs main goal for me is to spread humanity to all regardless of beneficiaries' religion specially kids they promote humanity and critical thinking based on my personal observation.

Currently I am not yet aware of the importance of building Irreligious community as I myself I still under transformation from religious to non religious.

Jacobsen: What are some of your more notable initiatives with HAPI in the past and the present?

Jamie: I have a monthly feeding for 200 kids through HAPI, Self Sufficient because of the HAPI Farm, I also have HAPI Merchandise for fund raising.

Jacobsen: How are things for the religiously unaffiliated, socially and legally, and politically, in the Philippines?

Jamie: Socially; still need to hide due to stigma as a non-believer.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Jamie.

An Interview with Wade King — President, SSA of Clemson

August 7, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Wade King: I grew up in Greenwood, South Carolina, a medium-sized town surrounded by even smaller towns. Most of my family came from more rural areas of the country, such as Estes Park, Colorado. Most would say my family is the typical rural, white, southern, Christian family. As far as religion goes, my family practiced an old-school form of Southern Baptism in the in the 1990s and 2000s. However, my immediate family broke away due to issues such as gay marriage and race, and joined more laid-back churches such as NewSpring. I kept away from church most of my life, using my education as an excuse. It helped in the long run, as I became the first in my family to go to a 4-year university.

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

King: I started becoming skeptical at around the age of seven, stopped going to church by middle school, and became an agnostic atheist in high school. My schools and community lacked any sort of secular community, so most of my experiences were internal. The whole process began due to my introduction into social issues and communities that these issues affected. By elementary and middle school, I was well aware of LGBT+ issues, abortion, secularism in schools, etc. High school science classes really cemented my beliefs.

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

King: As president of SSAC, I perform most, if not all, administrative duties for the group. I also share responsibility for all other aspects of the organization, including financial organization, social media, outreach, and event participation with my fellow officers. I do all this in order to help build a community of secularists and people who are accepting of secular values.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

King: I have always thought that the area lacked a strong secular community. Community is important for sharing ideas, networking, and other's personal wellness. A community can more easily bring change than a fragmented set of small groups. This is my higher level of fulfillment I get from this. It also doesn't hurt to make some friends in the process. All of our members have built some form of friendship with other members and even participate in other secular groups in the upstate.

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

King: I hate to sound cliché, but balance is the key. You need to be able to plan well, but also be flexible enough to change with the tides of the community. You need to be able to be kind to those who do not share your beliefs, but don't let them run over you or others. You need to have some degree of focus, such as my focus on community-building, but also be able to focus on other

aspects of secularism, such as science, social issues, government, activism, etc. I have missed many opportunities because I wasn't willing to add new events to our semester schedule; or because I wasn't confident enough to hold an extended conversation with certain people; or because I focused too much on building a community and didn't get enough guest speakers to talk about science and government.

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

King: Clemson University, being one of the larger and more advanced public universities in the south, has had its fair share of incidents. Most are the typical religious imagery around campus, professors enforcing religious beliefs onto students, and non-student religious groups using school funds. However, the most significant recent and well-covered issue on campus involved our football team's head coach, Dabo Swinney. The first incident dates back to before I even attended Clemson. The Freedom from Religion Foundation accused Swinney of promoting Christianity to his players by holding events with religious themes or venues and by allowing the team's chaplain to proselytize the players. Considering Swinney's position as a state employee, this was a huge problem for the FFRF, who had help from SSAC and other local groups. In the long run, Swinney suffered few consequences, given his success in the football team's performance the past few years, and secular groups suffered a new stigma of aggressiveness and a lack of respect for important personnel on campus.

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

King: For individual secularists, community and social activism are perhaps the most needed aspects in their lives. While students are generally accepting of secular individuals, most large groups on campus have religious ties or activities that exclude secularists. I would very much like to think we provide a strong community for them. However, with secular issues branching into other communities, especially LGBT+ and racial justice groups, many hope to see social progress come to Clemson's campus. Outreach is currently SSAC's largest area of need. While our group's ties remain strong with each other and with other secular groups in the area, we are still small. As mentioned earlier, we still suffer from a stigma that even prevents other secularists from joining.

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

King: I very much like to think I am making the correct decision in focusing on building a community for secularists. I feel much of it has been accomplished, so the next few months or semester will have more of a focus on science, social issues, and intellectual discussion and debate. However, the main focus will still be community since we do not want to lose our new, stronger connections. The next few years will be up to new officers and members as our current members graduate or pursue other goals. I am hopeful that our new focus will once again be activism as new secular and related issues arise in our world.

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

King: Our biggest concern has to be the chapel that is planned to be built on campus. Luckily it has faced tough criticism over the past couple of years, but it has started flying under the radar due to the university's willingness to be accommodating towards non-Christians in the building of this chapel. SSAC's faculty advisor is one of the heads of the program overseeing its construction and assures us that it is much more of a inter-faith center. SSAC plans to have extended

discussions and dialogue about this in order to cement our general positions on the matter. Currently, the consensus is that the chapel should be given a better label to avoid religious connotations and/or favoritism and to encourage acceptance and community.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

King: Faculty and administrative favoritism for religious activities and organizations always remain in our watchful eye. Long-time faculty are especially tricky to deal with, and it doesn't help that they have formed their own organization for this purpose.

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

King: SSAC is the only group exclusively dealing with these issues, as our campus lacks initiative on these issues. Usually we must collaborate with other local secular groups, such as Piedmont Humanists and Foothills Humanists, and with other activist groups, such as Clemson's Sexuality and Gender Alliance and FEM Club.

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

King: Our most recent and favorite discussions have centered around science and sociology of religion. Quantum physics and evolutionary biology are common topics given that some of our members are graduate students in physics and biology. While none of us are majors in sociology or religion, many of us have related hobbies and we have had discussions on cult behavior and the pros and cons of religion in society.

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

King: If your campus has any sort of online portal for student organizations, that is the best place to start. Clemson has a Tiger Prowl every year for organizations to recruit new students and members. Attending these sort of events makes it easy to meet leaders personally and build a relationship from there. Maintaining these relationships should be easy as long as the group's leadership remains serious about SSA and its values.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

King: I have already said plenty, but I don't think I can stress this enough: SSA is not the only resource young secularists have to participate in activism. Other local groups and national organizations exist. Getting involved with them is just as important. This is why I value community so much. Getting to know others who agree (or even disagree) with you is a powerful tool for social change. Use it frequently, and use it wisely. Also, thank you for this opportunity, Scott.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Wade.

An Interview with Dan Bowman — SMART Recovery Facilitator, SMART Recovery

August 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Note: Dan is giving this interview as a SMART Recovery facilitator and not as a spokesman for the Veterans Administration.*

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have an association with SMART Recovery. What is SMART Recovery? What is your relation with it as an entity?

Dan Bowman: SMART, Self Management And Recovery Training is a not-for-profit, face-to-face and on-line, science/evidence based, Peer and Professionally led self-help group for those with addiction issues. It's a self-empowering, dynamic and very interactive method of recovery, and by recovery, I mean the ability to be recovered. If I chose, I could go on and live my life, free from the emotional baggage of my past. I feel no need to attend meetings today for my own recovery, however I do so as a trained SMART Recovery facilitator to help others, because I believe in the SMART Recovery 4-point program.

Our 4-Point Program®

The SMART Recovery 4-Point Program offers tools and techniques for each program point:

- 1: Building and Maintaining Motivation
- 2: Coping with Urges
- 3: Managing Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviors
- 4: Living a Balanced Life

Jacobsen: Why is the organization important?

Bowman: Choice, plain and simple. There are many pathways to recovery, SMART being my choice, is only one of those pathways. There's a notable quote by Anne Fletcher "If nothing else, we know that people have better treatment outcomes when they're offered choices and not coerced to accept one thing or another." For many, many years I was told there was only one path to recovery, coerced if you will and when I could not do it that way, I not only felt like a failure. I acted like a failure.

Jacobsen: What are some notable and touching experiences in working with them?

Bowman: The "lightbulb moment" when I'm facilitating a meeting and I see the light come on. New attendees to SMART Recovery are hearing things they have never heard before. "No sponsor?" "I'm not powerless?" "I don't need to go to meetings the rest of my life?" "I don't need a Higher Power to recover?" "I don't need to label myself an alcoholic or an addict?" "Blasphemy you say!" I really don't get the last one very often, however on occasion, we have a naysayer or two and we continue to welcome them, those that do not cause disruption to our groups. All opinions are welcome to be voiced and heard, we are a non-judgemental, non-confrontational group. We do however use science, facts and rational thought as our arbitrators.

Jacobsen: How does your own background tie into them? What lead you to SMART Recovery, and the absolutely wonderful and magnanimous Shari Allwood?

Bowman: Shari really is wonderful. I hope to one day obtain her mystic level of email cheeriness, not quite sure how she does it, but I always feel so cheery after reading her emails.

I struggled with alcohol, irrational thinking and emotional problems for about 30 years before I discovered SMART Recovery. I was one of those led to believe there was only one way to recover. I did not believe in what I was being told to practice in other groups. I tried so very hard to thoroughly follow their path, but continued to fail. I was introduced to SMART Recovery while in treatment at the St. Louis VA hospital, through SMART's Mid-America Regional Representative, Virginia Frank, another wonderful person in SMART Recovery's vast arsenal and a highly valued tutor and mentor of mine. I had my "Lightbulb Moment" while there. I still drank, but each time it was a shorter and less intense relapse/slip. I learned in SMART that I did not have start from square one after I slipped or relapse, I could restart from where I stopped my slide, I had not lost sober days. I eventually became a trained facilitator and have over three years now without alcohol playing any part in my daily life.

Jacobsen: What is your main initiative or goal now in personal and professional life?

Bowman: As far as my personal life, I'm living the dream so to speak. I have purpose, I have a good relationship with my wonderful family and co-workers. Have everything I need. My life, for the first time is drama free and unencumbered, I pretty much do what I want, when I want. A personal goal I have is to help SMART Recovery continue to rapidly expand, especially here in the St. Louis Metro region.

I am currently retired. I do volunteer Thirty plus hours a week at the St Louis VA as a Certified Missouri Peer Specialist (CMPS) I'm on track to be hired soon at the VA as a CMPS/Whole Healthcare Coach.

Jacobsen: With your current position (if applicable, what is it...), what are your tasks and responsibilities?

Bowman: As CMPSs we role model successful recovery to other Veterans and VA staff. So often the staff does not see the fruits of their work, that is, to see Veterans in successful recovery instead of crisis mode, day after day. We also assist and teach Veterans to advocate for themselves and how to navigate the system. I currently facilitate mental health and recovery groups on the acute psych inpatient ward and in the substance use disorder treatment program. I also facilitate two SMART Recovery meetings a week, located at the St. Louis VA.

Jacobsen: How does a science-based and non-faith-based — with or without religion as a component — treatment work compared to faith, religiously oriented, treatments?

Bowman: Scott, I don't feel qualified to comment on other types of recovery program. I will say this, SMART's evidence based tools are what I was looking for when I was trying to use a faith based program. I really had a problem with the concept of "Powerlessness" and "Higher Power." In SMART, we believe the concept of a Higher Power is a personal and private matter. Certainly, we do not tell people they can't use a Higher Power, it's just not part of our 4 Point program. We are not powerless, we are powerful.

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

Bowman: If anyone reading this is still having problems with addiction, whether it be from substances, like drugs and alcohol or behaviors, like gambling or sex, and have not found success with the method they are using, please, please search out an alternative. There are so many

pathways to recovery. Do not let any one person or group convine you, their way is the only "true" way. That's just not factual, Scott.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Dan.

Bowman: Thank you Scott, for helping spread the word about SMART Recovery.

An Interview with Kevin Bolling — Executive Director, Secular Student Alliance — Session 1

August 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Kevin and I are making this an ongoing series to discuss secularism at large, especially for the youth. Stay tuned!

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So what was the family background, culture, geography, religion, irreligion?

Kevin Bolling: Well, that's a long question. My family was a military family, so my father was in the navy. I didn't have like most people the home town. I don't. It was wherever we lived. So we moved around a lot when I was young. Probably not as much as other military families. Most military families move every three years, we did it about every four and five years, but I've lived up and down the east coast.

We lived in Puerto Rico where my brother was born and lived in Spain for four years, mainly during my high school. And then at that point, we came back to the United States and I did college and my master's in the southeast, including around Everson. Growing up, I've come from a very Catholic based family. I remember my grandparents going to church every single day, so my family was very involved in the Catholic church,

My mother was extremely involved in all the stuff she did. I was an altar boy for years. So I always think my mother was very outspoken with the church as far as with regard to their treatment and inequality for women within the church. I think that very much, my brother and I definitely learned that from her to speak out and that equality should be the part for everybody. So we can see how that lesson is played out through our lives. We've gotten involved with different things, and so I think a lot of it comes from my mother.

Jacobsen: I think that's a fabulous foundation. And the personal background, so by that I mean, I meant more specifically, the pivotal moments or even the seminal moments in your trajectory to a more secular outlook. You hinted at some of those before.

Bolling: For me, of course, I think growing up in a strong religious background, my mother's approach to religion was very different, probably very different from the rest of my family. So she really applied us more to evaluate what the church was telling us.

So sermons with stories on how to do better. What was in the bible was, these would not be her words, but were dated and old. They were written at the time they were written and they were for that time. So, you had to look at them and just remember how things were these days. You didn't take the stories in the bible at face value, or the sermon at face value; you had to translate them to today's world and what you would do with them now, but they were stories on what was supposed to be good or how you were supposed to be a good person.

So I don't think she intended it. But she very much allowed us to question that, and we examined in different ways. She didn't take it as truth, an absolute truth. My aunt believes the Bible is absolute truth, even today she believes that men physically have one less rib than women because,

of course, God took the rib from Adam to make Eve. I was like you can just count and that is really easy to disprove. But she doesn't.

She is very hard in having that belief system and that is how she runs her life. I'm fortunate that my family does not. So, I think out of another pivotal moment for me was I think my very slow and gradual process to coming out as gay. I finally came out in graduate school. And so you know, I hadn't thought about this before from my father where the family is more important than religion. So, of course, I'm going to accept you. You are more important to me than what the Bible says.

For my family, that was a very easy transition. I think it's where their priorities were and family things are first. So I think we always had that; we had that nurturing environment from our family, but also, it was okay to question the things that were sometimes presented as absolute. So there was a strong belief, I think one from my father's background as far as the military, that service to the country was always important.

So we were always doing things when we were young about being involved in volunteering and those sorts of things. Because a large part of what we did was growing up on naval bases, I think we were introduced to a lot of different cultures and then living outside of the United States is a very different perspective of a very Americentric world. All you hear about is the United States and that's the only thing that's important.

Being outside the United States, you see things differently in the world and recognize that's not true, where it's not always the same experience in the United States. So I think all of those things were pivotal. I've always remembered volunteering with something. I continued that on through my personal life, so you were always giving back in a way and that was just important for us to do.

Personally, it gives me a lot of personal satisfaction, so I've always done things that I have continued. I do remember history class in college and talking about world religion, and coming up with the Catholic church, which is, of course, the paradigm I associated with at the time. The professor really going in and talking about the church more as a corporation and why we're doing all these things historically to make itself survive. So it gave me a very different perspective on the church and allowed me to question communion, and just the different practices of the church.

I do remember my first stances against religion: "I'm not going to confession anymore." And then coming out gay, the church does not have a great relationship, especially the Catholic church for a long time, and not much is better, of not being very accepting of LGBT people. So there were times when unfortunately I never went through this, but you weren't allowed to take communion, and being very negative. So I separated from the church a little bit more, and then I don't believe in God anymore. I do remember having conversations with people; I don't think there was anything specific that was a definite moment for me.

It was generalization, "That's how I feel and I'm okay with that."

Conversation with Oscar Gabriel Pineda

August 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When did you find yourself explicitly irreligious?

Oscar Gabriel Pineda: I can't really point out the exact moment when I stopped believing in God. It wasn't an epiphany, an emotional catharsis or a tragic moment, like it happens to other people. To me, it was a process that took a couple of years.

My childhood wasn't traditional, in the sense that I grew up being exposed to two very different and quite opposite worldviews. On one side, my mother and her family are evangelical Christians; on the other side my grandfather was a distinguished scientist in his field, who, like my father, was an atheist.

I heard magical and religious explanations for things every day, since for different reasons I spent a lot of time at my maternal grandparents' house. Even though I did believe the overall story of Christianity when I was a kid, it never really took root in my mind or became a part of who I was.

In part, because at the same time that I heard the Christian version of things, I also heard the scientific one. My maternal great grandmother took the time to teach me how to read when I was 3 years old; I owe my love of reading to her.

My father and my grandfather always encouraged me to question everything that I read or heard, and to look for natural explanations for things I didn't know; I owe my love of learning about science and my skepticism to them.

Armed with these tools, I kept finding things that just didn't make any sense. If the world was created by an all-powerful God, who created that God? If that God had the power to rid the world of evil, why didn't he do it?

When I asked these sorts of questions, I was told to go look for answers in the Bible, which contains the Absolute Truth about everything. I did, and far from finding answers I ended up with even more questions, the God that I found in those pages was violent, jealous, vindictive, misogynistic and cruel.

He didn't seem to know a lot about cosmology, mathematics of zoology. Weird stuff, considering what millions of people around the world believe. The years passed and I progressively distanced myself from religion and all those things. I watched Carl Sagan's Cosmos on TV.

There, he showed me that there is an endless source of awe and meaning to be found in science and philosophy; a sort of naturalistic spirituality that didn't require me to believe very improbable things about the Universe to make me feel a part of something greater than myself. I never told anyone about this because I knew I would hurt my family's feelings.

But then I started to pay attention to the horrible things that religion, belief in God, in the supernatural, in eternal life after death, could inspire in people. Yes, there's a good side to God and religion, but there's also a dark one, and it isn't mild. Not just at that precise moment, but throughout history.

That finally inspired me to speak my mind about all of these things and to start being open about my atheism. To paraphrase Christopher Hitchens, I took the risk of thinking for myself and found much more happiness, beauty and wisdom that way.

Jacobsen: What seem like common moments of people losing their religion, to you?

Pineda: Talking to many different people who lost their faith, I find that nearly everyone has the same feelings that something is just not right with the whole God story, although what triggers those feelings is different from person to person.

Whether it's reading those awful passages in the Bible, or seeing how people use religion as a cover for their own hatred, or just learning a bit about science, I have found that nearly all people who were once believers share the same feelings of uneasiness and intellectual struggles when they start realizing that what they have been taught as the truth, isn't so pretty or so true after all.

And when this happens, people can feel bad and "dirty" and guilty, and even think that they are alone. That they are bad for thinking this way, and that they should just keep quiet. A few days ago we asked people on our social networks to tell us why they walked away from religion and it was a formidable experience.

Many, many people opened up and some of them told their stories publicly for the very first time. Losing your religious beliefs can be a painful process, but it doesn't have to be.

Jacobsen: How does the landscape of the country dictate the morals and norms regarding sex and language?

Pineda: Well, even though Guatemala is a secular State, 87% of Guatemalans are Christian. About half of those are Catholic and the other half practice some form of Protestantism, the largest one being evangelical Christianity.

They are also deeply conservative when it comes to social issues, especially human sexuality, and many groups who identify as "pro-life" group together and lobby in Congress and the media to try to prevent anything resembling equality for the LGBT community, evidence based sex-education, or a smart conversation about what the best way to reduce abortion rates, childhood pregnancy and maternal mortality from ever happening.

They say that they want abortion rates to go down, and most reasonable people agree with them. But then, instead of having an honest conversation about how we can achieve that, they resort to absurd distortions and outright lies.

Just this Tuesday we (Humanistas Guatemala) were invited to a radio talk-show to discuss the billboard campaign and a woman called in to voice her opinion about it. She said that it was a clear attempt to impose the "LGBT agenda" on everyone and described our science-based approach to sex-education as "books that teach 3 year-old children to explore their body."

That is not only dishonest, it is patently cruel, considering what women and children are suffering from, stemming from the fact that a large percentage of Guatemalans, especially those in poor, rural areas, have no access to information about sex, family planning or even contraceptives.

Jacobsen: What have been effective tools in the fight against superstition?

Pineda: The antidote to superstition is always scientific knowledge, but that by itself is not enough. The way that scientific knowledge is delivered taking into account how people come to believe things and how those beliefs connect with deep personal emotions is very important.

If you go out and tell people that astrology is bullshit and that only idiots believe in homeopathy or prayer, because of all of these scientific reasons, you will probably only offend them and maybe even reinforce their beliefs.

If, instead, you take an empathetic approach, admit that everyone can be fooled into believing weird things, and show people that there are real negative consequences caused by those beliefs, you have a much higher chance of changing their mind.

Jacobsen: If you could take a single exemplar, who would it be? Why this person?

Pineda: Carl Sagan. He was a very important part of my journey towards skepticism and one of the first personal heroes I had growing up. In his books and in his Cosmos series I found the answers to a lot of the questions I had about the Universe, and learned the importance of applying science, philosophy and critical thinking to my everyday life.

I also found a profound naturalistic spirituality in his ideas. The fact that we are not the special creation of some omnipotent being, but that we are a collection of star stuff that evolved over billions of years in this pale blue dot circling an average star in an average galaxy, and how that makes us a way for the Universe to understand itself gives me a sense of awe and wonder that has stayed with me all my life.

Jacobsen: Any recommended books for those wanting to learn more about irreligiosity?

Pineda: Asides from the genre classics 'Why I'm not a Christian' by Bertrand Russell, 'The God Delusion' by Richard Dawkins and 'god is not Great' by Christopher Hitchens, I strongly recommend books that deal with irreligion in a more positive, indirect way.

'Cosmos' by Carl Sagan is a wonderful book that shows the richness of the scientific worldview and its capacity to provide feelings of awe that are widely believed to be only found in religion. Once you are done with 'Cosmos' you will probably want to go ahead and read all of his other books.

'The Varieties of Scientific Experience' is probably a great follow-up. Christopher Hitchens compiled a great collection of essays, excerpts and poetry from many different authors from different places and different times called 'The Portable Atheist.'

It features writings by people as diverse as Lucretius, Omar Khayyám, Hume, Darwin, Freud, Spinoza, Hobbes and Einstein. Finally, Richard Carrier wrote a splendid book called 'Sense and Goodness Without God' that builds an entire naturalistic philosophical system from scratch.

Jacobsen: What have been some of your main contributions to the irreligious community?

Pineda: I wrote about the subjects of irreligion, humanism, science, philosophy and criticisms of religion for an online journal some years ago. Now, I am Vice President of Humanistas Guatemala, a legally established organization in Guatemala that defends the separation of Church and State, and the rights of non-believers and people whose rights are infringed upon by fundamentalist religion.

Jacobsen: What are the main impediments to the free practice of living a life they choose themselves — for the irreligious?

Pineda: Mainly, the prejudice against being a non-believer, which was recently confirmed by a paper in Nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-017-

<u>0151?ncid=edlinkushpmg00000313</u>), in combination with States that privilege religion in the public sphere and therefore impact the cultural landscape.

Jacobsen: What are your near-future plans?

Pineda: For the moment, we are focusing on our billboard and social media campaign to reach out to non-believers and believers who share humanist values. That is going great so far. Lots of people have contacted us to express their gratitude and their support, and in the next months we will work hard to provide the things they've been looking for, community-wise, in an organization like ours. We also want to strengthen our position defending the separation of Church and State, which is one on the main issues affecting Guatemalans, not only non-believers.

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

An Interview with Humanistas Guatemala

August 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are the big issues for humanists in Guatemala?

Humanistas Guatemala: Wow, where to begin? There are so many issues, ranging from intolerance towards any type of diversity or anything that resembles a departure from the status quo, to overt religious extremism that seeks to impose "Christian values" everywhere. Many people who are open about their lack of belief in God, are often shunned and told that they cannot be ethical or moral, and as a result many choose to lie about their convictions. Religious leaders and public officials do not respect the principle of separation of Church and State, and are often attempting to pass discriminatory laws based on the Bible and "Christian values." Just in the last two years, members of Congress tried to force Bible lessons into every private and public school in the country, to forbid evidence based sex-ed, to make every single instance of abortion a criminal offence, and to make sure that the LGBT community is never granted equal rights. There's lots of work to be done.

Jacobsen: How do you reach out to the general public? How can people reach Humanistas Guatemala?

Humanistas Guatemala: Our work is mainly done through social media, but we also host events throughout the year where people can attend and know that we exist. We've had two year-round book clubs in the largest bookstore in the city and we will host a third one in 2018. We recently started a new series of events with the support of IHEU under the 'Cafe Humaniste' banner, but with our own local touch called 'ideas & chelas' (ideas & beers). People interested in our work and joining us can do so through our website, on our sign-up form: http://www.humanistasguatemala.org/sumate

Also, we are in the middle of a large-scale media campaign using social networks and billboards placed around Guatemala City that has allowed us to reach thousands and thousands of people. This has caused quite a stir with fundamentalist and conservative groups, even though our message is not directed at criticizing organized religion, but to inform atheists, agnostics, freethinkers and open-minded believers that can identify with secular humanist values that they are not alone. ("You don't need a god or a religion to be a good person. If you know this, you are not alone.")

Jacobsen: In terms of the social and educational initiatives, what are you pursuing now?

Humanistas Guatemala: Our work is done around 4 main areas: promoting secular humanism as an alternative to religion, promoting scientific knowledge and critical thinking as a way of knowing what is true about the world, defending the separation of Church and State, and defending sexual and reproductive rights — especially, the rights of the LGBT community and women who are often bullied and discriminated against because of fundamentalist religion.

Jacobsen: What have been some honest failures and real successes in the domain of outreach and education to the public about humanism, and the formal irreligious?

Humanistas Guatemala: Criticizing religion and presenting secular alternatives like humanism in a country that is deeply religious is very hard. One is often met with outright hostility and all

sorts of accusations that prevent the arguments from getting through. Nobody wants to hear that they've spent their lives believing a very big lie, and that's what many prominent atheist individuals and organizations have been telling people for a long time. When we started out, we took our cues from them and preached to the choir for a few years. We realized this, and stopped focusing on the negative aspects of religion and started talking about the positive elements that secular humanism has to offer. People are much more receptive this way.

Jacobsen: Who are the prominent humanists in Guatemala that deserve more international exposure?

Humanistas Guatemala: Even though we know many of them, atheism, freethinking and humanism are only starting to gain ground here in Guatemala and being openly secular is still a taboo. Many people choose to stay in the closet to avoid problems, but we are starting to change that. That's one of the aims of our billboard and social media campaign. Hopefully I can give you some names the next time we talk.

Jacobsen: What are the general demographics of Humanistas Guatemala?

Humanistas Guatemala: Our board and our staff, as well as most of our members are young men and women between the ages of 20 and 35.

Jacobsen: What are some of the fun social activities that the organization hosts for Guatemalan humanists?

Humanistas Guatemala: In the past we've hosted book clubs, and several events with invited speakers on important subjects such as science, philosophy, art, and the relationship between religion and societal ills such as sexism, homophobia and the obstruction of sexual education. We plan to continue with this, under the 'ideas & chelas' concept that we mentioned above, and many more that we will be revealing in the near future.

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for the global humanist movement in the coming years, even decades?

Humanistas Guatemala: We would love to see humanism continue to grow and reach more and more people all over the globe, and to have an impact in the way people think and take important decisions that affect all of us. In a world where global warming is a huge issue, and where people are still being discriminated against because of their race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation and religious affiliation, the humanist approach of empathy and critical thinking is more important than ever.

An Interview with Patricia Flanagan — President, Secular Student Fellowship

August 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Patricia Flanagan: I grew up in the Ozarks near Branson MO, but most of my family is originally from California. My parents are divorced and I spent my childhood living with my mother. I am a first generation college student. My Mom worked mostly in the Branson hospitality industry, and my Dad did mechanics. I grew up going to church. I went to Catholic Sunday school when I was very young, but started attending a Methodist church around fourth grade. Church and Jesus was always a big part of my life. My Mom was more spiritual than religious, but she has a strong belief in Jesus and wanted me to grow up in a Church community. I spent a lot of time involved in youth groups in middle school and early high school.

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

Flanagan: I first started to question my beliefs in my Junior year of high school. Learning in history class about all of the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity was very disturbing for me. It became apparent to me that people around me whom I deeply respected (teachers, friends) did not share my beliefs, but were still good and happy people. This was in conflict with what I was taught about non-believers. I was also starting to develop more progressive views about social justice which also seemed to be in conflict with my beliefs. There was not one huge event that changed my mind about Christianity and the supernatural, but one day I said to myself, "Jesus is like Santa Clause, I used to need to believe in him, but now I don't." From that moment I have never looked back. Lingering beliefs in the supernatural have dissipated and I focus on building community for people like me who have transitioned out of them as well. I fell in love with secular humanism and developed a passion for secular community building when I met Bart Campolo, the Secular Humanist Chaplain at University of Southern California my Freshman year of college. I was a part of the secular community there, and Bart helped mentor me to be able to build a similar community when I transferred to Truman.

Jacobsen: You are the president of the Secular Student Fellowship. What tasks and responsibilities come with the position? Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Flanagan: Our group is still in it's infancy. As president I am basically responsible for figuring out what we want to do at meeting and what events we want to have. I lay out what needs to be done and delegate tasks as needed. The most difficult thing to do was find like minded people in the beginning to get the group started. I made a post on FB saying that I would be at a certain place on campus at a particular time every Tuesday for people who wanted to talk about being secular. I found a couple of other people and we have all worked together to get the group off the ground. I have to admit that I pursue this mostly for selfish reasons. I wanted a community of people who have similar worldviews and experiences, so I worked to establish one. I also do this out of a deep sense of empathy and compassion for the difficulty and loneliness associated with transitioning out of religion. I want to be there for the people who feel isolated and alone.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Flanagan: Most of the fulfillment comes from the amazing friends I have made. We all share similar values and have a blast working together to create a safe and open environment for secular people to express themselves on campus.

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

Flanagan: I have not participated a lot in secularist activism. At this point our group is mostly focused on building community. We have found that it can sometimes be hard to do both because there are still broadly varying opinions of what activism and for what cause is appropriate. If simply existing as a group of people banded together by humanist values and naturalistic worldview is activism, then my advice is to kill them with kindness. Its hard for people to hold onto their belief that you are an amoral, meaningless, empty person when you are smiling and handing them a cookie! Also, reach out and connect with other groups on campus who share your values and vision for the world.

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

Flanagan: I don't know of any on campus. I'm sure they existed at one point, but in all of the activities of this club we have felt supported on campus, even by religious organizations.

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

Flanagan: I can't speak for all secularists, but I believe community is important. We are in the bible belt and while most people on campus are supportive, all bets are off when we step out into the real world. Many secularists I have talked to have to hide their true beliefs from their families and pretend to be religious. This can be taxing and it helps to have a group of people who allow you to truly be yourself.

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

Flanagan: We talk about a large variety of things. Many of our members have interest in other religions, so we have talked about that. We have only been having official meetings for one semester, so a lot of our time is devoted to talking about what we would like to do with the club in the future.

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

Flanagan: Simply by being an active member of the community. I think the biggest challenge for us is getting out there and showing people that atheists and secular humanists etc are just normal people. Each new member brings their own special skills and talents which allow us to reach out and interact with our community in different ways.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Flanagan: I think building communities is one of the most important things we can do as secular people. There are so many people who hold onto religion not out of true belief, but out of a desire to have a community in which they feel connected and integrated. If we can recreate that without violent ethnocentric narratives and logic denying supernaturalism, then those people will have a place to go. Parents who don't believe but don't what their child to believe "nothing" will be able

to find similar ways to pass down values without all the extra stuff. I really love the idea of secular churches like KC Oasis which I think are an awesome way to create secular communities beyond just on college campuses.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Patricia.

An Interview with Romeo de Bellefroid — Secretary General, IHEYO

August 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Recently, you were elected as the secretary general of IHEYO. Why did you run for the position?

Romeo de Bellefroid: Near the end of my second year in university, a friend and I stumbled into a discussion of a lesser-known humanist student organization that advocated for Free Inquiry. Unlike anywhere else, Socratic ignorance was acknowledged and self-questioning was seen as the most moral thing you could do. Two-and-a-half years later, I finished my mandate as President of that association and I was looking for something else to do. I still wanted to work for purposes I believe in. I think no teenager or young adult should be faced with the choice of either submitting to an external moral authority or being left on your own without anyone or anything to help you figure out how you should deal with life. That is, where you live you are not completely shunned, treated like a pariah or even persecuted when I got the opportunity to help people like me all over the world in circumstances often much dire than mine, I did not hesitate for long.

Jacobsen: What are you plans for the first 4 months of the organization, or the latter parts of 2017?

de Bellefroid: As soon as I figure out the tools I'm given, I will set up the elections that are due for our Asia Working Group. The amendments voted in this General Assembly will also need to be implemented. But maybe most importantly I have been told that we may have a window of opportunity for a conference somewhere in Europe. It would be awesome if we managed to set that up!

Jacobsen: What would you really love to see get off the ground for 2018?

de Bellefroid: The membership merge of IHEYO with IHEU opens up an untapped potential of young humanists that we want to reach. I will make sure we cooperate with IHEU and encourage local organizations to direct their youth to us. It is going to be a long process, but it is definitely worth it. I also think we should keep on supporting active local organizations that are very active and motivated, such as those in Central and South America. Then I give importance to being connected with all kinds of other youth organizations with different purposes. As an umbrella organization, I think it is important for us to know what kinds of external networks and opportunities exist, and can be used, for our members. And last but not least, I am curious as to what the other members of IHEYO and our Executive Committee have in mind, as most of them have hung around for longer than I did.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on the super-minority demographics of the humanist population, what are some difficulties associated with that in terms of getting the word out about humanists and humanism?

de Bellefroid: I think one of the bigger problems is that humanism is yet another droplet in a pond of "–isms." Moreover, core parts of the humanist worldview are, in part, encapsulated in terms that are sometimes better known. Individualism, secularism, freethought, skepticism, those are all terms I have vaguely encountered elsewhere. But it was not until I joined a humanist

student association that I began to form a coherent view of what is meant by humanism. It is also the case that humanism expresses itself in different forms. In many countries, humanism is much defined by the struggle to emancipate from religious doctrine. However, in countries with little religious pressure or in already humanist communities, it needs to offer something more.

Jacobsen: What does it take to be a humanist? Can one be a deist, pantheist, and so on — non-supernaturalist, humanist? I ask because the typical association is atheist, agnostic, freethinker, and so on.

de Bellefroid: I consider you a humanist in its broadest definition if you hold reason and morality to be derived from human considerations, aspirations, and needs, and not any authoritative and external source such as gods or holy scriptures. Sapere aude! But how humanism relates to different theisms is a bit fuzzy, people can combine certain theistic beliefs (such as pantheism) with humanism in the definition I gave. Though in practice, most humanists tend to seek morality without ever resorting to supernatural beings.

Jacobsen: What can humanists learn from each others' honest failures and successes?

de Bellefroid: Well, a lot. We can learn from the attempts of excluding people in the name of humanism or using a particular description of humanism to call certain people less human, which is what Heidegger did in favor of the Nazis. But we can also learn from attempts to use a common feeling of humanity to strive for emancipation, and there I think of the fight against racial segregation in places like South Africa or the US. I think looking back at the latter is especially important, as the current struggles for social emancipation are often framed as a war between identities. This often ignores the heterogeneity of society and, for example, the fact that there are also vulnerable people in dominant groups.

Jacobsen: How else can we bring together the youth humanists around the world?

de Bellefroid: I think we can act as a global hub for today's interconnected youth. We form a community of values based on the largest common denominator possible. That is why I don't think we should keep to ourselves but be aware of everything that is done in terms of youth activism, consultation or any other kinds of projects involving youth internationally. I also think that many possibilities that the Internet and social media have opened will unfold in the future. Finally, I think we can be a rallying point for humanists around the world simply by being where it is important to be and offering humanists a positive project for the future. The advances of sciences, from AI, the study of consciousness, the exploration of space, to something very concrete like self-driving cars, all those new subjects have ethical ramifications for society. There is a need for large-scale ethical discussions on what this means for humans in human terms, which is what we stand for.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Romeo.

An Interview with Karma Alvey — Internal Relation Officer, SSA at Southeast Missouri State University

August 14, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Karma Alvey: I was raised in rural Southern Illinois in a highly Christian, Conservative, and Poverty Stricken area. My family went to a Presbyterian church for a while, and we occasionally attended church with a grandparent, but usually our family was never incorporated in a church. My mother is a Christian with liberal-leaning values, my father and brothers are unaffiliated, and I am an agnostic atheist. Both of my parents hold Master's Degrees, and I am currently earning a Bachelor's. We are Irish and Scottish descent and all speak English as a first language.

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

Alvey: I actually used to pray a lot and was really involved in religion as an older child and younger teen. I was "saved" at church camp in 4th grade, went to church for a while in middle school, but moved away from organized religion in early high school. Some negative feelings about the church, their attitudes, and their actions arose and I realized I didn't agree with any of it. I would still pray regularly, nearly every night, but somewhere in late high school, I realized that I wasn't really doing it out of belief, but more out of fear and some twisted obligation. Questions arose and I started to understand that I didn't know if there was a God (or gods). Further down the line, I started to doubt the existence of a "higher power." I met a guy in Marching Band my first semester of college who introduced me to the Secular Student Alliance on our campus, and I've been a member ever since.

Jacobsen: Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Alvey: As a secular person, I see so many ways other secular individuals can benefit from having a safe place to discuss anything — from schoolwork to activism to how to tell your parents you don't believe in God. It's also just generally good to be generally good, in my opinion, and by raising money for the local animal shelter or picking up trash at the park as a group, we're doing good and challenging people's preconceived notions that atheists can't be moral. Our activism is also important to religious people, too. By advocating for the separation of church and state and freedom of (and from) religion, we are working to ensure no one is pressured or forced to adopt one religion or another. We want everyone to be able to practice what they believe freely, individually, and consensually, whether that be Daoism, Catholicism, Atheism or any number of other religions.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Alvey: Personally, it's really important to me to be able to help people. I'm not Iron Man, and I know I'll never save New York from a massive alien invasion, but saving one person means saving a little piece of the world. It's an earth-shattering feeling to know that you've made a difference for someone — that you changed someone's life, and that they can change the lives of others moving forward.

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

Alvey: Get out there! If you establish yourself on campus and put a familiar friendly face to the "scary atheist agenda," people will be more likely to ask questions rather than judge you immediately. Of course there will always be antagonists as well, which brings me to the next tip — don't get discouraged. For every person who calls you a name, there is a person who thinks, "How brave of them to stand up for their beliefs." For every person who tears down your flyer, there's a person who is thankful to have a secular presence on campus. The payout is far greater than the pain.

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

Alvey: I can't think of too many, thankfully. As long as I've been here, I've only seen our president continue to strive for inclusivity and respect. One instance that comes up repeatedly, however, is the prayer before the annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Dinner on campus every year. It's been suggested the prayer be replaced with a moment of silence, but no news on that so far. We live in a heavily religious area so I'm honestly surprised (and proud) that institutional religiosity isn't a recurring problem.

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

Alvey: Support from others. One hundred percent. Our greatest need is for positive support for religious freedom from all faiths. Respect is a big one as well. When we advertise, we see a lot of negative backlash — torn down flyers, water on our chalk drawings, etc. It's important to respect other's advertisements in any capacity, especially when it comes to something as personal and defining as religion or non-belief.

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

Alvey: Right now, it's hard to be anything in America other than a straight, white, Christian man. Considering the regresses our federal government is making concerning religious freedom and the separation of church and state, I am afraid it will become increasingly hard to be secular (or Muslim or Jewish or anything other than Christian) openly on a college campus.

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

Alvey: Betsy DeVos. Hands down. She could be the end of the secular movement on campuses if she's not kept in check. I'm also quite worried about Missouri's own state government — especially Eric Greitens. We've already seen some steps back with women's rights and other issues that hinge on his religion, so there's no telling how far he will insert his religion into state affairs. Overall, I feel that the current state and federal administration has encouraged a hostile environment to several groups of people — secular people included.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Alvey: The long-standing stereotypes about atheists are the biggest threat to our organization. Just general misinformation and negative attitudes make it hard to keep a group enthusiastic and strong. Things have slowly gotten better over the last few decades, but there's still a lot of work to do before it's generally socially acceptable to be secular, especially in Southeast Missouri.

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

Alvey: Here there's not much. We have the Secular Student Alliance, obviously, and we've done some interfaith events to educate the student body. There's Campus Democrats, — they do a lot of political activities, and we are trying to partner with them for some events, but have had no luck just yet. We take part in any event we can to try and educate and stay active, like involvement fairs, charity benefits, and organization showcases.

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

Alvey: We meet weekly and talk about everything you could imagine — fears, the Satanic Temple, food, television — you name it, we've had a discussion about it! We hosted an interfaith panel last semester that we hope to continue, and we host a lot of social events, like hikes and game nights. The only thing we try to steer away from is politics so nonbelievers from every walk of life feel comfortable sitting in on our meetings.

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

Alvey: On our particular campus, we meet at the same time every week (Thursdays at 7 if anyone is reading). Go to meetings, volunteer to lead a discussion or present on a topic, table with your group, or join them for dinner or a camping trip. Follow them on Facebook (to plug us again, we're on there as SEMO Secular Student Alliance), and join any Facebook groups or group chats they provide! It's the best way to follow what's going on and check for last minute changes.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Alvey: I was thrilled to be a part of this interview. Visibility is vital, so thank you for the opportunity to speak about our movement.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Karma.

Charlottesville to Kuala Lumpur

August 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation (IHEYO) stands in solidarity with the International Humanist and Ethical Union and the American Humanist Association against the white supremacists and Neo-Nazis in Charlottesville.

IHEYO also stands in solidarity with the Kuala Lumpur consulate for Atheist Republic.

In light of the calls for hunting down the atheists for being public and having a dinner in an Islamically-run society, and the Neo-Nazi and white supremacist gatherings in Charlottesville, the humanist and ethical culture movement does have implied positions.

On the hunting down of atheists, or nonbelievers, even "infidels" by some people's lights, this goes against fundamental principles of freedom of belief and association, especially without fear to life and livelihood after a dinner photo.

On the Charlottesville gathering of Neo-Nazis and white supremacists, IHEYO stands against any ethnic chauvinism and supremacy, and Nazi political positions, especially when brought together in movements hoping for a fantasy through ethnic nationalism.

These recent events reinstantiate the need for universalist values inherent in humanism to be further implemented in societies, especially those wracked by theological domination over state and law, and the death threats for those simply believing as they wish.

It is also a means from which to reflect on other societies' positions who are not overtly theocratic, but by culture, custom, and norms are tacitly theocratic with religion holding high privileges.

These types of events will likely occur in the future. We must be prepared to act in solidarity against these atrocious actions with coalitions, whether explicit or not, to protect against inflaming of old hatreds and the rising from the ashes of extremist positions: religious, ethnic, or political.

An Interview with Uttam Niraula — Board Member, IHEU & SOCH Nepal

August 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Uttam Niraula: Not at all. My father was a famous Hindu priest of my village. He passed away when I was four years. My mom is also a very religious. I was pro-Hindu child due to their influence. I use to chant Hindu mantras and believed in massive influence of 'god' in my lilfe during my childhood.

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

Niraula: I have a school friend named Ms. Bishwamuna Shah. We were disconnected after graduation of secondary school. In 2001 we encountered in a busy place of Kathmandu. Obviously we had a long chat about childhood and school days. She was involved in Humanist community and she asked me to visit once. I used that opportunity to understand what Humanist idea is. Finally, I liked the idea of being free and fearless to design my own future. Slowly, I felt like, I am getting rid of many imaginary sins in life.

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

Niraula: I think religion is a designed prejudice to impose superstitions so that one can highly benefit from overall society. So, Being a Humanist for me is living an ethical life of my own choice.

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

Niraula: Nepali society is Hindu dominated. They equally respect Buddhism in general. Interestingly the Atheist community exists from the foundtion of its civilization let's say 3000 years ago. Guru Brihaspati, Gautam Buddha, Guru Kapil were questioned the existence of god. Unfortunetely religious people did not want their ideology wide spread in society. But, at least small sect of Buddhist community preserved the atheist ideology.

Later, we initiated a movement to identify like minded people in the society while we were about to form SOCH Nepal. Hardly 7 people were ready to tell they are Humanist. Later we started conducting college seminars, discussion programs, publications. Slowly, many people started coming to US.

Now, Humanist community is getting bigger. More then two thousand people are organized in SOCH family. Interestingly, some religious groups express their solidarity to us. So, I take the expansion Humanist community as an assets to Nepal for long run.

Jacobsen: You are a board member of IHEU. You joined in a "competitive election." What was the feeling being elected? Why did you run?

Niraula: Hehe. I am a very calm person. I think many time before taking any decision. I worked for IHEYO in different positions before I joined IHEU. When it was about to end my tenure in

IHEYO, I was not feeling good in the back of my mind giving up my role in wider Humanist network. Then I decided try IHEU.

I was not sure if IHEU GA will trust me as a board member. Later I realized that whole IHEU GA is positive about my candidature. After I was elected! There is no word to explain my happiness. But I tried not to be so excited among all.

Jacobsen: What tasks and responsibilities come with this board position?

Niraula: As a board member, my main responsibility is to contribute for correct policy decision because IHEU is the earning of universally devoted liberalists, freedom fighters, human rights defenders and scientists. I feel very lucky to be in the board of such organization.

I am mostly focusing myself utilize my knowledge on untouchability in South Asian society and campaign against this grave concern as a board member of IHEU.

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

Niraula: I think the definition of Humanism itself is enough to understand what Humanism is. It promotes the universal human rights and gives equal value to each Human in the world regardless of difference.

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

Niraula: We are living in the age of Information, Communication Technology (ICT). ICT is the outcome of science. Generally, ICT is used by young generation in the world. They understand the logic of science. Also, young generation is the future of the world. So, we should focus on bringing more young minded people to explore the message worldwide.

We have to be very careful on those parents who are poisoning their child with superstitions. Teachers are also equally responsible for shaping the mind of youth and child. So, we need to reach parents and teachers to make our coming future very welcoming to respect each other.

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

Niraula: Only the selfish person does not understand the damaging effects of religion in the world. They are selfish because they do any unethical act in present in hunger of living in heaven after death. Religion is the biggest lie to create inequality and anger against other society. This creates the foundation for hate and crime. Hate and crime are the base for social damage. See, religion has killed more people than in world wars.

I think each intelligent citizen of the world can understand the damaging effective of religion. Probably, that is the reason more and more people are now emancipating from religion and becoming non-religious. I think the wider population should organize themselves and influence in policy and action throughout the world to promote secular, free and respectful society.

Jacobsen: What are some of the big future initiatives for you?

Niraula: I am not focusing on creating a worldwide campaign against untouchability in South Asian Society. Only in South Asia more than 205 million people are living the worst life as 'untouchables' each day. Their politicians and even UN has not done enough to protect them. I want to use IHEU's platform to raise their voice in UN and in other universal bodies.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Niraula: There are three kind of people in the world; religious, silent Humanists and active Humanists. Active Humanists are doing their best to make the world livable. That is not enough. So, we need to make silent Humanists awake to participate in building the world.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time today, Uttam, that was fun, my friend.

Niraula: Thank you Jacobsen for sending my voice internationally. What an honor!

In Celebration of Dr. Leo Igwe

August 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Leo Igwe has been awarded the Distinguished Services to Humanism Award by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). We have written a number of articles together in a question and answer format.

It was a pleasant surprise to him, apparently (Brayton, 2017). As the vice president of the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation (IHEYO), for 18–35-year-olds, I happy to see someone well-deserving of the recognition of support in the fight for humanism, secularism, and against superstition and unreason.

He wrote something short entitled "Distinguished Services to Humanism Award: To All Humanists at Risk Worldwide," where he shows appreciation for the support and reflects on others, "How would anyone compare my contributions to those of the likes of American Philosopher Corliss Lamont, Indian Humanists Indumati Parikh and Abe Solomon, British Humanists, David Pollock, Robbi Robson and my friend Josh Kutchinsky and past IHEU presidents Roy Brown and Sonja Eggerickx?"

He noted that the vision for humanism from the inception of IHEU was to advance the principles and values of humanism forward. The point, with which I agree, is to fight against dogmatic religion *and* to provide an alternative path in life, critique and community.

Dr. Igwe founded the Nigerian Humanist Movement in 1996. "I was not born a humanist. In fact, I trained to become a priest, not a humanist leader," Igwe said, "I had no experience in organized humanism. However, I knew that there was something missing in humanism as it was then."

Over 20 years later, there are two organisations founded and registered with the Nigerian government: The Humanist Assembly of Lagos and the Atheist Society of Nigeria. Dr. Igwe built these organizations from the ground up. A commendable act and person who has definitely earned this honor. It has contributed to humanism in across the continent.

Igwe said, "In fact, recently we have seen a wave of humanism-as-it-should-be silently sweeping across Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa."

All of these efforts, especially those from IHEU, have helped with the development of the Freedom of Thought of Report, which I recommend if you want to know what to target in order to further secularize your country. The research is thorough and important.

I am happy Dr. Igwe was given this award as it was definitely well-earned. I look forward to his further work in the future.

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Charitable Giving of Christians Around the World

August 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Christians around the world have been the subject of study for years, and years, by various organisations and statisticians. These researchers have uncovered some news about the Christian population writ large. In general, the Christian population around the world have some consistent demographic trends in terms of their attitudes and beliefs. For examples, Christian hold fast to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and belief in a monotheistic God. There are other, more nuanced, aspects to the demographic attitudes, though.

Let's take a look at some of those attitudinal stances of the Christian world population, and the North American population, these can be enlightening as to the trends within the population and the potential extrapolation for projections about the trends and attitudes over time.

What will happen to the attitudes and the demographics of the Christian population in the future? I find these are important points and questions to consider because these will demarcate the likely from the unlikely for the future of the global Christian population, and the continental and regional Christian population whatever the continent or region happens to be, such as North America, Latin America and South America, Middle East-North Africa, and so on.

The continents and regions will have differing concerns and trends in population demographics. Therefore, they will likely have different attitudinal stances. To begin, let's look at the level of donations and charitable giving from the Christian population compared to the general population and other subpopulations in the world, then we will move into continents and regions and some countries that are exemplars of Christian giving and not. Let's start with the one that I am the most familiar with, North America.

The *Christian Science Monitor* reports that (Velasco, 2015) after seven years the United States, for an example, made a record in declines of charitable giving from the churches, the congregations. The pews have been and continue to shrink in the United States.

American donors, more than ever, have given about \$358.4 billion to charities, which is according to an annual report provided by Giving USA Foundation (Giving USA Foundation, 2017). It peaked over and above the \$355.17 billion from 2007 before the Great Recession in America.

The rise was in 8 of 9 charity categories. "Unsurprisingly, demographics have a lot to do with religion's shrinking piece of the charity pie," Velasco said. Looking at the demographics the Pew Research Center, the numbers of the religiously unaffiliated in the United States comes to 22.8% (Pew Research Center, n.d.).

It is a substantial increase in the number of non-believers. Between the years 2007 and 20014, the number of self-identified Christians dropped from 78 % to 71% (Velasco, 2015). The Millennials have the most pronounced difference in their ratio between no religious affiliation and the mainline Protestant-Catholic grouping.

There are more millennial religiously unaffiliated than the Protestant-Catholic Millennial grouping (Ibid.), which derives come straightforward conclusions: if fewer people attend religious services, then fewer donations come from the pews.

Velasco also reported that the wealthiest sectors in the U.S. became wealthier, so their donations comprised a larger share of the pie. The pie devoted to religious gifts comes from a broader range of people. It is not that the religious Americans are giving less. They are likely to give more. The issue is the donating "beyond the collection plate." So, the only issue with religious giving in the United States of America is the reduction in formally religious people by self-identification.

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Solidarity — Atheist Republic Members Under Fire in Malaysia, Recap

August 21, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Atheist Republic in Malaysia is under threat, as many know by now. It made national news, international ripples on the internet, and then caught the attention of the government, where the state has been looking to reason.

The <u>Malay Mail Online</u> reported on the call for atheists to be "hunted down." This was an open statement by a Malaysian Minister Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim. Shahidan notes the Federal Constitution does not mention atheists.

At a press conference, he said, "I suggest that we hunt them down vehemently and we ask for help to identify these groups...They actually don't want to be atheists but it happens because of the lack of religious education. They are misled with a new school of thought."

He made another call — associated with the hunting down of the atheists in the country, presumably by the religious — for the muftis to educate Muslims who chose atheism. That they need to return to the faith rather than stay atheists.

<u>The Friendly Atheist</u>, on Patheos, reported on the reflection from the minister in President about the afterlife:

In the afterlife, we'll also be questioned if we've explained the religion to them.

To state religious leaders and governments, they need to pay attention to this issue. We should do it nicely, so they don't play victims.

The call is for the search and seizure of atheists, of Malaysian citizens, based on their beliefs with the inclusion of social pressure, especially from the muftis, and in reference to guilt based on supposed supernaturalist judgment from Allah in a purported hereafter. It seems bizarre, but it is the reality.

Imagine if this happened in the reverse case, with the atheist community persecuting religious peoples' livelihood and lives, Malaysian citizens, based on a dinner photo — with everyone non-provocative and smiling — spread over social media. It doesn't happen, at least as far as I recall. It is unfair.

Also, this becomes a violation of religious freedom, to believe, or not believe, freely, which is the serious question. Ex-Muslims in the group should be given <u>counseling</u>, was one proposal. Shahidan was also <u>moderately concerned</u> about acting in such a way as for atheists to gain general sympathy.

He <u>noted</u> the glamourization of people in social media, who he called "keyboard warriors." Atheist Republic founder, Armin Navabi, <u>said</u>, "They (Atheists) are treated like criminals. They are just hanging out and meeting other atheists. Who are they harming?!"

Conversation with Bwambale Robert Musubaho — Founder, Bizoha Humanist Center

August 26, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have been involved with humanism to a great degree. What makes humanism the life philosophy worth pursuing?

Bwambale Robert Musubaho: Yes, I remain committed to advancing humanism to the wider community here with a purpose.

Humanism allows us to understand better the world better by favoring us to question everything and grow up with critical minds.

Humanism stresses a lot on encouraging belief in evidence; me as an educationist i encourage evidence based learning at my schools to open up the minds of learners to embrace facts than myths or fables.

Humanism encourages us to put humanity at the center of everything, this is very true because all the advancements, knowledge and innovations under the sun and beyond are evident because of human existence, all the inventions & discoveries have been evident because of humanity existence.

Humanism is a great necessity in my country Uganda which is highly religious where the majorities believe in god, deities or gods; the country has scores of religions ranging from foreign based ones to indigenous ones. These beliefs have caused divisions, hate and confusion among people. It has even fueled wars and cases of fundamentalism and extremist activities have been noted. There is high belief in irrational thinking and superstitions activities, witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, witch hunting which have led to lynching of innocent lives.

Humanism presence in this part of the world is an antidote to homophobia which is high in Uganda, there is a strong hate of civil liberties and minority rites where same sex acts , LGBT and transgender humans are not looked at as people but castes or wasted fellows, this to me it hurts me since i feel homosexuals are people like others, a majority of them are born naturally like that and have a right to live, study, work and contribute to the development of our country and the world in general. In general Humanism teaches us to respect human right freedoms, race, sexual orientations etc.

Humanism stresses a lot for people to share with others, this is a great factor that brings people together and puts them on equal footing. You can share food, ideas, shelter or anything and at the end of the day both of you benefit mutually.

Humanism emphasizes people to broaden their minds and get an education, questioning everything, investing in research and being curious of anything opens one's mind. This favors you to have self confidence within you and puts you at a state where you can be fooled or your minds getting manipulated, so in general this makes one an all-round person which is good for humanity.

Humanism encourages people to respect others and tolerate being with them irrespective of their thinking or mindset but the good thing with being a humanist, you can be an ambassador to explain more about people's beliefs and where people fall prune to being religious. Humanism

allows one to research more about people's beliefs, god, gods, heavens, heaven, hell or whatever. "Sacred books" This means humanists are more informed about the beliefs systems people embrace plus the books which they pray in.

Humanism Okays Science, Science advancement and innovations. Science has played a great role in allowing us to understand more about nature, food crops, diet, flora, and fauna and provided solutions to some of the world problems like climate change, over population, proper nutrition, ease transport and mobility of people from one place to another, communication & telecommunications and so many other things.

Jacobsen: What is the Bizoha Humanist Center?

Musabaho: The Bizoha Humanist Center is a one stop point located along Mbarara Kasese Highway in Muhokya trading center in Kasese District, western Uganda where you can come enjoy our services:

We have a library that stocks readable books, magazines, journals and DVDS. Most of the books are on humanism, atheism, science and self help sustainable projects in Agriculture, small business management etc. The purpose of this center is to enlighten the locals about the goodness of science, humanism and one living a free life free from dogma and indoctrination.

At the Bizoha Humanist Center we organize conferences, debates on a number of topics on humanism and science and in more months ahead we plan to make tours to different schools, churches and outdoor places teaching about humanist values, human rights and our role in this world.

At the Bizoha Humanist center, we aim high at being a point where locals can come for entertainment, listening to news on Television and watching soccer on giant screen. At some points we pass on secular messages to the locals to give some eye opener of what we stand for.

At the Bizoha Humanist Center we offer hostel facilities to guests, some of the guests are volunteers who come work with our projects while others are just tourists who came by to tour Uganda's rich biodiversity of wild life flora and fauna.

We do have Bizoha women Empowerment group which has an office on our property whose works include women empowerment in tailoring, craft making, trading skills, micro financing to mention but a few.

We do offer other services like boat rides on the nearby Lake George, tractor hire services, secretarial services, soft drinks & hard drinks plus a cup of coffee.

Jacobsen: Why did you organize it?

Musabaho: I organized the Bizoha Humanist Center to share with my people the goodness of what i embrace and cherish plus enlightening them about humanism and science.

Jacobsen: What are its targeted objectives?

Musabaho: To educate people about humanism and secular thinking.

To encourage people to get more knowledge about science, its importance and how we can make good use of it to solve most of our pressing problems.

To bring people together as one family in this one life we all share.

To make people happy and encouraging them to enjoy life to its fullest as they also take precautions in avoiding things that may tend to complicate their lives.

To foster peace and unity among locals so that we all find joy during our life time.

Jacobsen: How do you hope to implement the intended outreach?

Musabaho: Most of our outreach programs include us moving from the Humanist Center to some outside location in other schools or villages. These movements will be implemented by Kasese United Humanist Association, a community based organization which i founded in 2009.

Jacobsen: How can people donate or help you?

Musabaho: People can donate to my initiatives via the following organizations:

Brighter Brains Institute based in the United States, their website is at https://www.humanistglobal.org/donate/

Atheist alliance International based in the United States https://atheistalliance.org/support-aai/donate.html

Humanist Canada https://www.humanistcanada.ca/contact/donate

All these organizations welcome donations earmarked for my projects and have done a good job of redirecting funds to me with ease.

I also do have an organizational website called African Humanists where one can donate directly to me at http://africahumanists.org/new-products/

All in all, i do encourage personalities who can fundraise for my initiatives at their locations by holding fundraising drives or sharing my works to friends.

Jacobsen: What does Bizoha mean to you as an organization?

Musabaho: Bizoha is a great project that has helped so much in favoring scores of needy and orphaned children get an education.

Bizoha has also helped in putting in place an orphanage hostel where total orphans shelter during times when the school term is running.

Bizoha as a project has helped me move from owning one school to owning a string of schools, the international community have welcomed and supported immensely this project and it's the reason i do have a number of assets which are helping out in creating a change to the better as we serve.

Jacobsen: Who are some partners in the endeavour?

Musabaho: The Bizoha Project is wholesomely a partnership of Kasese Humanist with the Brighter Brains Institute.

Brighter Brains Institute generous donors plus some section from other secular communities worldwide plus some contributions by local guardians and parents have done a great role in ensuring success of this project.

Jacobsen: Who may be valuable stakeholders in it in the future?

Musabaho: The valuable stake holders of Bizoha Humanist Center in the future is we the local people here in Uganda, the same goes to the Bizoha Schools or Kasese Humanist schools since

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we are the major beneficiary and at the same time we are on our journey to self reliance and sustainability.	

A Compendium of Crimes and Criminals of the Eastern Orthodox Church — Part 2

August 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I doubt this is comprehensive, nor is it representative of the positives of the church either; it is reportage on the reports from the news. I didn't see a compendium, so decided write one.

This one comes in the form of the — common — use of religion as a political force. In this case, it is the Russian Orthodox Church used to prop up and support the corrupt autocratic oligarchy of modern Russia, which continues to annex, unfortunately for many including Canadian Ukrainians where I reside but also, Ukrainians born and raised in Ukraine.

As Human Rights Watch has reported on the issue, there remains consistent evidence that resistance to the Russian Orthodoxy can be an issue:

A pro-Kremlin television channel was at the scene almost instantly, cameras rolling. It later <u>aired a story</u> referring to the activists as "neo-pagans" and "members of a cell" who had "ammunition and psychotropic drugs" in their apartments. The head of the Church, patriarch Kirill, called the protesters "cultists" and "pagans". (Gorbunova & Ovsyannikova, 2016)

As it is an Eastern Orthodoxy, it poses as an example, a case-in-series, of the harms of faith with this as an example.

Even with environmentalists and the Eastern Orthodox Christians here, this extends to Pokemon Go bloggers who are at the ripe age of 22 (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

This is in a country where it has been voted legal as part of 'traditional values' to be able to beat one's wife (The Economist, 2017). It is near a par with the religious legalisms, for centuries, around women as property.

Of course, civil society groups worked to reduce the severity of prior laws attempting to instantiate this (Ibid.). As per usual, as with Poland and abortion with the Roman Catholic Church, women's rights are being mocked with the Russian Orthodox Church wanting more severe punishments for women who step out of imposed religious lines, religious dogma and decree for how women should be — God forbid an independent woman emerges from their ranks. This extends in consideration of children too:

But the Russian Orthodox Church was furious. Scripture and Russian tradition, the church said, regard "the reasonable and loving use of physical punishment as an essential part of the rights given to parents by God himself". Meanwhile, conservative groups worried that parents might face jail. They argued that it was wrong for parents to face harsher punishment for hitting their child than a neighbour would. (The Economist, 2017)

This is a major part of religion influencing tens of millions of people's (children's and women's) lives (Cauterucci, 2017). And asking useless questions doesn't help, "Is the Russian Orthodox Church serving God or Putin?" (Schmitt, 2017) I barely care about that question. I care about concrete questions affecting the lives of Russian citizens because of formal religion.

Bearing in mind, the majority of men in charge of a religion making commentary on the ways women should behave, tacitly, and what consequences are potentially or actually, explicitly, in store for them if they step out of the Russian Orthodox Church line, and the political line of the Putin Regime.

Religion may not be the source of all or even most 'evil,' but it is certainly facilitative in this case.

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Views expressed are not necessarily those of IHEYO or IHEU.

Talk with Gary Patterson — Member, SMART Recovery (Part 1)

August 30, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have an association with SMART Recovery. What is SMART Recovery? What is your relation with it as an entity?

Gary Patterson: I've been involved with SMART Recovery for almost two years now, since I last came out of detox. In my decades of drinking I would from time to time go into detox just, in my mind, as a matter of some warped sense of periodic self-care, but there had never been anything solid to hang on to in order to maintain any kind of prolonged sobriety afterwards so I always ended up drinking again days after, or more often than not the very same day I got out. I had tried the 12-step approach numerous times but could never resonate with their ideals and principles of the program and so carried on with a sense that nothing was ever going to work for me. While in detox this last time I saw a little 4"X 6" card pinned to the corkboard with some information about SMART Recovery. Seeing it was something I had never heard of before I decided to check it out and began attending meetings. By chance there was a meeting scheduled for the evening of the day I got out and in retrospect that was what kept me from the liquor store that day. The first thing that hit me was how much practical sense this approach made to me. I consider myself a thinking man so a program that deals with thoughts, emotions, and behavior, a psychologically oriented approach peaked my interest and I found myself thinking..."what if?" I had been very much isolated for the five years leading up to this last detox, basically staying in my room drinking until I was almost out of booze, then sleeping pills to end the day by passing out only to wake the next day to start all over again. I have to give myself that after I got my license back this time I made a personal comittment never to drive after two beers and stuck to it, which led to my leaving the house only once per day to get my booze and maybe stop at the grocery store if it was one of those seldom times when I thought maybe I should eat something. That was my life for five years. These SMART meetings were so much different than anything I had ever experienced in an attempt at recovery, people actually calmly discussing issues among peers delving into the principles, practices and methods of SMART Recovery evoking real-time ideas, and SMART tools to try. The synergy in a room of like minded people working together to help one another and ourselves solve our personal problems in our quest for sobriety gave me a warm, safe, connected feeling I still have today.

Jacobsen: Why is the organization important?

Patterson: To my mind, if you consider the destruction, chaos, and dehumanization that are daily occurrences in our society, caused by the misuse of drugs, alcohol, and many other types of maladaptive behaviours and habits which inevitably cause us heartache, pain, suffering, and too often these days death, involving millions of people worldwide, it's not rocket science to see the need for something out there more effective than what has been historically available. SMART Recovery is that 'something'. A program with actual viable, practical, science-based, proven substance, to guide people to a place where learned self-management skills not only provide the tools to actively maintain sobriety, but creates a new perspective that enhances many other aspects of our daily lives. SMART Recovery is so much more, to me, than just an 'addiction recovery' program. It has led me to a place where I'm restructuring my entire life to be a more healthy,

fulfilling and enjoyable existence.... and it works. I don't have words to express adequate accolades for this organization. "Discover the Power of Choice" resonates big time!

Jacobsen: What are some notable and touching experiences in working with them?

Patterson: You ask about notable experiences working with SMART Recovery. For me, as a Facilitator, it's the level of support I get from the people in Mentor Ohio. Taking the training, preparing for, publicizing and starting a new meeting, as well as issues that come up in a meeting I may not feel qualified to adequately address myself, personal issues with my own journey while facilitating meetings, all covered with a profound sense that we are a team working together for a common purpose to help people end their suffering. These people have our backs every step of the way.

When there is an active, involved discussion in a meeting and someone says something like "wow, I never thought about it that way before!" and you can see it in their eyes, feel it in their body language, those 'aha' moments in the room give me goose bumps to this day. When someone keeps coming to meetings and you start to notice the growth and the confidence that's building in that this can be done and in fact is happening, simultaneously deepens my resolve to continue with this endeayour.

Talk with Gary Patterson — Member, SMART Recovery (Part 2)

August 31, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How does your own background tie into them? What lead you to SMART Recovery, and the absolutely wonderful and magnanimous Shari Allwood?

Gary Patterson: My background, at least the first thirty-odd years of it was a dark, chaotic, self-destructive, drug, alcohol, and crime infested nightmare. To even vaguely understand you would have to go back to when I was four years old. My birth parents left me at a card game supposedly to 'go to the store' and never came back. I ended up being shuffled around from town to town, house to house, people to people I never had a clue who they were, why I was there, who I was, or just what the hell was going on and where were my mom and dad? My birth father did show up one day when I was ten and took me to live with him which led to the next three years of every kind of child abuse you can imagine until the police finally removed me from the home.

This led to foster care but by this time I was so messed up I didn't want to be anywhere 'they' put me so I started to run away. I'd get caught, they'd put me somewhere else and again I would run away. This cycle of course eventually led me into the 'Juvie" system. Still confused and by this time very rebellious I chose to live on the streets rather than be 'placed' somewhere else I didn't want to be. I've never felt like I 'belonged' anywhere. Living on the streets, alone, at fourteen ultimately led me to the mental escape and emotional numbness of drugs and alcohol. At first, to eat I would go into a supermarket, take two slices out of a loaf of bread and put a package of bologna or ham in and eat it in the store just so I could have some food in my belly, eventually got caught doing that and put on probation.

Circumstances after that led to more running, stealing, more lock-ups, and then finally jails and prisons, a 'revolving door' type situation ensued for years. I was in a lifestyle where drinking and drugging constantly were not only acceptable, but fully expected behaviours. And so it was for the first thirty years of my life.

By the time I had finished my last stint of eight years the prison system had broken my spirit, beat me down and I knew I had to change my way of life or this was going to be all there ever was. I used that time to learn a trade which gave me the means to legally survive once released, but the drinking continued as always. I had been a heavy user of crystal meth and heroin in my teens and early twenties but by now the booze was adequately serving my perceived needs. I became a very high-functioning heavy drinker maintaining employment, a family, and even starting my own business. Incidentally, I have never engaged in any type of criminal activity since being released in October, 1987.

Then one morning my wife of fourteen years came to me and said "Gary, I love you but I cannot stay and watch you drink yourself to death, the kids and I will not be here when you get home tonight" And they were gone. I've had suicidal tendencies off and on throughout my life with several attempts and now, having lost my wife and kids, home, and business it was something I seriously contemplated but decided instead to take myself across the country to be away from it all and just drink until it killed me.

I didn't care. I had to retire from working in 2007, the heart attacks I had in the 90's (five), finally wore me down to the point where I could no longer put in a days work, so that left ample time to actively engage in my morbid persuit. Thus, the five year isolation, which led to detox, which led to SMART Recovery. (in a nutshell)

Jacobsen: What is your main initiative or goal now in personal and professional life?

Patterson: My main initiative or goal in my life today is to pay-it-forward to try to help others find their path to freedom from the ugly, chaotic, self-destructive turmoil that is addiction so they may find some true meaning in their lives, as I have, without the need for mind altering substances or maladaptive behaviours.

SMART Recovery has become my main VACI (Vitally Absorbing Creative Interest), I am also a caregiver to a wonderful lady of 77 years who unfortunately has MS, and back into trying to play this guitar, so my life is more now than I ever thought it would be again, and SMART Recovery is the major reason for everything good in my life today.

Jacobsen: With your current position (if applicable, what is it...), what are your tasks and responsibilities?

Patterson: After an unbelievable ten months of sobriety I decided to take the FAST Distance Training to become a SMART Facilitator. Today, at 23 months sober I hold two regular face to face meetings and one Family & Friends meeting per week with an additional evening Family & Friends meeting set to begin August 25th, and about half way through my SROL (SMART Recovery On Line) training to facilitate one online meeting per week as well. So very busy with SMART in my retirement.

My tasks and responsibilities in this as I see them are first and foremost to maintain my own sobriety and well being so that I am able to inform, promote, and educate people about the SMART Recovery program and to create a warm, open, honest, welcoming, non-judgmental meeting environment where people can spend quality time working through recovery issues to learn new ways to make changes in thought processes and stabilize emotional turmoil to make the behavioural adjustments that lead to a healthier, happier, and much more fulfilling life.

Jacobsen: How does a science-based and non-faith-based — with or without religion as a component — treatment work compared to faith, religiously oriented, treatments?

Patterson: For me, the answer to this question is abundantly clear. A religiously oriented program can work.... for the religious, but, how on earth can we expect such a program to work for the millions of people on the planet with no religious affiliation to draw strength and support from?

Would a farmer consult a dentist on which crop to sew in which field this season? When all physical withdrawal symptoms have run their course, the only place left where an addiction survives is in our minds, this is in the realm of science. I don't know about you, but I can't count the number of times in my life, times of total despair and desperation when I have prayed for some relief and none came, so I relate that to trying to change my addictive behaviours by wishing they would go away.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Gary.

An Interview with Anton van Dyck — Secretary General of IHEYO

September 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

This interview has been edited for clarity and readability.*

So tell us about your background in humanism or ethical societies.

I think it all went quite naturally since both of my parents are non-religious and verbal in their political views. In Belgian education, we have a special subject. If you want to take religious studies like Catholicism and Protestantism, you can. But we also have a course specifically for freethinkers. As soon as you're in elementary, you can take it. My dad was an educator like that. He did it for awhile. I was vaguely aware of the movement.

When I was abroad on an exchange programme in South Africa, I became aware that being an atheist — which not all humanists are, but most of them are — was not a common thing in many places. It was at that time that I started wondering about ethics, society and life stances. Once back in Belgium I decided, "I want to start studying and becoming politically active without picking a color." A buddy of mine who was the leader of the Green party for the youth section told me to check out a group called Free Inquiry. "They're a bit of a special organization", he said. So one Monday night, I stopped by, went into a meeting, and never left. Now, five years down the line, I'm very active.

In terms of humanism itself, there are statements that are out from organization such as the American Humanist Association. Things such as the Humanist Manifesto. In that common thread, humanists will define it within their own framework. How do you define humanism or freethought yourself?

I had a pretty interesting conversation about that with the founder of the Church of Bacon.

[Laughing]

You might have heard of him, John Whiteside. We basically agreed the declarations for humanism weren't very accessible because they are very precise and can be overly complex. After a brief discussion we decided to describe it in the following way: not being too much of a dick, but reserving the right to be somewhat of a dick when it's necessary.

Have you heard of The Church of the SubGenius which had Reverend Ivan Stang? He was the cofounder for 30+ years. He retired. He had one principle: "fuck 'em if they can't take a joke." It sounds akin to that 'reserve the right to be a dick some of the time.'

Yes, but at the same time we must be aware of what we're doing and saying, which refers to the first part of that definition. We're currently facing a huge problem on both sides of that spectrum. On the one hand we have Social Justice Warriors that fight for "intellectual safe spaces" and on the other hand we have a bunch of Trolls who push buttons to push buttons. Since ideas that aren't allowed to be challenged downright scare me, I'd consider myself more on the side of the provocateurs. Unfortunately, the interaction between both sides today is often without any positive result and could even be considered intellectually impoverishing. Tolerance is both an active and a passive process. So in order for that debate to be fruitful, we need to find the balance

between not being offended by everything and treating each other with a modicum of respect. And by "a modicum of respect" I mean phrasing, not censoring ourselves.

Comedy wouldn't work without it — good comedy wouldn't work without it. A good comedian knows exactly where the line is, crosses it deliberately, makes the audience laugh, and has them happy they crossed the line with them. I think somebody said that before me.

A State without comedians or where comedians have to be regulated is not a democratic state in any way.

Where everything starts with a glorious anthem song to the great leader before they do their comedy?

Yup, yup. According to Montesquieu you have the three state powers. Do you know this? The power to create law, the power to execute law and the power to enforce law. So you have judges, government, and parliament. But then, especially in modern western society, you have other very important powers such as the media, which plays an important role in a participating democracy. You also have the critics and the cynics. They all play the role of independent opposition, which you need to transcend partisan politics.

Those last two. They are the wild ones. The independent checks and balances that keep the other three in check.

Right, right, they are the independent judges in a way.

Yes, very much. Although more in the sense of administrative law: checking on good governance by holding politicians accountable to the principles of a transparent democracy.

With respect to IHEYO, what is your position? What are your tasks and responsibilities?

Right now, I am the Secretary-General. I do a bit of the administration and the executing work. When our president Marieke says, "I think it would be good to go in this direction," I have to think of how it would be best to go about it. I think that's the best way of putting it. I also do some of the secretarial work like write up the minutes, do some follow-up, send out some emails, and documents and all of that. It fits my personality.

What are you training for now, if anything?

I am finishing law school. So in Belgium we have a general forming bachelor, which is 3 years, then you have 2 years for specialization. I chose economic law, which is something very, very different from what people might think would be related to humanism. But for me, I have a strong fascination for how people unify themselves within organizations. You see the same thing in corporate law.

Big companies have legal entities. They structure themselves so they become effective organizations and that's something I want to apply in my volunteering and, hopefully, professional career. I'll see what comes my way. But it is definitely my intention to continue what I am doing on a volunteering basis, but more professionally.

What are ways for people to become involved in IHEYO, whether contacting on IHEYO, volunteering in some way, or writing?

Well, we have the platform, Medium, where we offer people a forum to put their ideas out there and to motivate them. That does come under the condition that they will get responses of people

who have different opinions. By contributing to that, they are contributing to an international community of humanism, which we aspire to be. IHEYO has decided to focus more on providing the platforms for multi- and bi-lateral cooperation between all of the member organizations of IHEYO and IHEU.

We only have a few mandates, but there's plenty of ways you can join. First, by looking up your local organization, and seeing what they're all about. Maybe, if they don't have any activities in international humanism, they can start them up, contact us about it, and we'll help them partner up with other organizations and do projects to size. There are lots of possibilities. They can also join our working groups. We have one per region in the world (Americas, Africa, Asia and Europe) plus a comms group.

Recommended books? Or, if not books, authors?

I have a nice collection of books but my favourites are:

Heart of Darkness.

Fight Club by Chuck Palahniuk. The movie is very good as well [Laughing].

Those two, there are other notable ones. Then there's *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela. This one formed my view while in South Africa because it is Mandela, man. Another one is by Jonny Steinberg called *The Number: One Man's Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs*. It's about the number. You have a very strange tradition there in crime culture. They have three gangs: the 26s, the 27s, and the 28s who have their own strange form of religion, culture, and language. It has elements of the mafia, tribalism, the military... Very, very fascinating.

Last one, what is the strongest argument you have ever come across for atheism or humanism?

The strongest argument for humanism would be that the existence of god is irrelevant for the question on what we should do when we're alive. We should care for each other and try to be good people because it's the right and rational thing to do, not because we need to save up "goodness-points" so we can go to heaven.

If you want to be truly humanist, it doesn't matter what comes after life. It matters what you do here and do now.

Thank you for your time, Anton.

Interview with Cleopatra Yvonne S. Nyahe — Co-Cordinator, Humanist Services Corps

September 3, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Cleopatra Yvonne S. Nyahe: I grew up with three sisters and one brother. My mother was a very important figure in my life as a child and still is to this day. She was a seamstress and a teacher, a chef, a bar tender. She basically did any job she could to take care of us. When she married my step dad, a teacher, we moved around the country a lot because of his job but I was born in the Volta region of Ghana. I was raised in a Christian home and religion and spirituality is something that's really important to my mother. Sunday church was something we did together as a family. I really enjoyed the process of dressing up in my best outfit and singing and dancing at church with my family. After service, we would make a huge meal at home and have a big lunch. Sundays were always good days, they helped bring my family closer.

I went to primary school in different places because of my step dads job. I was a shy kid and found it difficult to make friends so I was determined to go to boarding school when I went to high school. Boarding school was an interesting experience, it made me realize that I didn't enjoy being away from my family. As the 3 years progressed I started to make more friends and started to come out of my shell. After high school I studied a short course in graphic design and did several small jobs. I then did au pair jobs until i started working with HSC.

Jacobsen: You are the co-coordinator for the Humanist Services Corps. What is it? How does the position work? Why do you pursue this line of work?

Nyahe: I am currently only program coordinator for HSC on the ground in Ghana. My job is managing the program here in the northern region. I oversee our volunteers and the projects we do with our partner organizations.

When I started this work, I was just a volunteer with the intent to stay a couple of months. I realised then that there were lots of nongovernmental organizations in the northern region being run by foreigners. I realised that lots of Ghanaians in the South didn't even know some of the big issues the northern region had, one of the biggest being the Alleged witch camps here. People were just not interested in doing voluntary work or getting involved with NGO's because it is often seen as a career with little benefit and people have huge financial responsibilities. The economy isn't at its best so people would rather have high paying jobs even if it means giving up their passion for human rights work.

I realized there is a need to get more Ghanaians involved in this aspect of the countries development. I wanted to show my people that the face of change and development doesn't always have to be a foreign one. That we too are capable of helping people to achieve positive change.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Nyahe: I enjoy the interactions I have with members of the local communities here in the North. I enjoy the reactions people have when they realise I am actually not one of the volunteers (which is always peoples first assumption).

They ask if I went to school and lived abroad or come from some western country. I enjoy talking about how succeeding in your work does not depend on the colour of your skin, level of education, what kind of economic or social background you come from. Your passion and perseverance are what matters the most and that the reason for my success is that I truly care about the work we do here.

Jacobsen: How does the general public view the Humanist Services Corps compared to other organizations?

Nyahe: People from the humanist community agree with our philosophy and methods of working; the idea that we want to empower people with the right skills and tools to be the face of their own change instead of coming in and doing everything ourselves. We want to leave people with sustainable skills and ways to achieve long term positive change. It's not just the humanist community that has realised how ineffective service without long term sustainability effects communities in the long run. This means our approach takes more time, changing the way people in the communities feel and about receiving service is no small task. They have become accustomed to quick and short term solutions to their problems. That's why the work we do requires a lot of patience and open mindedness. You have to understand why someone who is disadvantaged would want to fix their problems quickly. It is our job to respectfully show them has more benefits not just for them but also for their children's children.

Jacobsen: How do the provisions of the Humanist Services Corps differ from others?

Nyahe: We differ from other service groups because we focus on providing skills, tools, and knowledge. It's the same concept of, Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; Teach a man to fish and you feed him for lifetime. Our main goal is to provide something that will last these communities a lifetime. Long term change is our main focus. Not to say that short term goals are not important but, we want the short term goals to line with our long term ones. An example of this is the agriculture training we do with the women living in the accused witch camps. We teach them how to grow and process Shea nuts to make Shea butter and other things. This helps them become self sufficient. Because they now have this knowledge they are able to do this process on their own. They have even been able to start small businesses to support themselves.

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

Nyahe: In my first year volunteering for HSC, one of my projects was interviewing women in the Kukuo camp who had been accused of witchcraft. The accused women in the northern region are often banned to live the rest of their lives in the camps with other accused women. In the camps, life is difficult for the women who are mostly old and fragile. They don't have access to some of their basic necessities such as food and clean water.

I was interviewing a woman in her 80's who had been at the camp for 25 or so years. Before she was accused she had two sons and one of them suddenly fell ill. He was rushed to the hospital and sadly died on the way there. Her other son brought his brothers corpse back and left it at his mother's door because he believed she had killed him. He then went to gather the village youth who lynched her with stones and sticks for being an evil mother. She run to a family member's

house and was sneaked out of town in the middle of the night to the Kukuo camp for alleged witches and has lived there since without any family support. She hasn't seen her other son since.

This story really touched me because you often hear stories of neighbours, co wives and aunts and uncles accusing women of witchcraft but this woman's own son did this to her in the same moment she lost her other son. She lost both sons on the very same day. It was heart breaking for me to hear and I thought of my own relationship with my mother and how I couldn't fathom my life without her. I couldn't understand how someone could do such a thing.

Jacobsen: When coordinating, or co-coordinating, what is the process there? How do you do what you do there?

Nyahe: Well, my job is mostly managing and overseeing our volunteers, projects, and maintaining and building relationships in the community.

I also manage our relationships with our partner organizations to plan projects, meetings, field visits...etc.

It's a broad position with ever changing tasks depending on what's going on at any given time.

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

Nyahe: I hope to see the humanist platform grow in the next few years. I want the term Humanist to be a common term known to more people. Specifically speaking, I want more Ghanaians to know about the concept of Humanism.

Jacobsen: Thank your for your time today, Yvonne.

Interview with Derek Gray on All Things Personal, Canadian, and Religious (Or Irreligious)

September 5, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Was there much religion in family upbringing?

None at all really. I can't think of a single member of my family, including grandparents, who ever even mentioned religion in a significant way. My father was staunchly agnostic. Christmas was celebrated with an intense level of decoration, including the occasional religiously-themed decoration (and the songs of course) but these were just that — decorations only, out of tradition.

Was the part of Canada in which you grew up religious or more irreligious than the national average?

I could be totally wrong, but I would say average or below-average religiosity probably, in the Durham Region of Ontario. I can recall a friend or two who went to church but were granted the choice to stop attending even before they were in their teens. I do remember the uncomfortable feeling of listening to the Lord's Prayer in primary school and at Cub Scouts...

How did you become formal irreligious, an atheist, in Canada?

I was always a passive atheist and tended to just think of religion for the benefits it may have provided anthropologically in the past and present (e.g. reading the Bible purely to better understand literary references.) I took more interest in South-Asian religions and language after meeting my wife, who was raised Hindu (we had a full-blown Hindu wedding.) We still participate in and take our kids to cultural events which are technically religious but more social than anything.

Until 2015 it never really crossed my mind to start getting involved more formally. At that time I wrote a letter to the editor to protest retaining the Lord's Prayer at city council meetings, eventually giving a deposition to city council in person. So I have continued to be involved since then in whatever ways my time allows.

What is your best argument for irreligion?

The mere fact that thousands of religions have come and gone, evolved, transformed, and continue to be invented tells me that the common morals we have cultivated in modern secular societies are coming from human societal evolution, not from religion. If religion has to keep playing catch-up to modern context and morals, why not just avoid the trouble and focus on those shared values without the unproven and baseless mysticism? Like "alternative medicine": when it's proven to work we just call it "medicine."

What is the long-term future, say 50 years, of religion in Canada?

I am actually optimistic on this front that the significant decreases in religiosity will continue to grow unabated. The rises in the "religious right" in my mind are death-throes. With declining influence, they must make bigger noises. That's not to say we shouldn't be vigilant. We can't ignore bigotry if we want to keep the momentum towards eradicating religious privilege. But the bad behaviour of the extreme will only serve to repel more people at a faster pace in my opinion.

Hopefully that's not just Canadian nice-guy naivete on my part. I think we'll be rid of the remaining publicly-supported separate Catholic school systems. I hope my children will think it utterly absurd that their parents had to vote in elections inside a publicly-funded Catholic school plastered with crosses in a secular democracy. Just as there are so many secular Jews, who don't believe but maintain a culture through religiously-based customs, I think we'll see the same thing from other faith communities in the future.

What is its near-term future?

There are a lot of difficult conversations that people are avoiding or responding to with too much emotion and opinion and not enough end-game goal-setting and proper understanding of the law. So we have to keep those conversations going by listening to, rather than pummelling, those few who are level-headed in their arguments yet attacked, amazingly, by polar opposite camps simultaneously. In the near term I think we'll see more capitulation from religious institutions on the topics of medically-assisted dying due to the overwhelming majority support for it. There will continue to be turmoil in Quebec (and other areas of Canada as well) as we try and reverse the slippage of tolerance and try to balance that with legitimate criticism.

What are perennial threats to non-belief in Canada?

I could be wrong, but I think we're on a pretty good trend. How can we speed that up? We need to drill into people that no-religion does not mean no-morals. We need more emphasis on how donating to overtly secular charities is the more virtuous path. Speak up when public institutions (schools, police departments, etc.) or your workplace unthinkingly place faith-based organizations on a pedestal when secular options are available (e.g. local food-bank vs. anit-LGBT Salvation Army.) In most cases this is done because this is just unconscious bias — it's that bias that is the threat.

What are the bigger areas of social discrimination against nonbelievers in Canada?

Probably the idea that as a non-believer you and your children will lack the virtue of "faith," and that when we argue for reasonable separation of church and state, it is bigotry against us to say that it must be because we lack this "virtue." People like those at the Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform (anti-choice and anti stem-cell-research group) would have you believe any one who disagrees with their obvious Catholic ideals are little more than child murderers. And you still have national media outlets such as the National Post publish anti-atheist columns with bigotry that would be absolutely unthinkable in this day if the word "Jew" or "Muslim" were inserted in place of "Atheist." Hate speech against atheists in the world is always the lowest priority. Good luck if you are an Ex-Muslim! You'll be attacked by both white-nationalists and Muslim leaders simultaneously!

What are the bigger areas of political discrimination against nonbelievers in Canada?

Some provinces have had the will to change, but some still maintain the horrible pandering to Catholic votes and the fear of tearing down a system of inequality counter to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that is the publicly-funded Catholic school system. We have the same problems with Hospitals systems run by religious institutions — they take public funds but then expect the privilege to opt out of Canadian laws at the same time.

What are the bigger areas of legal discrimination against nonbelievers in Canada?

Legally, and I have little hope of this changing soon (though there are trickles of good news here and there,) the huge sums of money wasted in the form of tax-breaks for religious institutions is just appalling. They provide a service to their members that should be taxed as any other. Let my taxes go to community centres and libraries that benefit everyone. That and the blasphemy laws, but hopefully it looks like those are headed for the trash bin of history.

What are the positives of religion?

This question can be interpreted in different ways. One can ask "what are the positives found uniquely in religious settings" and I would say little positive remains today that can't also be found elsewhere (though perhaps not as ubiquitously or within a reasonable radius.)

But the question could instead be simply "what are the positives often found in religious settings" and I would have to credit the widespread motivation it provides to have cultural communities come together at regular times throughout the year. For example, I would be hard-pressed to give my children a sense of their Bengali culture without the social impetus to gather together and celebrate.

Who are people attempting to move the conversation within religion to a higher plateau, a more progressive platform?

Probably Gretta Vosper, the former atheist minister in the United Church of Canada is one — you don't get much more progressive in religion than admitting you don't believe in God, right? At that point you really give yourself and others the license to cherry-pick only the good parts. There is also the Clarion Project's founder, Pakistani-Canadian Raheel Raza, a moderate Muslim who fights for gender-equality and against racism, as well as radical Islam/Islamism.

Who is a personal hero for you?

I'm not sure about personal heroes, but there are some people who are very influential in my thinking and attitudes (even if I don't always agree 100% with everything they say). One would be Ex-Muslim Eiynah (NiceMangos) because she is one of the few who digs into those difficult conversations about just how difficult it is to maintain a flow of valid criticisms of religion, while at the same time countering anti-Muslim bigots. I think Anthony Magnabosco is inspiring for teaching Peter Boghossian's Street Epistemology techniques by example — the nicest possible way to have a dialog with believers. He should be an honorary Canadian.

What is a better book on non-belief in Canada?

I can really recommend "The Atheist Muslim" by Ali Rizvi. He is so measured, logical and clear in his writing, it was a pleasure to read. The chapter on "Islamophobia" is especially relevant and unique and will challenge your own gut feelings.

Who, naming names, are attempting to either argue for the traditionalist, even fundamentalist, religion in Canada? Also, who are closet religious-minded individuals who are attempting to rebrand religion, especially Christianity, and sell it to the modern generations such as the, as they're automatically labelled, the Gen Xers and the Millennials?

Andrew Scheer, the current leader of the federal Conservative party is the person I'd be most concerned about because he may not *openly* argue for fundamentalist Christian-based laws but he is extreme and could cause much trouble should he win a federal election. The following that Jordan B. Peterson has amassed is incomprehensible (and lucrative — hundreds of thousands of dollars a month for him.) It seems based on word salads of little meaning, often of a traditional

Christian (read: sexist) mentality hiding behind the veneer of professorship at the University of Toronto. I'm also irritated at the Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform and their callous advertising campaigns, pretending that their arguments have anything other than Catholic fundamentalist superiority-complex behind them.

What are your major initiatives the irreligious movement in Canada in the coming months?

As I touched on earlier, I think we need to keep on the offensive and support legal challenges such as the one by <u>OPEN</u> to roll back the public funding for religious schools. We also have to focus on denouncing the vocal bigotry against Muslims.

Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Thanks Scott, for making me think about these questions. I am far from an expert or historian on the irreligious movement, but I try my best to listen and learn from others. Having a place like Canadian Atheist to contribute stories on local events, and curating news for our social media accounts has kept me busy and engaged on a daily basis.

An Interview with Carla Rodriguez — Executive, University of West Florida Secular Student Alliance

September 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Carla Rodriguez: My family originated in Cuba and moved to the USA about 23 years ago. Most of my family practices Catholicism, Santeria, and various forms of Christianity and our native tongue is Spanish. My mother has a degree in Technical Engineering and my father a Law degree, however, since they earned those degrees in Cuba, they did not transfer over to the US.

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

Rodriguez: I grew up with my Atheist cousin while surrounded by a very religious family. But, I was never religious myself. I've tried going to Christian church and have done my fair share of research on multiple religions but I have never had a feeling of faith toward anything. There weren't any major events in my life that confirmed by disbelief in a superior being. With that said, I have a very inquisitive mind so blindly believing in anything is not something I do.

Jacobsen: You are an executive of the University of West Florida Secular Student Alliance. What tasks and responsibilities come with the presidential position? Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Rodriguez: As SSA President I am required to organize meetings, delegate tasks, and educate the SSA membership of our organization's objective and how to achieve it. My Freshman year at UWF, I noticed chalking in front of my Residence Hall with a drawing of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and quotes such as, "Are you an Atheist, skeptic, religious, curious?" and after attending a meeting I knew I found my place on campus. About 3 years later and I have held 3 different Officer positions: Vice President, Events Coordinator, and now President.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Rodriguez: Personally, I see SSA as a safe place for those who do not feel comfortable expressing their curiosity and questions regarding Secular values and issues. SSA invites everyone regardless of religious/non-religious background. The organization is meant to educate the masses on what the separation of church and state entails as well as provide support for the campus, its students, and the surrounding community.

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

Rodriguez: Inclusion, organized debates (guidelines for debate etiquette), volunteering, make your club stand-out on campus, philanthropies within your community (ex. gathering donations for homeless shelters), and make sure your campus' SGA sees your club tabling and hosting events in order to show them your organization needs their support.

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

Rodriguez: One of the major historic violations of secularist values would be the use of free speech on campus. The UWF campus is very open to free speech, we have a mixture of activists holding up signs outside the library referring to Governmental and Societal issues as well as religious personnel either passing out flyers or spewing scripture through a megaphone. SSA at UWF has hosted various events on campus too such as, the Southeast Secular Student Conference, Stone-a-Heathen, Graveyard of the Gods, and others. I'd say our campus takes a win for combatting secular principle violations.

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

Rodriguez: Given West Florida is a very conservative area, the secular population is quite underrepresented. So, I would say representation of secularists and their values is of great need both on campus as well as in the surrounding community.

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

Rodriguez: My main concern is reaching out to the student body and finding those who are lost or need guidance in reference to secularism. As President, my short-term goal is to gather and retain a larger membership while my long-term goal is to show the entire student body and faculty/staff that SSA is diverse and here to provide support for its members and the community as a whole. This will be achieved through philanthropies, volunteering, and activism.

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

Rodriguez: Underrepresentation of secular values across campus.

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

Rodriguez: We discuss secularism around the campus, community, and national/international governmental issues. Meeting topics vary but we will be posting a list of the intended meeting topics and possible events by mid-August on our Facebook Page!

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

Rodriguez: The most important thing is to come to meetings! We will be having them on the biweekly basis starting late August. Also, feel free to follow the SSA at UWF facebook page at: https://www.facebook.com/groups/ssa.uwf/ or email us at ssa@uwf.edu.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Rodriguez: Thanks for reaching out to us for an interview! Excited to read what you gathered from everyone!

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Carla.

IHEU to the Defense of the Right to Religious Dress

September 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

'One of the things they told us was that if a boy or a man went into the church, he had to remove his hat in order to honor the presence of God, but they already told me that God was everywhere. So, I used to wonder, 'Well, if God was everywhere, why would you even own a hat?' Why not show your respect, don't even buy a fucking hat! And just to confuse things further, they told the women exactly the opposite! Catholic women and girls had to cover their heads when they went into a church. Same as in certain temples, Jewish men have to cover their heads, in those temples. In those same temples, Jewish women, not allowed to cover their heads. So try to figure this shit out. Catholic men and Jewish women, no hats. Catholic women and Jewish men, hats. Somebody's got the whole thing totally fucking backward, don't you think?'

George Carlin

The <u>International Humanist and Ethical Union</u> (IHEU) <u>has been active</u> in the protection of the religious and irreligious with respect to their rights. In some areas of the world, citizens, often women, are told not what they can wear, but what they have to wear.

In other areas of the world, women are told what they can't possibly wear, but what they have to not wear. Both cases seem egregious to me. In either case, the severity comes from the means of implementation and the type of clothing enforced to be worn or not.

Elizabeth O'Casey, the Director of Advocacy for IHEU, at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), defended, in mid-September, the right of the religious to wear what they wish to wear that is, the right to wear religious dress is a right, which is violated by numerous laws throughout the world in the name of extremism. O'Casey argues the arguments based on extremism are fallacious.

She spoke alongside Harlem Désir, the Special Representative on Freedom of the Media, who is from the OSCE. Free expression, broadly interpreted, includes clothing, attire, e.g. religious dress or the latest fashion trends, and so on. Her defense of the religious to wear religious dress came from that angle, and in the context of anti-extremism legislation.

She spoke on these issues at the 2017 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) with the emphasis on fostering rather than hindering or discouraging freedom of expression of belief, where the attire a religious individual wears is part of that belief.

There has been a "crackdown" in Central Asian countries, which is the place that O'Casey used a recent examples. "As the OSCE representative on freedom of the media points out, free expression can play a critical role in promoting equality and combatting intolerance. We urge the governments of the Central Asian states concerned to foster not hinder expression of belief so that an environment of debate, inquiry and tolerance can be fostered," O'Casey stated.

More here.

An Interview with Christel — DINNoedhjaelp

September 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

<u>DINNødhjælp</u> was founded in 2012 as a charitable organization. It works from the heart to help the poorest and witch accused children in Nigeria, especially to the creation of a more dignified life.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was there a family background in activism against superstition?

Christel: Anja grew up with my mom who worked in a elderly home and she always told her that hopefully all humans grow old and live a long life and it's important to take care of people in need. Her mom gave her all the tools of the importance of taking care of people in need and she often told her about African children who were starving. So from a very young age Anja developed a very strong fascination about African children and her whole life she had a dream to someday help them and make a difference in Africa. Anjas mom died of cancer when she was only 23 years old and since she died Anja have been struggling trying to find peace of mind. Loosing her was very difficult and Anja needed to find meaning with her life. So she decided to follow my dreams and I established her own NGO and selling all her belongings gave Anja a freedom of independence to travel and make a difference without worrying about material things in her life.

Jacobsen: What was the original moment of making the separation between the real and supernatural to you? When did you realize others continue to believe superstitions? Why were these an important realizations for you?

Christel: Anja traveled alone to Nigeria where she met children who had been tortured and beaten almost to death because they were accused of being witches and therefore left alone on the street. What she saw were so barbaric and terrible and it left a deep impression on her.

That's why Anja decided to sell everything I owned in Denmark to devote her time and life to help "witch children" in Nigeria.

For centuries, using magic or witchcraft has used the term witch doctor to describe someone who is believed to heal. Some historians claim that these early physicians and many of the potions they created probably led to modern medicine. Mentions of witch doctors are commonly found in early African literature, but in general terms, the reference could apply to early folk medicine practitioners worldwide. In various parts of the world, early medical practitioners might have been referred to as shamans, healers, or wise men or women.

Jacobsen: Your first project was the renovation of a Tanzanian school in August, 2012. What were the renovations? Why Tanzania?

Christel: It was because it was the journey where she needed to find out if she had it there was going to be able to make a difference on its own. And she would choose a country, which of course was not too dangerous, now she travelled alone and so reminiscent of Tanzania on Malawi and it is countries that are next to each other. Anja found in Tanzania an organization that lacked support for, to get a refurbished village school so this is why it was like Tanzania. It could also have been in Kenya but it was Tanzania. It was supposed to be a country in East Africa.

Jacobsen: Your second project was the Children Center (part of ACAEDF) on June 1, 2014 onward. What was this center for children? Why was this the next project? What have been the observed impacts of the work on it?

Christel: The Children Center was not the second project. Anja has been in Nigeria several times before she started DINNødhjælp. Children Center means that the children get a safe and loving home, where they can have a good upbringing. Furthermore, the Children Center also means that we can help people in the local communities with our Hope Clinic.

At DINNoedhjaelp's orphanage in Nigeria all the children goes to school. Education creates development and the children's schooling also helps to process their horrible past of severe torture and abuse. Besides going to school, we also work with the children every day through singing, dancing, playing and by being creative. Drawing and painting are the children's favorite activities. The children develop their senses and creativity. Drawing and painting is an expression of their spontaneity and imagination. Children express their best thoughts, memories and feelings through play, song and dance.

Jacobsen: The organization participated in the DR2 documentary entitled "Hell's Heroes (Helvedes Helte)" in 2014, "A Dane saves the world (En dansker redder verden)" in May 2015, and "Anja and the witchchildren (Anja og heksebørnene)" in October 2016. What were the main contributions to these documentaries? What are some of the more important messages, or even individual narratives, from the documentaries — each one, respectively please?

Christel: The documentary was to inform about the existence of witchcraft and superstition in Nigeria. It gives the viewer a good glimpse into everyday life in Nigeria. But it also provides a glimpse into rescue missions in Nigeria.

Jacobsen: What are the main issues surrounding high superstition leading "inhumane treatments of torture, dehumanization and banishment by the family and the local community"?

Christel: When a child is accused of witchcraft, the accusation often come from either an uncle, grandmother, stepmother/father, neighbours, people from the village or the priest. Actually it's very rare they are accused by their own parents. But once a child has been accused of being a witch, there is no turning back. Villagers will require the child to either be exorcised from the so-called evil spirits through nightly exorcism rituals by the local priest. Or the parents take the child to a witch doctor, which they believe has magical powers to exorcise the witch from the child. But this cost a lot of money and superstition is most common in the poorest areas. The children are often tortured and killed. The parents can't stand against the whole village and the local occult groups who all demand that the bewitched child must either be tortured to death or banished from the village. The parents or the family members of the accused child are at risk of being killed, if they let their child stay in their house. The parents will believe that the child is bewitched if it is a priest who appointed the child to be a witch. The child is killed either by being beheaded, buried alive, burned alive or simply beaten/tortured to death.

Jacobsen: What is the line of reasoning and evidence for this? What leads to these terrible consequences? What are the main solutions to prevent it, and to protect children, and so families and communities from superstitious hysteria?

Christel: Witch accusation is a growing problem in many African countries, especially in Nigeria. Witch accusations may occur due to death and illness in the family, harvest failure, layoffs or infertility. According to traditional African beliefs everything has a supernatural source, and it is often the children who are made the scapegoats.

In the past 50 years in Nigeria, many new independent churches emerged with roots in Pentecostalism. The churches are charismatic, and they use rhythmic singing and dancing in the worships services and a high emphasize on healing by laying a hand on a person and the ability to speak in prophecy. Unlike the official Pentecostal church these churches give room for traditional African belief in witchcraft and black magic.

The belief in witches, black magic and sorcery does not only exist only in Africa, it exists throughout the whole world, and it's not an outright "African thing". Witch-hunt goes back several hundred years, and is also a part of Danish history. Every year at midsummer we burn witches made of clothes at the stake. Millions of innocent people have throughout history been killed due to superstition and witchcraft. Mainly this has affected both children, women and old people for many years.

The superstition in Nigeria is most prevalent in Cross River State, Rivers State and Akwa Ibom where DINNoedhjaelp works. In Akwa Ibom mixed Pentecostal understanding of Christianity mixed with local tribal religions leads often to a deadly cocktail that involves belief in witches and exorcism of witches.

Jacobsen: You provide children with "plenty of care, medical treatment, food / lodging and education, which enables a stable life for the children so they can become viable in the society." How does this look on the ground? What have been some of the worst individual cases you've seen, and the improvements in the child's life with these provisions?

Christel: There are many bad cases, one should keep in mind that children are tortured, and many children are being killed on a daily basis. It is estimated that there are 10,000 children each year, which are accused of being witches only in Nigeria.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved, even donate to DINNoedhjaelp?

Christel: People involves through our facebook pages, our website and through Anja's lectures around the world. It is important for Anja to know that every cent of the money collected is used correctly to the benefit the children. To ensure the collections reaches the projects, Anja travels to Africa herself with DINNoedhjaelp's funds. This prevents the money from being lost in corruption and she can ensure the funds are used the right way.

You can donate and become a member at DINNoedhjaelp, through our website.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion, Christel?

Christel: It is important that the world will be aware of the superstition about witches still exists in some places of the world. We have as human beings have a responsibility to help others when we have the possibility — if it is to help your neighbour, a man in distress you meet on the street, or people you will never meet. It is the only way we can make the world a better place for all- if we dare to take the responsibility to help.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time today, Christel — was a pleasure.

In-Depth Chat with Gary McLelland — Chief Executive, IHEU

September 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Gary McLelland: Hi Scott. I grew up in a small town outside of Glasgow on the west coast of Scotland. It was a happy childhood. I was also fortunate to have family in a small village in the north west coast of Scotland called Arisaig, where I spent most of my summer, Christmas and Easter holidays. It's a stunningly beautiful village surrounded by some of the most majestic highland landscapes, and tranquil beaches. I still try to return for a few days each summer and feel very lucky to have such warm memories of that place from when I was young.

I was raised as a Catholic, and attended Catholic schools. The Church had a fairly important place in my family life. Whist the place of the Church was important, for rites of passage, celebrations and school life, my family was never overly-religious, and were (and still are) socially progressive and open-minded.

My experiences with religion when I was young was fairly positive. I enjoyed the ritual and community aspects of Church, and the sense of 'belonging' felt very positive. I was probably more religious than most young teenagers my age, I would attend Mass and take part in other Church events fairly frequently until my mid-teens.

In my late teens I began to have doubts about my beliefs. Not my beliefs *per se*, but I knew that people smarter than me, with more worldly experience had rejected religion. So I felt it was strange that I seemed to have such a rigid idea about something which so many people had differing opinions about. Eventually I rejected religion, not an easy process — but eventually I embraced atheism and eventually humanism.

I felt angry — angry that the state-funded education system allowed, even encouraged me, to follow one particular belief system. I don't want to exaggerate the situation, I received a very good education, at a very good school, but I was never exposed to any views, beliefs or philosophy which challenged my religious beliefs. I feel so angry that this system is allowed to continue.

It was this that inspired me to get involved in secularist and humanist campaigning.

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

McLelland: I have been made to feel very welcome by everyone in the international humanist community since beginning in February. I want to be very open and accessible, and hope that folk feel like they can get in touch with me, to offer ideas, ask for support or have a moan.

We are clearly seeing an increase in divisive politics all around the world at the moment. Populist leaders of the far left and right try to divide and enrage people against each other, appealing to the

basest of our emotions and fears. This is clearly a concern for those of us who try to live inclusive, ethical lives based on reason.

And of course IHEU continues to receive a steady amount of request for support from people who are in high risk areas such as Pakistan and Bangladesh. This is one of the most challenging aspects of the work that IHEU does. To help support this work we launched a global crowdfunding campaign to raise money for helping humanists at risk (https://www.gofundme.com/protect-humanists-at-risk) and hope that as many people as possible can help support it.

Jacobsen: What have been some of the more heartening developments of the organization for you?

McLelland: Without doubt the most heartening aspect so far has been the reception by the amazing IHEU staff team. It amazes most people to learn that IHEU only has four member of staff! We are lucky to have such a dedicated, hardworking and smart team of staff.

The major development has been the start of our new Growth and Development programme. This is a series of targeted support, funding and activities which are going to be rolled out over the next three years to support new and smaller humanist groups in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

There is a lot more we can do to support and promote new humanist organisations in these regions, and we are working hard to do it. In order to do this we need resources, money. We're lucky to have so many big Member Organisations which help fund the work of IHEU through their annual fees. I have high hopes that we will be able to find other funding bodies to help support this work as well.

Jacobsen: As the chief executive, what tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

McLelland: As the Chief Executive I am responsible for the day-to-day running of the organisation, and report to the Board 5 or 6 times per year to update them on the progress being made. It's my job to make sure that the strategic aims and objectives of the organisation, which are set by the General Assembly and the Board, are acted upon in most effective way.

This means ensuring that our team of staff and volunteers and well managed and understand their place in the plan. It also means ensuring that we meet all our financial and legal responsibilities in the UK and USA (where we are registered).

One of the most important parts of my job is communicating with our members and supporters around the world, to communicate the work of IHEU, and listen to concerns and suggestions from members of the community.

It's a very interesting and stimulating job!

Jacobsen: Before this work, you were the head of communications and public affairs at the Humanist Society of Scotland (since 2013) and a director (this is a British term which means Board member) of the European Humanist Federation, and board member on the Scottish Joint Committee on Religious and Moral Education. What were the big takeaway experiences from these positions?

McLelland: That's right. I was promoted to head of communications and public affairs after having joined the Humanist Society Scotland doing research and policy work on education. It was a wonderful job, during which time I helped to make some real progress in challenging the

requirement to have religious worship in schools — something I'm glad to see the Society continue today.

In the European context I was always interested to learn about the similarities and differences within the humanist movement. Meeting other humanist colleagues from different countries is a really good way to get appreciation of the breadth and diversity of our movement. That's one reason why I want to see IHEU offer more support to less well-off organisations to fund delegates to our conferences in the future.

My work on the Scottish Joint Committee was interesting, I was the first ever humanist to be appointed! The Committee's work is mainly as a lobby group of religion and belief interest groups, with teachers and union leaders. It seeks to promote the subject of Religious and Moral Education (which is a very progressive curriculum) and develop it.

My main takeaway from these experiences is understanding the difference between tactical and strategic aims. Joining the Scottish Joint Committee will be an unpopular move for some, seeing it as 'buying into the system' rather than seeking reform. However, I believe that in some cases it is more beneficial to our strategic aims (secular education) to also be involved in areas that might not immediately achieve them.

Jacobsen: In addition, you did some humanist campaigning, and worked for the Mercy Corps European headquarters in Edinburgh. What were the tasks and responsibilities in these positions? What is humanist campaigning?

McLelland: My work at Mercy Corps was on a global citizenship project which sought to find youth leaders who have an interest in international development. The idea was that by bringing these youth leaders together with counterparts from Gaza, the USA, Jordan and other countries — we could share skills and experiences. We wanted to help promote and nourish youth leaders, with a view to developing the idea of global citizenship.

I was also active in humanist campaigning before working for a humanist organisation. I has a particular interest in dialogue between religious and nonreligious people.

Jacobsen: How did these positions help prepare you for this one? What were the unique perspectives and skills development from them as well?

McLelland: Having a background in the humanist movement was a great advantage, I already knew a lot of people, and they knew me. This was a big help.

Having an understanding of both policy and also international development were both helpful too. I would like to see IHEU work more with development work around the world. I think we have a key opportunity to help development organisations meet their aims through our vast network of members and supporters.

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

McLelland: Yes, you're right. The attack on women's rights' is a very worrying development. It goes without saying that we will always stand up for the woman's right to choose, and defend and protect the rights of women.

You're right to identify the different groups involved in this debate. I think it's important to acknowledge that we all have different jobs — the job of lawyers is not the same as the job of an activist. What is important is that we both understand and acknowledge that, but also ensure that we talk to each other.

I am particularly interested in the academic research around religion and belief, in law, history and sociology. I think it is so important that our movement engages with researchers in these fields, in a real way though — more than just being research subjects. I think we have a lot to say, and also have to be present to argue against some misconceptions which can exist about our movement.

Jacobsen: You earned a BSc (Hons) in psychology with a diploma in childhood and youth studies. Your master's dissertation is in progress. Why pursue the psychology degree? What was the research question and finding from the honors thesis?

McLelland: Yes — I have always had an interest in psychology. My interest grew into a passion when, after my deconversion, I read Freud's 'Future of an Illusion'. This fascinated me. After studying psychology for 4 years I came to understand the critiques of Freud and his methods — but I still believe that his opinions offer a really insightful view into the human mind, but more through a philosophical lense.

My main research for my undergraduate was on how individuals who identify as 'liberal catholics' make sense of their identity. I wanted to know how someone with liberal (pro-LGBTI, pro-choice, socially progressive) could identify with a belief system so closely associated with a conservative institution.

Jacobsen: What is the research question and tentative title to the master's dissertation?

McLelland: I'm glad to say that I have now completed my master's dissertation, on the question of "What would be the impact on the European Court of Human Rights' jurisprudence on 'blasphemy' laws if it was to adopt the same approach as the United Nations?"

In my dissertation I argue that the European Court of Human Rights has developed an idea that the right to "freedom of religion and belief" should also include a right for religious people not to be offended. I compared this with the approach of the United Nations, which is much more progressive, and argued that the European Court should reform along the same lines as the United Nations.

Jacobsen: Who is a personal hero for you?

McLelland: It sounds cliched, but I'm genuinely humbled by all the amazing campaigners I meet within our movement. At this year's General Assembly we gave an award to Dr Leo Igwe, an anti-witchcraft campaigner and founder of the Nigerian Humanist Movement, we also heard a speech from Narendra Nayak, an anti-superstition campaigner whose valuable work saw him targeted for assassination in India, also people like Kaja Bryx of the Polish Rationalists who despite having a full-time job is able to produce so much video material and interviews for the humanist movement, and also contribute as Vice-president of the European Humanist Federation.

It's honestly a privilege and and honour to work with these dedicated and inspirational people.

Jacobsen: How can the human rights orientation prevent encroachment of standard religious privilege into societies, especially secular ones — and even further ones more prone to respecting women's rights (in particular, reproductive rights)?

McLelland: Human rights is the framework through which IHEU seeks to engage with, and change, the laws and policies which affect our movement. The advantage of the human rights approach is that it is grounded in a secular and objective framework of law. Human rights takes the aim of increased material well-being as a presupposition — this leaves us then to debate the relative merits of different specific laws and policies to achieving this aim. So in this sense, human rights is the most effective way to address the threats you mention.

There are, broadly, two risks to this approach though. Firstly there is the threat from reactionary nationalism; we see across the world now populist leader emerging who want to tear down the idea of universal values, global citizenship and internationalism. The threat is that the delicate human rights framework falls down with it, or loses its authority as a moral leader.

The second risk is postmodern relativism; I see an increasing trend within sociologists of religion a desire to unpack and reexamine arguments which our movement takes as read. This includes the positive value of the enlightenment, a trust in rationalism and the idea of secularism as tools for the orderly and productive structuring of public life. The risk here is that we must be ready to make our arguments for secularism, freedom of religion and belief and enlightenment values in a way that I'm not sure many of us are.

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

McLelland: What I am confident is about is that we have the right people, the right ideas and the plans to carry them out. What concerns me is that we don't have the resources to make them happen.

Our members pay an annual fee which largely funds the work of IHEU. However, if we want to build our capacity and increase our activities we need to find more sources of funding and support. This will be a key focus for me in the coming months and years.

Thinking ahead further, there is a need for our movement to be bold and take leadership in a number of areas. We are lucky to have within our movement incredibly bright people, and I would hope to see them lead with ethical and practical comments on issues such as; work automation, artificial intelligence, environmentalism and challenging populism.

Jacobsen: What are the future prospects for the fight for the most vulnerable among us and their rights being implemented, such as women and children (globally speaking), because — as we both know — there are some powerful and well-financed people and groups who hold rights in contempt of the advancement of their theocratic endeavours?

McLelland: I think the future prospects are good. Bearing in mind the threats I mentioned above, there is progress being made. Our movement also has a role to play in ensuring that liberal religious reformers, non-conformists and heretics are defended and protects, as it's through these internal debates and discussions in religious movements that progress can be made.

I also think we have a lot more to do in relation to the rights of children. Too often the rights of children are completely overridden by the wishes of parents — I'm thinking here particularly of the issue of prayers at school and other religious issues.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

McLelland: I am grateful for the chance to talk to you. It's great to see how active IHEYO is these days, and I look forward to working with you all more.

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Jacobsen: Thank you for your time today, Gary, that was fun. McLelland: Thank you :-)	
Mederalia. Hank you .)	

An Interview with Will Zieburtz — Vice-President, SSA at the University of Georgia — Part 1

September 26, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Will Zieburtz: I am a fairly generic white guy. I grew up in the vast homogenized suburbia of northern Atlanta. My family was never particularly religious and I was not raised in any church environment. In a few months I should have undergraduate degrees in History and Linguistics.

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

Zieburtz: I am fairly lucky for a member of our club in that my family was never particularly religious. Sure I grew up on veggie tales, but that is objectively a funny show so I really can't say I'd rather that had not happened. I think my own personal atheism/secularism was motivated by a worldview informed by very basic historical knowledge. For a while when I was fairly young I would pray to all of the gods I could think of, "Dear God, and Zeus, and Thor, and Ra, and Vishnu, and Buddha, etc., etc., and any other gods I can't think of..." And then I would say my prayer if I actually remembered it at that point. It was not a long step from thinking I believed in all of the gods to realizing that I was being dishonest and I actually did not really believe in any of them. I suppose even that is more of a gradual process than a single event, but that is about as close as it gets in my case. Since then, as a historian, I have developed a fair bit of respect for theology in general and the different ways that humans manifest their religious belief and the ways that such things affect people and societies. In a sense dropping the dogmatically antitheistic aspect of my atheism might be a bit more seminal in my specific case, though here again I cannot think of a specific instance.

Jacobsen: You are an executive member of the SSA at the University of Georgia. What tasks and responsibilities come with the position? Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Zieburtz: Like most Vice-Presidents I don't have to do all that much, but one of my functions is to organize our volunteer work in cleaning up a local park which is important to the area. But really I'd say the most important thing our club does is provide a community for secular people at UGA that wouldn't necessarily have one otherwise.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfilment comes from it?

Zieburtz: Obviously anyone would feel a sense of fulfilment after a day of doing community service in the heat of Georgia to clean a park, but apart from that, being an executive certainly fulfils a fair number of personal psychological needs of having a community and it has provided me with a friend group I would not have had otherwise. I imagine the same could be said for many clubs which are not directly involved in a certain field or major, but I don't say that to demean the experience I've had with our club. One of many things I'd change about my life if I had the information I do now would have been to come here sooner than I did since I've mad

more lasting friendships and connections with this club than I have most anywhere else in my relatively short life.

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

Zieburtz: It pays to be diplomatic with activism. In the past our organization was a bit more "firebrand" with their public events. That helped them in some ways, but it was clearly harmful in others. As part of the national SSA we've tried hard to be a much more diplomatic organization, it might get us less media over all, but when we can actually reach out and make a connection with another human being that doesn't agree with us it can make the relationship a bit more meaningful and worthwhile. For instance, in the past we've tried to raise money for organizations which support religious freedom for numerous populations around the globe, including Christians where they are actually still persecuted in some way. When you can encounter a Christian on campus on a basis like that instead of, "your religion sucks!" you can have a much much more meaningful dialogue with someone, that might personally need it, than you would be able to confronting them in a more aggressive style. Being diplomatic and trying to foster interfaith discussion and activism is definitely worth while and I recommend it to any secular group whether they are on a college campus or otherwise.

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

Zieburtz: UGA is never blatant in secular violations if they do anything bad at all. In a sense you might say that the way clubs get support is biased toward larger clubs which is a bit like giving preference to the giant bible clubs over us or other minority religious clubs, whether it's us, the Bahia group or any other small club. Some universities have found ways to help smaller clubs better than UGA, but this certainly isn't targeting us, it's just an unfortunate fluke or legacy of administrative policy if anything.

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

Zieburtz: It really isn't terribly difficult to be secular on our campus, and the resistance we get while doing public events is usually just from fellow students, but really striking up a civil dialogue with those students is one of our main goals when we do a public event. So in a sense our main area of need would be to dramatically reform religious attitudes in the "bible belt", but if you did that our club basically wouldn't exactly exist any longer.

A Brief Note on Universality and Solidarity

September 27, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Sexual and gender identity minorities have rights, secular internationalist privileges granted the status of rights in light of their universality. On December, 2006, Norway presented the joint statement on the violations of human rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity, stating:

At its recent session, the Human Rights Council received extensive evidence of human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity, including deprivation of the rights to life, freedom from violence and torture.

We commend the attention paid to these issues by the Special Procedures, treaty bodies and civil society. We call upon all Special Procedures and treaty bodies to continue to integrate consideration of human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity within their relevant mandates.

We express deep concern at these ongoing human rights violations. The principles of universality and non-discrimination require that these issues be addressed. We therefore urge the Human Rights Council to pay due attention to human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and request the President of the Council to provide an opportunity, at an appropriate future session of the Council, for a discussion of these important human rights issues. (Strommen, 2006)

In 2011, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights released a report entitled "Discriminatory laws and practices and acts of violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity." The document delineates the generalized discrimination against those with sexual or gender identity minority status. It is not many individuals, statistically, but globally those numbers add up; also, the accumulated treatment of the vulnerable may stand as a sign of moral legitimacy, or weight if implemented.

In my own country, Canada, Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, or a national bill of rights, states:

Equality Rights

Marginal note: Equality before and under law and equal protection and benefit of law

15. (1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Marginal note: Affirmative action programs

(2) Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. (84) (Government of Canada, 1982)

These parallel the principles of universality. Individuals with gender identity and sexual minority status have rights, realized in official statements privileges, for equality with everyone else, disregarding any religious, social, or personal feelings or thoughts about it. These rights amount to protections and instantiation of further equality.

I suggest running the experiment in your own country or state, territory, or province, to see the results of the alignment of rights for those with sexual or gender identity minority status with the international community. If they aren't there, maybe, this is an area for positive activism for you.

The universality of the rights, and the areas for improvement of the lives of others who tend to be vulnerable, seems like an important note to me. Plus, it's easy to do it and something important, too.

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British Columbia Humanist Association Working for Marriage Equality for Humanists

September 27, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA) created a petition for marriage equality for humanists. It is an ongoing concern for humanists in the province of British Columbia, Canada, in the continual march for equality. The BCHA surpassed their goal of 500 signatures. You can help them out through donation, membership, or being a signatory to the petition.

The <u>British Columbia Humanist Association</u> (BCHA) is fighting for equality in marriage. The BCHA started <u>a petition</u> with a goal of 500 signatures. The 500 signature mark was passed, recently, which indicates the desire for the marriage equality.

The petition from the BCHA is directed towards the Minister of Health. This was preceded by a publication entitled "The Case for Humanist Marriage in BC" (2017).

They target, for consideration, the <u>changes in the religious demographics</u> of the province, the <u>Criminal Code</u>, marriage in the province of British Columbia (BC), marriage in <u>Canada as a whole</u>, and <u>marriage in other countries</u>.

Ian Bushfield, Executive Director of the BCHA, said:

There's a double standard at play in BC when atheist Buddhists can perform a wedding but atheist Humanists cannot. We're simply calling on the Minister to end this arbitrary discrimination.

Couples are increasingly turning to Humanist groups to recognize their bond and it's time for British Columbia to open that door.

Bushfield, on behalf of the BCHA, is <u>simply asking</u> for equality in marriage for a worldview apart from the religious but on the same plane of acceptance in law as the religions of the province, e.g. Scientology, Catholics, Sikhs, Muslims, and so on.

As Bushfield noted, "What we're trying to do is offer a ceremony that's based on our world view and our values, just in the same way that the Catholic Church can do that, the Muslim community can do, that the Scientologists apparently can do."

In 2013, the BCHA applied to be considered a religious body by the Vital Statistics Agency, which is the body responsible for provincial solemnization of marriages. They were denied, so no solemnity for humanist marriages through the Vital Statistics Agency.

The next attempt now is in 2017 with calls for the change to the definition of marriage. The call is being made to Health Minister Adrian Dix and involves a change to the Marriage Act.

Dix said the government will consider it, but will not do it at this time. In short, the petition at least had an impact via consideration, simply more work to be done.

"As legislative change inevitably takes a long while ... we certainly don't have a plan to do that right now...If there's an intention to reform the Marriage Act, we're going to obviously consult with lots of groups from faith communities, from secular communities, from everywhere else," Dix said.

The Health Minister did state that the BCHA can make applications to be marriage commissioners. There are concerns <u>based on limitations</u> for marriage commissioners: must live in the community, cannot give any wedding consultation/planning, and no vacancies exist for marriage commissioners in the province.

This is going to be a hard road, but inroads are being made.

Interview with Dave Chevelday – Shift and Site Peer Manager, Overdose Prevention Society

September 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: To begin, what are some of the main problems of overdoses in British Columbia, Canada at the moment?

Dave Chevelday: Two of the biggest problems we face is people still using at home alone, and users that have either detoxed or have been released from prison and have not used for a long period of time. The second problem is so significant because the opiate strengths are increasing all the time. Harm reduction sites can only keep people safe if they are using at the sites. Another stress point for sites is the strength and cutting agents are constantly changing in the opiates and make every overdose a challenge.

Jacobsen: What is the ratio, based on any anecdotes and data, for those using at home compared to using at sites? Also, to clarify for the readers, what are "cutting agents"?

Chevelday: The ratios are not clear at this time, because that info is not public. The term "cutting agents" is regards to what substances are used at the time when the opiates are being created. Also known as "buffs", which is what Fentanyl is, because you can take any garbage opiate and make it street grade by adding drugs such as Fentanyl.

Jacobsen: How do the problems here reflect the more national and international problems with excessive drug misuse/abuse? What demographic of people is most hit in B.C. by the overdoses?

Chevelday: The demographic is not clear at this point. An overdose can happen to either the rich or poor, first time user, or long time user. It all depends on the amount of Fentanyl in the shot you are using, or dragon you are smoking.

Jacobsen: What is the main social injustice surrounding overdoses in B.C.?

Chevelday: The main social injustice is Mental Health. The main use for opiates is one trying to self medicate, or escape from your inner problems. Detoxing from narcotics is not a solution. The only way in which we as a society can win this war is by combatting it from the inside, and by this I mean a better Mental state. That is the only way to truly fight the need for mind altering substances.

Jacobsen: Why do citizens in one of the highest quality of life places in the world self-medicate?

Chevelday: For the most part, self-medicating is someone trying to escape from their mental problems.

Jacobsen: What are the main means of educating through peers and for the public of the Overdose Protection Society?

Chevelday: At the present time, Overdose Prevention educates at the site as often as possible and we also have a Facebook page: Overdose Prevention Site.

Jacobsen: People can look at the website for more information on the Overdose Protection Society. How can they become involved, even donate, to the Overdose Protection Society — to save lives, or prevent further harm if not at a minimum reduce the amount of harm that is ongoing through overdoses?

Chevelday: Overdose Prevention Society is always accepting new volunteers. You can leave a message on our Facebook page and someone will return with all the info needed. Donations are always accepted, please make checks out to: Overdose Prevention Society. Every penny helps, donations go to the following, toilet and paper towels, drinking cups, juice, muffins, and other treats for the clients.

The management team from time to time use our own money to help get Items the site needs. The staff that has been there from day one do does it because they love there their community.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Dave.

An Interview with Will Zieburtz — Vice-President, SSA at the University of Georgia — Part 2

September 30, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Will Zieburtz: As previously mentioned, secularism does not really face any real institutional opposition at UGA, and it really does not have much in terms of an anti-secular legacy. However, one thing UGA does have a pretty deep issue with is a legacy of segregation. As an obviously white guy, I personally cannot speak to any current institutional discrimination, but as a historian I can definitely say that the legacy of discrimination and segregation is blatant if you bother to look into it. Apart from numerous institutional buildings named after famous Georgian segregationists, there is a plaque donated by the "Georgia Historical Society" which calls the civil war the "War of Southern Independence"... As a historian I find this gross to say the least. It presents a modern socio-political identity on the campus that I cannot condone. It is in some ways understandable if one looks at southern identity sociologically, but this is somewhat discriminatory and presents a radical regional identity which has been institutionalized much more severely than anything against the secular community could be.

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

Zieburtz: There really aren't many. In a sense our greatest threat is ourselves.... Really our most pressing concerns is a solid line of succession since organizations like ours often fall apart after leaders graduate. That is complicated, but I think we'll manage for now.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Zieburtz: UGA does not do a whole lot to ensure that small clubs are supported generally, and I don't think this is a problem with the staff, they do everything they can to support us and everyone else. I just hear stories of mythical lands where universities actually fund smaller clubs and don't force them to pay for every little thing necessary to run a club, rooms for instance. Obviously I cannot be too mad at UGA for this, if a club has more money they probably have more support and represent a larger student population, but at the same time if we had more support or didn't have to waste so much money on using decent rooms or table space we might actually be larger in the first place. Of course as I've mentioned, this is not just an issue for the secular community alone, all small clubs are surely facing similar issues.

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

Zieburtz: We really try to inform the public and our own group as much as possible. We often have talks on subjects which are only tangentially related to atheism to help support our members. For instance we recently had a talk on the biological, human developmental and sociological roots of morality for whenever the topic comes up in discourse with christians that ask where our morality comes form, which seems to be a common question among theists to atheists.

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

Zieburtz: Many of our issues relate to living better as a secular person, like how to deal with the family on holidays or specific issues which come up, like the previous example. We try to keep group topics pragmatically useful or at least comical and interesting. In one case the group let me do a presentation on the historical Jesus in response to the prevalence of "Jesus myth theory" in our community, but that was more about a personal wish to make our community less dogmatic and silly in the face of evidence and expert historical opinion.

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

Zieburtz: At UGA you can look us up on Facebook with our old, but catchier, name UGAtheists or the current UGA SSA, it is a secret group so you can join without worrying about being "outed" if you aren't yet. Or you can email ugasecularstudents@gmail.com and we will add you to our email list for any and all events. I've met enough of our colleagues at other universities to know that most would ensure that they were findable with a quick search online. You can also check out https://secularstudents.org/ if there isn't already an SSA at your school, they are extremely helpful and would love to hear from you if you are considering creating a secular organization at your school. Don't hesitate to ask, their job is to help you!

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Zieburtz: UGA does not discriminate against the secular population on any direct level. Even where they could be helping smaller clubs out more, that is just it, they aren't harming us it's just that we could use a helping hand like every other small club with limited funds. UGA has much bigger issues to deal with, like a very real issue of a legacy of latent racism just below the surface. The way that this university has not actively worked to cleanse its past history of racism and segregation is harmful not only to the African American students to but also to the local community which is in some cases literally descended from slaves which worked on campus. As a historian I find it unacceptable to retain vestiges of the past due to a modern misguided and regional social appeal. If one wishes to honour the past, put up new plaques about the legacy of institutional racism, improperly named buildings, that present a balanced view of the era which does not push a modern and yet still backwards social orientation.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time.

Zieburtz: If there is any single point I'd like to emphasize in all of this which might not be completely conveyed in text, it would be that the secular community at UGA is not really discriminated against, but there is at least one community on campus which is. There is even a monument to "confederate dead" just off of campus within Athens Clarke county jurisdiction, making it much more complicated to deal with. I am a native Georgian and I find this absolutely insane and unacceptable. The secular community is doing just fine, but there are real issues to address on our campus and our club leadership is currently looking at ways we can get directly involved in these sorts of issues.

Another Big Event for Humanist Alliance Philippines International (HAPI)

October 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Humanist Alliance Philippines International is in the midst of the planning stages for another big event this year, which will be the coalescence of four smaller events. One of which is the Masskara Festival in Bacolod City in the Philippines. Masskara Festival is a 3-week event in October.

Rekindle Ph and Rebelblood from The Union of Artists of Maharlika, International will be artists showcased at the event, as well as Lucille von Hoersten, J-rik Villa, HAPI Pro, HAPI-IC (Germany), and the Board of Trustees.

The benefits or proceeds from the big event will be donated to humanitarian initiatives in addition to Secular Humanist Development and Education (HAPI-SHADE).

This will be an event purposed for the inauguration of the elected and appointed officers for HAPI. These include the new executive director Alvin John Ballares (Bacolod), and the chief financial officer, editor in chief, and national representative of HAPI-LGBTQ Dwengster Bulaclac (Manil).

One other highlight of the event will be the HAPI General Assembly to plan future projects in addition to permit the training of the next generation of humanist leaders in the Philippines.

Marissa Torres Langseth, HAPI Founder Emeritus and Interim Chairperson, said, "This is a great bunch of humanists elected and appointed to run HAPI for the new years and hopefully for next generations to come. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to them, love and respect for doing great things for HAPI and humanity in general."

An Interview with Alvaro Efrain Aguilar Zanabria on Youth Humanism

October 4, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: To begin, you are in the Working Group of the Americas for the International Humanist Organization and Ethical Youth. Speaking with other young people of humanistic and ethical culture, or those oriented, what is your overall impression of them and their background?

Alvaro Efrain Aguilar Zanabria: My first impression is that we are people interested in the human and humanity in general; For their dignity, respect for their differences and the way they think, however different it may be. The Working Group of the Americas for the International Humanist Organization and Youth Ethics is composed of many young people from different parts of the continent, but it is this interest for the human being that makes us a community anxious to carry the humanistic message to the other young people of the world.

Jacobsen: In what other work are you involved with respect to humanism?

Zanabria: I belong to an intellectual group called IPIF (Instituto Peruano de Investigaciones Filosóficas). This institution, based in the city of Cusco, was founded by students and young professionals from my country and abroad. We founded it with the aim of grouping young freethinkers of the city and the country, in order to begin to question the reality and the circumstances of the place where we live.

From the beginning, our projects have focused on the realization of events aimed at society. We hold, for example, weekly exhibitions on philosophy, culture and science; but also bigger events such as book presentations, lectures and academic debates around controversial issues and national circumstances.

We had, among others, the debates "About the existence of god" or "Gender, family and society", the latter with respect to the characteristics of the new Peruvian education curriculum that promoted an education of equality, in which both males as women were shown as individuals with the same opportunities and rights; but unfortunately the country's religious groups saw it as dangerous to promote homosexuality and what they called "gender ideology."

The IPIF, with other groups of the country and people from abroad, is currently co-organizing the First Latin American Meeting of Free Thinkers, which will probably take place from May 28, 2018. This event is adding to several exhibitors from Latin American countries (Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Costa Rica, etc.) and already has three axes of work. First, lay state, which includes analyzing the viability of separating the state from Catholic interference, a curricular mesh with no religious tendencies, the pope's arrival in the country and the reflection of the latest pedophilia scandals. Second: Critical Thinking and Pseudosciences. And finally: Gender freedom.

Other constant works are our calls for new young members interested in the philosophy and development of critical thinking. It is also for this reason that we adopt philosophy as the main tool and attitude of my organization. We decided this, because we believe that it is the discipline that gives us the necessary attitude to achieve our goals, which are to study and ask critically

about those social institutions so accepted and shared in my culture; such as religion, customs or traditions and Peruvian idiosyncrasy.

I also belong to the *Sociedad Secular Humanista del Perú* (Secular Humanist Society of Peru), a humanist institution that carries out its main activities in the city of Lima and of which I am always pending. The SSH regularly disseminates scientific outreach programs on the internet to promote rationality and free thought, as well as secular activism in the face of abuses of religious institutions in my country.

Jacobsen: What are some of the initiatives of the Working Group of the Americas to expand the humanist message to young people?

Zanabria: The Working Group of America is in the search of new members from different parts of the continent to build a network of contacts and thus help to expand the humanist message. Regional conferences on humanism are expected to take place in the future, but for the time, Working Group is inviting to those youngs who are able to attend the FES (Future of Ethical Societies) conferences in U.S.

Jacobsen: What are the trends observed in the youth humanist movement in the Americas? What happens, specifically where you are, in Peru?

Zanabria: In my country, the Working Group of the Americas has much to do. To begin with, I believe that many young Peruvians have a clear ethical concern for our fellow citizens, although many have worried about this concern only for being correctly led by a religious dogma. This, I think, must be the first hand of the humanist movement, to teach that an ethics towards man does not depend on any external entity other than on human itself, that it is only humanity that has been capable enough to respond to problems he has faced throughout his history; that its rationality, its scientific development and its motivation for progress has always been constant.

Perhaps humanistic ethics can be understood in one society better than in others. It is not the case of my country. Religion and a wish for returning to a glorious past has made us move away from what reality shows us. The way they educated me makes me realize that for most people in my culture the only solution to all our problems is religion and an irrational confidence towards something that does not exist.

But I see changes. As I exist many people who wish to change the reality, which we wish, as a humanist friend would say: "betting on humanity". And we are not few, in fact we are many, from all parts of Peru and all with the purpose of betting on the capacity of humanity to define its own values and transform their reality.

Jacobsen: What have been some of the effective means of spreading rationality, empiricism, dialogue of compassion and humanism in general amon.g young people in Peru — 18–35?

Zanabria: I know humanistic ethics and its close relationship with rationality and scientific evidence in virtual platforms. Social networks; YouTube, Facebook, and other media are those that allow us to find potential humanists, young people have been created in religious dogmas by having critical thinking, but still remain in the void by no point to find principles that satisfy rationally.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion about what we talked about today?

Zanabria: The absence of democracy, racism, homophobia, religious fanaticism. Actually, there is a lot for what you work for; And I am very happy to recognize that the humanist movement is

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working to bring the humanistic ethical message to the young people of the world. For it is we, the young people, who will have to face the subsequent human crises.	

An Interview with Mary Farrell — Previous Executive, Secular Student Organization October 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Mary Farrell: I was raised in a Christian home in a rural area of East Texas. My family attended a Missionary Baptist Church. We were a "working class" family. I was "saved" at the age of 12. I had known since I was 8 years old that I didn't believe in anything the adults in my life were telling me was fact regarding the religion. I was silent. I played along.

I knew if I didn't, I would be considered as a "Damien" child straight out of The Omen movie. After high school, I attended college and got a degree in biology. I fell in love with science. Finally, something I could believe in was in my life now.

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

Farrell: My realizations regarding secularism were a bit wacky. When I was very young we had what was known as the "blue law" in effect in Texas. It made no sense to me that I could buy a pair of shoes on Saturday, but when Sunday arrived I was not allowed to. I remember thinking "This is just stupid!" I really thought something was wrong with me because no one else seemed to question it. We watched a television show called "All In The Family" back then. The character Michael Stivic played by Rob Reiner who was the son-in-law of Archie Bunker was an atheist on the show. I was amazed! That was how I knew that I wasn't crazy, I was normal, and I was not the only one who felt the way I did.

Jacobsen: You were an executive in a student alliance, which went the way of the dodo bird. What tasks and responsibilities came with the position? Why did you pursue this line of volunteering?

Farrell: I went back to college later in life after a divorce. By this time in my life I had connected with many other freethinkers, agnostics, humanists and atheists. The college was located in a small Texas town dominated by Christians. The college had three Christian clubs. There was nothing for the non-religious. I took the initiative to connect with the Secular Student Alliance and start an alliance there. It was rough. The Director of Student Life looked at me like I was insane the day I walked into his office with all of my completed paperwork including the club constitution I had written myself. He informed me that everything was in order, but I probably wouldn't be able to find a sponsor. With no sponsor, I couldn't proceed. I spread the word in my secular humanist community. I had a sponsor within 24 hours. Checkmate Mr. Director of Student Life. It was a glorious moment.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment came from it?

Farrell: Serving as President of my newly formed SSA, I was helping young people who were non-religious to connect. Some of them were not "out" and now they had a safe place to congregate and be with others like themselves.

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

Farrell: When you are involved in secular activism on a campus, be brave. Be ready for backlash. Push forward. When your flyers for meetings are torn down, just replace them with new ones. Don't engage in debates if you can avoid them. Keep it positive!

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Farrell: To continue a secular presence, the torch must be passed on to others as student leaders graduate. For many, this leadership role is scary. It takes dedication and time as well. This can be overwhelming for many students, especially when one feels they are under scrutiny because of it. Some secular students will even have lower grades given to them.

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

Farrell: Fighting the good fight to maintain secularism is a challenge at all times. Ostracism is a big issue. The main goal is to be accepted for who we are without judgement. Unfortunately, the right versus left issues in the country we are experiencing are amping up the fight to maintain secularism. A fine line exists between activism and extremism. Vigilance must be maintained to not cross that line.

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

Farrell: Our alliance was basically a support group. We shared stories about our experiences, we learned about new issues and had in depth discussions. We ate yummy food, we played games and we hugged each other when a hug was needed.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved and maintain the secular student alliance ties on campus, especially keep the organization from going kerflooey?

Farrell: SSA groups do the best at four year schools. Ours was a two-year school. It helps to attract new members with flyers, social media outlets, and entice them with free food! Build the group. Make your presence known. Encourage your members to plan activities they would like to participate in. Meet frequently, once a week is best.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Farrell: Even though the SSA is no longer active at this college, I do not consider it a failure. I consider it a success. I was able to do something that had never been done before against difficult odds. My legacy I leave behind is — If I can do it, so can you. Be fearless, push forward and you can be successful. Never look back.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Mary.

Sex Positive Culture With Angel Sumka

October 14, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Angel Sumka is the President of the Alberta Sex Positive Centre. Here we talk about sex culture in Alberta. We talk more here.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I find a sex positive approach humanistic. Does this seem like the case to you too?

Angel Sumka: That term fits, although I have never used it. I tend to focus on how sex positivity is not just about accepting our own sexuality and our own bodies, but also accepting the diversity of humans as it applies to sex and sexuality.

Jacobsen: For the youth, this is something important for the health of their lives. What kind of things should they know as the basics?

Sumka: That would highly depend on the age of the youth and where they are in their own development, but focusing on teaching youth the truth about how bodies work, with the real names for body parts, is a great way to start. There are some great resources created by professional sexologists that provide excellent guidelines as to what and when to teach youth.

Jacobsen: Many people come from a sexy negative culture. How can the youth understand that this isn't necessarily an approach to life that is the best for their well-being? It may be in some cases, but definitely not all.

Sumka: Sounds like you just answered your own question-we need to teach youth that humans are diverse, that there is no one approach.

Jacobsen: What are the damages to the life of young people when they take a sex negative approach as most cultures do?

Sumka: I am not sure I would say that most cultures are sex negative. However, sex negative values impact youth in the same way they do adults. Negative culture surrounding our bodies teaches us to be ashamed of our bodies. Negative culture around sexuality teaches us to be ashamed of our sexuality, etc, etc. Cultures that are steeped in heavy gender stereotypes teach youth some very troubling things about how to interact with one another, and many of those messages have been indicated as the support for intimate partner violence. Abstinence only sex education has been thoroughly studied, and the findings indicate that by teaching shame based sex ed, that the risk of pregnancy and sti's increase, not decrease. Studies on sexual repression show an increase in risk for addiction and other self harming behaviours.

Jacobsen: What resources can you recommend for the young for a sex positive life?

Sumka: Depends on where they live. Here in Edmonton there are great resources at www.sace.ab.ca and http://www.compasscentre.ca/home Read up on consent, risk reduction etc. Don't be afraid to reach out to your local pride centre, or to talk to a counselor if you are struggling.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings?

Sumka: Sex positive culture is not about encouraging promiscuity, but about removing the shame from sex, gender and sexuality. We believe that consensual sexual activity is healthy, and that every individual has the right to know about their body and to learn not just about diseases and risks but to learn about pleasure and how to talk about sex in a way that is consensual. Teaching youth that sex is only about disease and risk does not decrease their sexuality, just as giving them honest information does not increase it.

Chat with Bong Faner — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

October 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become a humanist? Was religion in the family?

Faner: I didn't realize that it started when I started to have doubts about religions and gods in 2000. There is no higher being to help humanity but humans themselves. Prayers don't really help at all but makes people feel good, making them believe that there is a god that helps them. There is religion in my family, I am the only atheist, but one nephew is an agnostic. Belief range from the extremely pious to passive believers.

Jacobsen: What was a pivotal moment in becoming irreligious?

Faner: In the late 70s and early 80s, Protestant sects or 'born agains' were starting to gain foothold in the Philippines and were converting Catholics into these groups. I had cousins who were converted. I started to get curious on why and how these groups were successful in converting people. I found out that their points of contention are that a lot of Catholic doctrines are not Bible-based and were just inventions by Popes and the Catholic hierarchy. In my own research, they were right. But I decided to take it one step further, is there really any evidence about god? I found out that there is really none, and it all comes back to faith — believing in the absence of evidence.

Jacobsen: What is your best argument for humanism?

Faner: History has shown that relying on the supernatural to solve human problems is an exercise in futility. Prayers did not prevent millions of death during the Black Plague. No amount of prayer can prevent natural disasters as earthquakes and hurricanes. 'Thoughts and prayers' after a mass shooting have been total failures. Only humans can help its own species. Science, which is a product of human minds, has helped humanity far greater than anything.

Jacobsen: Why are you a humanist in worldview and ethical life stance?

Faner: Due to my belief that humans alone can help themselves.

Jacobsen: How does the humanist life influence your political and social views if at all?

Faner: It doesn't. I take so many factors in consideration.

Jacobsen: How did you find HAPI?

Faner: During the early years when my non-belief was evolving, I read books and searched the Internet about atheism in the Philippines. Being a very religious country, I never expected a lot of Filipino non-believers. I was wrong. I never expected to find a lot of young, Filipino non-believers. I learned about the existence of the atheist group PATAS, Filipino Freethinkers, and other groups. One of these groups morphed into what has become HAPI.

Jacobsen: Who is a hero within it?

Faner: Marissa Torres Langseth. She was the founder of both PATAS and HAPI. I admire her zeal. I don't know her personally and based on what I have read, not everybody likes her, but I can't judge her either way. I still see her as a beacon of hope for freethought in the Philippines.

Jacobsen: Any favourite books relevant to humanism?

Faner: I haven't read any book exclusive to humanism, but I have read plenty of books about non-belief and evolution. What are your hopes for humanism in the Philippines? I hope that Filipinos will see the light and wean themselves from relying too much on praying for everything from passing an examination in school, to averting natural disasters. I would like to see the day when they would use rational thoughts in solving everyday problems and improving their lives.

An Interview with Nick Khaligh, Vice President of the Secular Student Alliance at George Mason University

October 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Nick: My father is a native Iranian, and my mother's side of the family is a mix of Italian and Irish. I've lived in Northern Virginia my whole life, and am now in my fourth year studying psychology at George Mason University.

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

Nick: I am incredibly grateful for the way my parents raised me and encouraged me to think critically. My mother, although raised in a catholic family, refused to tell me how to think regarding religion. She always made it clear to me that she would support me no matter what I believed, and she encouraged me to come to my own conclusions. Whenever I brought up God or Jesus (Christianity was the religion I came in the most contact with), and asked if they were real, she wouldn't give me a yes or no answer. She would instead ask me what I believed. This deliberate refusal to indoctrinate me is one of the things I am most grateful for, and I am under no illusion that I would be who I am today if she had simply told me "yes" all along.

My father played an equally important yet different role. He has told me many times that I was an especially inquisitive child. Whether it was about his instructions or just about how the world works — I always wanted to know *why*. As cliché as it sounds, my parents joke about how my go-to line as a child was "prove it!" And, to my great benefit, my father always did his best to do just that. Even though it's much easier to fall back on "because I said so," he would explain things to me, and he wouldn't sugar coat his answers either. I am incredibly grateful for the way this set me up to be inquisitive and skeptical as an adult.

Jacobsen: You are the vice president of the Secular Student Alliance at George Mason University. What tasks and responsibilities comes with this position? Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Nick: I pursued the role of Vice President not because I was especially keen on organizing group events or doing internal housekeeping, but because I wanted to try and be a model representative of not just our group's, but secularism's ideals as a whole. I'm aware of the widespread misconceptions about what it means to be an atheist, and I try and dispel them whenever I can by being not only outspoken and forthcoming about my views, but also by being as reasonable and articulate as possible in discussing them. Far too often, atheists become too combative or condescending when discussing religion, and this does more harm than good.

Jacobsen: What have been some historic violations of the principles behind secularism on campus? What have been some successes to combat these violations? What are the main areas of need regarding secularists on campus? What is your main concern for secularism

on campus moving forward for the next few months, even years? What are the current biggest threats to secularism on campus? What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Nick: I think all of these questions can be touched on with one answer. While this isn't something I have witnessed first-hand on my own campus, but rather something I've heard and read quite a bit about, there's a disturbing rise of the censorship of ideas, topics, and speakers that make people (especially college students) uncomfortable. In fact, within the past week, it was revealed that a radio station cancelled an appearance by Richard Dawkins because of his previous criticisms of Islam. In addition to this, there is a very real and well-founded fear that speaking out against or criticizing a religion as a set of ideas will be misconstrued as bigotry or hate speech. I know this is true because I closely follow the work of Sam Harris, who is one of the most reasonable, articulate, and intelligent people I know of, and yet he is still commonly misrepresented by many religious apologists as a bigot. In my opinion, this is one of the biggest threats secularism faces both now and in the future. Free speech is at the absolute core of our western values, and an inability to have honest discussions about sometimes inconvenient truths will hinder our social progress and prevent our policies and practices from lining up with reality.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Nick: I get great fulfillment out of playing devil's advocate, challenging beliefs, and seeking the middle ground. The human mind tends to see the world in discrete, black-and-white terms, and this is especially so when it comes to politics or religion. I always strive to (I'm under no illusion that I'm perfect at this) be as reasonable, impartial, and logical as possible, and I take pride in my perspective. I try and always embody the values I believe in, so that others may follow.

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

Nick: Stop hiding in the shadows. There is most definitely a stigma against atheists, agnostics, secularists, etc., but neglecting to speak up and hiding your true views does nothing but contribute to it. While there is obviously a time and place for everything, I know many people who habitually shy away from expressing their beliefs out of fear of conflict or judgment. Speaking out in a reasonable and confident way causes others who are keeping quiet to realize they're not alone, potentially giving them the courage to speak up as well. Conformity is a powerful social influence, and the less religion appears to be unanimous, the more people will be able to break the mold.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Nick: More people (especially critics of religion) need to learn how to have conversations with those they disagree with, without it becoming a competition. In order to persuade and have other people see our point of view, we have to avoid framing ourselves as enemies. Being combative or condescending, especially when discussing politically charged topics, instantly causes the other party to see you as a competitor rather than a collaborator, and no progress can be made that way.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Nick.

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