

CANADIAN ATHEIST: SET IX



SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

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Scott

Canadian Atheist

West Coast Christian Accord

October 21, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The West Coast Christian Accord got founded, recently. According to the information provided by the WCCA website, the purpose is to bring together leaders and church communities under one literalist Bible-inspired ideological banner on gender identity and human sexuality.

The WCCA has a specific audience, too, as explained, “The target of the Accord is first and foremost traditional, biblical based, evangelical leaders and churches” (2018).

The meaning of “Evangelical Christian” becomes a problem for some believers now. Not according to an outside source, but to the internal leadership and community; hence, the reason for the WCCA. They’re, potentially, fragmenting.

The shifting landscape of culture created the need for the WCCA within the Evangelical Christian community, to reaffirm – among the believers – their “long-held, traditional beliefs, convictions, and lifestyles” tied to the bringing together of religious leaders firmly adherent to Evangelical Christian tenets within the nation (Ibid.).

Bearing in mind, of course, the supermajority religious slice of Canada remains Christian at 67.3% (StatsCan, 2016). Granted, “Christian” does not mean “Evangelical Christian” in full.

However, the vast historical conceptual waters of the Christian colonial power are Christian ideas, symbols, beliefs, rituals, architecture, art, authority and hierarchy, implicit sensibilities and mores, and notions of morality seeping several facets of the nation. The WCCA seems as if a story of the oppressed most, the beleaguered majority, the downtrodden almost all.

To be an Evangelical Christian in Canada, in general, and with only a modicum of historical knowledge or updated statistical information of the demographics, the waters seem like smooth sailing compared to other subpopulations.

The main advertised figures of the WCCA include the following: Kevin Cavanaugh who is the Lead Pastor at Cedar Grove Baptist Church & President of the Surrey Pastors Network, Dave Carson who is the Pastor at Hope Vancouver & the Secretary of the Association of Christian Ministries Vancouver, and Giulio Gabeli who is the President at the Association of Christian Ministries Vancouver & the Senior Pastor at the Westwood Community Church.

For individual Evangelical Christians who disagree with the document and its contents, these are the religious leaders who affirmed the full WCCA value set through becoming signatories of the WCCA.

That is to imply, other churches exist with other leaders with different values more applicable to personal tastes and preferences for you. Those values and preferences in contradistinction to the interpretations of the Bible of the signatories.

To those within the nonbelieving community with an interest in its contents, the values and preferences of the WCCA, when read, seem to show the general assumptions about this sector of the Evangelical Christian community, which remains observable [here](#). No sincere surprises there.

The WCCA appears to reflect a reaction to two things, as identified by them in fact. One comes from the loss of dominance in the local culture, as other cultures request and acquire

representation, as per the statement about the change in “long-held, traditional beliefs, convictions, and lifestyles” (West Coast Christian Accord, 2018).

Two emerges from the reaction or cultural opposition to SOGI 1 2 3, related but sufficiently distinct from the first concern. Perhaps, the “two” can be considered a derivative or subset of “one.”

A *CBN News* clip exists [here](#) on the webpage. If you watch it, the first opposition, against SOGI 1 2 3, comes from Laura-Lynn Tyler Thompson, who is a motivational speaker. She, in a moderately concerned and exasperated tone, asks, “Who decided that this was okay to teach our children?” (Ibid.).

Another woman named Kari Simpson, Executive Director of Culture Guard, opined, “All those beautiful qualities that make young girls beautiful girls and women are being, basically, vilified. The things that make our boys, boys, are being, you know, taken from them. So, things of equating young men to being strong protectors is something that is now evil” (Ibid.). Simpson argues the curriculum is child abuse.

Morgane Oger, who supports SOGI 1 2 3, stated, “The idea is to teach kids that there are gay kids. There are trans kids. There are trans parents and gay parents, in our society, and everyone is wanted and desired. It is the role of the schools to teach the following of our laws, right?” (Ibid.).

Simpson disagreed. That is, it is a “hedonistic cult” being implied, where there are no boundaries and then shifting the culture from the heteronormative (Ibid.). Oger affirmed human rights.

Oger explained, “Well, actually, in Canada, parents’ rights are limited. And children’s rights are put ahead. So, the child has a right to be protected from the parents, when the parents behave badly.”

Pastor Cavanaugh (mentioned earlier) opined, “This is very scary stuff... Our problem is not the teachers, the educators, the administrators. This is a battle in the heavenlies.”

He thinks Satan or the Devil is attacking the children. Religion becomes spiritual in theory within the view of Cavanaugh, but the actual implications in the real world are political and educational. This form of religion: spiritual to the inside; political to the outside.

Near the end of the clip, and indicative of the WCCA and other moves in Canada from Evangelical Christians – some – and other sects of Christianity, Thompson firmly stated, “And the church is beginning to prepare for what it takes to fight for our kids.”

Keeping the biased tone of *faux* terror of the reportage, the issue was wrapped up with the frame of a battle between “an aggressive homosexual agenda and the faith community...” (Ibid.).

The WCCA seems to exist within this orientation as well: a purported “scary” battle of the “heavenlies” with the good, represented by God and some of the righteous Evangelical Christian “faith community” firmly adhering to the “traditional, biblical based” worldview, versus evil, represented by Satan working to war against the kids with the “aggressive homosexual agenda,” SOGI 1 2 3, a “hedonistic cult,” and a changing Canadian culture.

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Ask Mandisa 5 – Secular Parenting

October 23, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The basic principles of parenting do not change, whether religious or secular/atheist or believer. You mentioned a story in personal life with report cards with the youngest and the oldest child for you.

What are the basics or ground rules for good parenting? What are the means of eking out justice for violations of rules set out ahead of time?

Mandisa Thomas: I think many believers think atheists do not have rules and do what we want to do as far as our lives are concerned. That is not true. For parenting, it is setting rules for them. When it comes to education, we take it very, very seriously.

We offer as much help and advice as we can. We stay on top of them. We make sure they are doing their homework. We make sure they are doing their work. When they do well, we reward them. We take them out for dinner or give them something they like.

When they do not, we take away privileges. There is TV time on weekends. We can take that away. We do not allow our younger children to watch TV during the week. So, on the weekend, if you are not doing well in school, you will not watch TV at all, not play video games.

You will do the work, study more. We will make sure you are improving in that area. For us, we like to set those rules early to make sure that they know the educational process is important. That they are not going to rely on this rule being something negotiable.

Jacobsen: If this comes to things with significant impact over the long-term in a young person's life, especially in a knowledge economy now, how do you gauge how a child is doing in education at various levels?

How do you keep them in bounds in terms of satisfactory to even exceptional grades?

Thomas: It is important to understand every child learns differently. That not every child will be as academically inclined as others. My middle child is more of a creative type. He is more of the type that tends to like working more with his hands than actual readings of the books and such.

But we do challenge them to go beyond their comfort zone. My middle son, my oldest son, who did not have as good of a report card this quarter. We will challenge him to do more reading at his grade level or above.

For that, we understand that he does not have to read all the hard science or literature books, but the basic stuff. He needs to keep up with the work. If there is something that he is trying to give up on doing, we will make sure that he is engaged in the learning process.

So, he gets better. We do not allow our children to give up on anything, especially not when it comes to their schoolwork. They are not allowed to just tap out and give up there. Now, there are extracurricular activities that are not necessarily of interest to them.

My sons do not like basketball or sports that much. That is okay with us. They are at Taekwondo and things like that. So, we do not push them to sports that kids are expected to like. But when it comes to schoolwork, if they need help, we always encourage them to ask questions and let us know when they need help with tutors or tutoring.

When they need assistance, we can get it to them. But we will not know unless they tell us, or if we look back on their work, which is something that we do. All our children have been raised independently enough to speak out, speak their minds, when they are behind.

So, we do not need to check up on them. Or there will need to be a bit of a disciplinary action on our part, or certain privileges will be revoked should the performance not improve.

Jacobsen: How do you work to build those relationships with faculty, administrators, teachers and community to provide a proper environment for not only your own kids but other kids, especially living in a pluralistic community with a variety of faiths and non-faiths?

Thomas: We make sure we keep an open line of communication between ourselves and the teachers. They have all our contact information. So, if there is a problem in any form, we can respond and communicate very quickly. We can respond very quickly.

Because we are such a liberal and progressive household. Our doors are pretty much always open. We allow our kids to participate in most activities that are of interest to them. Even if we do not engage with our neighbours all the time, we make sure we are friendly and communicating enough.

That if they need something then we will be right there. That has been very, very helpful for us with older children. We have a daughter who just graduated college. We have pre-teen and teenage boys too. Keeping the line of communication open has been, first and foremost, the most important thing.

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

Thomas: Thank you.

Interview with Dr. Sven van de Wetering on the IAT, Prejudice, Xenophobia, and Canada

October 24, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Sven van de Wetering was the head of psychology at the University of the Fraser Valley and is now an associate professor in the same department. He is on the Advisory Board of In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal.

Dr. van de Wetering earned his BSc in Biology at The University of British Columbia, and Bachelors of Arts in Psychology at Concordia University, Master of Arts, and Ph.D. in Psychology from Simon Fraser University.

His research interest lies in “conservation psychology, lay conceptions of evil, relationships between personality variables and political attitudes.” We have been conducting an ongoing series on the epistemological and philosophical foundations of psychology with the current sessions here, here, here, and here.

Here we explore the Implicit Association Test, reduction of prejudice and xenophobia in societies, non-null xenophobic societies, and fraught worldview interactions in Canada.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: As an expert in social psychology, some ideas emerge in the public conversation around subject matter related to the professional peer-reviewed literature of social psychologists. I want to focus, today, on the Implicit Association Test (IAT).

Many utilize the findings to bolster well-meaning programs to reduce implicit bias, not simply explicit bias. Does the evidence of Implicit Association sufficiently endorse the implementation of policies and programs in different areas of professional life of the Canadian public?

Dr. Sven van de Wetering: More than 20 years after the IAT was first developed, it is still not entirely clear what it measures. The thinking behind it is noble: The idea is that asking people explicitly about their prejudices leads to biased results because there is a social stigma attached to uttering racist/sexist/homophobic opinions.

Because most people want to avoid that stigma, they will tend to respond in a less racist/sexist/homophobic manner than they would if that social stigma did not exist. The IAT is thought of by many people as a way of circumventing the tendency toward socially desirable responding to surveys.

If it were true, it would be wonderful, but that does not appear to be what the IAT actually does. In most circumstances, the IAT does an even worse job of predicting behaviour than an explicit attitude survey does, which suggests that whatever it is that the IAT measures, it is probably not the person's “true” attitudes, if such a thing even exists.

I'm not as up on the literature on the IAT as I would like to be, but the most compelling account I have seen of what it is that the IAT actually measures states that these so called “implicit attitudes” are nothing more than a statistical aggregate of all the associations one has been exposed to with a concept.

So, if one has seen African-American people portrayed in a negative light more frequently than one has seen European-American people so portrayed, the IAT will find an implicit prejudice against black people, regardless of whether one actually believes the portrayals.

The fact that most people, including many African-American people, appear to have negative implicit attitudes toward African-Americans as measured on the IAT, or that the same is true of homosexual people, overweight people, old people, etc. suggests that typical portrayals of members of stigmatized groups still tend to be more negative than portrayals of non-stigmatized groups.

I think that is unfortunate. On the other hand, I'm not sure that specifically targeting people's implicit attitudes will be all that helpful. If organizations are finding that their employees are being rude or insensitive to members of stigmatized minorities, it might be more effective to target the offending behaviours directly instead of trying to modify performance on the IAT, which is probably easier to do.

Modifying performance on the IAT is not as helpful because those "implicit attitudes" do not, in many cases, drive the offending behaviours.

Jacobsen: In terms of psychological phenomena, and the reduction of prejudice in large groups including societies, what tends to reduce the degree of xenophobia in societies?

van de Wetering: I've been trying to figure that out for about 25 years, and still don't claim to know what's going on. Exposure to a great variety of people is usually helpful, especially if that contact is carried out under conditions of equal status, in pursuit of common goals, under fairly enjoyable circumstances, and in situations that allow people to get to know each other reasonably well.

Such contact is often hard to arrange, but I never cease to be amazed by the recurring tendency for xenophobic attitudes to be strongest in areas where there are very few members of minority groups around to be prejudiced against.

Beyond this, xenophobic attitudes tend to be activated by disorder and social threat. When people perceive the social environment as chaotic and uncertain, when they perceive a breakdown of the moral norms that help structure their lives, then people start to become more hostile to outsiders and stigmatized minorities.

I still wonder how much of the worldwide turn toward right-wing populism is driven by things like the terrorist attacks of 9/11. I like to tell people that cows, hot dogs, and falling television sets all kill more people in North America than terrorists do.

The point of my telling this to people is that this belief in massive, inimical forces sitting on the fringes of North American society plotting our downfall is so powerful for many people that it seems to change their whole worldview and activate the little seed of xenophobia that is probably buried in all of us.

Violent crime is still on the wane, terrorists kill very few people compared to even very banal risks that most people don't worry much about, and yet the terrorists and criminals influence our society in a way that those other risks do not. People think of terrorist acts as acts of war; I try to reframe them as public relations stunts. I'm fighting an uphill battle, though.

Given the literature on xenophobia, the actual answer to your question is probably that people will become less xenophobic if they are exposed to diversity, and if they perceive their society as peaceful, prosperous, and moral.

The problem, of course, is that there is always crime and deviance, and even if rates of crime and deviance are going down, any deviant act can be sensationalized.

There are powerful incentives to perpetrate such sensationalism, with the result that public perceptions of disorder are not very strongly correlated with actual disorder. Not an easy problem to fix, especially if you believe in free speech (which I do).

Jacobsen: Has there ever been a null xenophobia society? What have been cases in history of, apparently, optimized xenophobia, and explicit *and* implicit bias?

van de Wetering: I don't think there ever has been a null xenophobia society. Every once in a while, someone claims that a certain society has no xenophobia. When I do a little digging, it doesn't take me very long to find out that claims of the lack of xenophobia are greatly exaggerated.

On many measures, much of Canada looks to be pretty low on xenophobia. Despite that, it's easy to find cases of racist epithets, discrimination, hate crimes, and widespread implicit bias. I sometimes wonder if xenophobia is like temperature; you can try to drive it down, but the lower you get, the harder it gets to get lower it more, and you can never reach absolute zero.

Jacobsen: Are the interactions between religious and non-religious people in Canada immune from the forms of xenophobia seen in history and in other societies?

van de Wetering: I actually think the relations between religious and non-religious people are somewhat fraught in Canada. We have norms that more or less forbid the discussion of religion in a wide range of contexts, and that keeps the tension under the surface.

As a university professor, I find it very striking how hard it is for my students to admit to having religious beliefs. I'm sure many of them do; I teach in a so-called Bible belt. It seems to me that what we have is something like the arrangement we have with smoking.

It looks like we have no smoking on campus because smoking on campus is forbidden, and smokers therefore take their cigarettes elsewhere. Similarly, it looks like we have no highly religious people on campus, because strong expressions of religious fervour are non-normative, so the religious people take their fervour elsewhere.

This state of affairs is conducive to superficial peace, but not to a deep mutual understanding between more secular and more religious people. Maybe that is the best we can achieve, but it doesn't look to me like an absence of xenophobia.

Jacobsen: If you could build policy to reduce prejudice in Canadian society, and if you could recommend this to the political, policy-making, and decision-making classes in Canada, what form would the policy take provincially-territorially and federally?

van de Wetering: I honestly think most governments in English Canada are doing fairly well. I approve of official multiculturalism, and think that keeping a lid on really virulent hate speech while still avoiding stronger restrictions on free speech is probably about the right balance to strike.

I would probably let in more refugees than Trudeau has done, but not a lot more; the backlash that Angela Merkel provoked by letting in really large numbers of refugees will probably prove, in hindsight, to have been a counterproductive consequence of her actions.

It's enough to make me cry, because I thought her intentions were very noble, but political limitations on what is possible are very real and difficult to circumvent. Because we are far from most of the trouble spots of the world, we have a fairly easy time vetting our immigrants. We can afford to be more generous than we are, but not without limit.

The one area where we are really falling down in reducing prejudice is in our dealings with our First Nations. After our government spent decades trying to destroy their culture, we are finding that people whose own cultures have been severely damaged but who also sometimes have trouble participating fully in ours (if they want to) will often not do very well.

I am hesitant to propose concrete programs to deal with this problem; I don't think paternalistic white men should be taking the lead in dealing with this problem. I do think more funding needs to be made available to First Nations to assist them in helping themselves.

Jacobsen: What firmly does reduce prejudice, xenophobia, bias, and so on? What firmly does not?

van de Wetering: I don't think there is a magic bullet that will reduce prejudice and xenophobia in all circumstances. Laws against discrimination are a good idea in societies where discrimination is open and above board.

Once those laws have taken effect and been reasonably well enforced, unofficial discrimination goes underground and becomes much harder to prove in a court of law. The temptation then is to enact still stronger anti-discrimination laws and to enforce them still more vigorously.

At some point, I suspect that that strategy reaches a point of severely diminishing returns, and the costs and the threat of backlash are not adequately compensated by the small decrease in discrimination one is able to achieve by those means. At that point, other strategies may become necessary.

I am wondering if the #MeToo movement is pointing the way. The laws against sexual assault are already on the books, and they are even sometimes enforced. The issue is now that so many cases are not reported, and therefore not dealt with.

The #MeToo movement aims to change the informal norms surrounding the making of formal complaints of behaviour that is already illegal. Some sort of similar strategy might make sense in other domains of discrimination.

There are a couple of difficulties involved in trying to reduce prejudice. One of them is inherent in any form of social action: Social action differs from non-social action in that the objects being acted on (other people) are not some inert objects that passively accept the actions one undertakes, but are instead social actors like oneself, with their own goals and strategies.

Even as you are trying to persuade them to let go of their prejudiced ways, they are trying to persuade you to defend the integrity of your shared culture by stemming the tide of immigrants they believe are threatening it.

Related to this is a special difficulty specifically related to reducing prejudice: because people will resist one's efforts, and even undertake active counter-efforts, it is often easy to see them as bad guys.

The problem here is that the world is not divided into bad people who are prejudiced and good people who are not. Instead, the world is full of people, all of whom can be seduced by the good guy/bad guy narrative that brings such uplifting feelings of moral clarity and self-righteousness.

Once one decides that a certain category of people is the enemy, one has begun to be seduced by that narrative, the very narrative one is angry at the opponent for having fallen prey to.

I have met people who say they would feel very comfortable sitting down and eating a meal with a person who was transsexual, or a Syrian Muslim, or indeed a member of virtually any stigmatized group one would care to name, but who also say they would not be willing to talk with someone who had voted for Donald Trump.

To me that moment of moral clarity is the moment of downfall; one is just as big of a bigot as the person one is angry at, only the identity of the stigmatized groups has changed.

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

Ask Mandisa 6 – Atheist Experience, and Religion and Ethnicity

October 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You were on the Atheist Experience with Matt Dillahunty. You mentioned some were contacting BN through its main contact, several times, and trying to offer a sale or solution to the problems of all African-Americans, all black folks in America.

How are these reflecting the sales pitches and bases of a lot of North American religion?

Mandisa Thomas: So, yes, I had the chance to be on the Atheist Experience with Matt Dillahunty. It was a great experience. We see lots of support. But we also received inquiries from people trying to sell us, if you will, a way for blacks to completely leave religion.

It really does parallel the idea of a saviour. The idea of being saved from religion and indoctrination is unrealistic. It is also in conflict to the core mission of BN. The focus of our organization is not specifically to stop people from believing in God.

Our focus has been more on reaching the folks who already don't believe in God anymore, and who are questioning in favour of leaving because it will reach more folks out there and build the community for the people who are ready for it.

In terms of process, we engage believers. We engage in discourse and discussion. We do prepare each other for that. There are some people who are enlightened, if you will, or take the information given and then reflect on the information and then decide to let go of the beliefs.

There is that as well. But our overall focus is to focus on those who are already there, pretty much. For myself, specifically, I am under no illusion that all blacks will leave religion, not in my lifetime or 2 or 3 generations.

But there are always the people out there. It is almost an impossible task, to be a saviour to all black folks. That's just impossible. Many blacks already believe in an imaginary or impossible saviour.

That mentality just feeds over into this idea of people being helpless in doing things on their own, where they are responsible for their own actions. It is hard to dismantle and to reach other people.

This is something that we simply can't do alone. I am suspicious and wary of people who try to sell this idea of the liberation from all religion. Because, at this point, it is unrealistic.

Jacobsen: Does this, basically, blanket all black people as the same and all religious people as the same?

Thomas: Yes, it does. There is often a perception that all religious people are stupid. We try to discourage this. There are a lot of smart believers. We try not to paint a broad brush, especially for those who had religion and let go of the God concept.

Because there was something that compelled them to change their minds. We do not want to discourage those who are caught in the middle, if you will.

Those who are sincerely questioning their beliefs. Yes, just because many of us may not see eye-to-eye on the religious point of view, there are, often, other things that we have in common. The diversity within the black community has always been present.

That is something that we aim to show. If we can build our own support system and find common ground with believers, and I know we have, then we can continue to do so and help people understand that there are ways for us to disagree and work together for the benefit of our community as a whole.

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

Thomas: Thank you.

Interview with Vikram Parahoo – Mauritian Atheist

October 30, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Vikram Parahoo is a student in British Columbia. We met at a talk, decided to explore his background more. Here we get some insight into Mauritius and religion.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are from Mauritius. You study in UBC in Canada, which is one of the premier universities in the country. Why choose Canada?

Vikram Parahoo: I originally wanted to go to the US and applied to some universities in Canada to increase my chances. In the end, I got into a few in both countries and UBC ended up being the one I settled for.

Jacobsen: What is atheism like in Mauritius?

Parahoo: Mauritius, despite being a secular country, has religion imprinted all over its political and social spheres. The political leaders swear by their faith and get voted mostly by people who share the same belief in God.

Hinduism is the majority religion with about 50% of the population sharing this belief. Atheism is a really arcane subject in my country as most people just assume God exists because their friends and relatives believe.

Fortunately, unlike in some Middle Eastern societies, being an atheist is not a crime. However, it would be harder to get a job or be looked upon with the same respect if people know you are irreligious. The social backlash would be quite severe as well.

Jacobsen: How does that experience differ from the one in Canada?

Parahoo: I have been here for a few years and I honestly love this country. Religion is not a big deal here, so it is refreshing to live life without having religion shoved down my throat.

In Vancouver, I got to listen to Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris' talks with Dawkins having a speech down the street where I live, I met a lot of people who slowly helped me realize not believing in God is not a big deal.

I also have recently become quite a fan of the liberal values Canada bases itself on. I also had the chance of meeting like-minded atheists like yourself; and I had the honour of meeting Armin Navabi, the founder of Atheist Republic.

His book "Why there is no god" essentially taught me how to refute any argument I have ever heard for god. I also got to talk to Travis Pangburn of Pangburn Philosophy. He helped organize a lot of discussions on arts and science by acclaimed authors and philosophers, something that I rarely experienced in Mauritius.

Thanks to Travis, I got to see one of my favourite debater, Matt Dillahunty, have discussions with the likes of Sarah Haider and James Randi, all of these down the street where I live.

Jacobsen: How does an individual extricate or extirpate themselves from religion in Mauritius?

Parahoo: I cannot speak for other Mauritians but only for myself, my realization that no god exists started from when I was in what is the equivalent of grade 6.

We had a Hindi class (where they teach us the Hindi language but also add a lot of religious lessons to it) and the teacher asked us: “What do you all believe in God?” My answer was that my parents told me there is one.

He replied something along the lines of: “Scientists have concluded there is a god for a simple reason. They said that, when you look outside and you observe the planets, the trees, the sea and other such magnificent things, there must be a creator that created these. This is why we know God is real.”

For some reason, I never forgot these words as well as the first thought that came to mind when he said that. “Nature is complex; therefore, God is real? That does not make sense. Can it not be that something else created everything?”

Years later, as I learned more about evolution and the Big Bang theory, that question came back to mind. So, I told that story to a priest I met and asked him that as we know of evolution and the Big Bang that created life and the universe, how do we know there is a god?

He got upset and said something along the lines of “Well, what created the Big Bang? You don’t know. Exactly, that must be God.” That, right there, made me realize that neither I nor the priest actually had reasons to believe in a god.

Because if the Universe and the Big Bang were so complex that the only possible explanation is that they must have been created by a god, that God must be even more complex. So, what created the creator?

Then what created the creator of the creator and that just keeps on going indefinitely. From then on, I was somewhat of an agnostic. As I read more about religions and studied the philosophical arguments for the existence of god and realized they were all fallacious, I gradually evolved into the atheist and antitheist I am today.

I kept that essentially a secret until after I graduated our equivalent of high school. The reason being, at that time and for a few months until I left high school, I was the only atheist I knew. I had no knowledge of atheist authors like Hitchens or Dawkins yet.

And I was scared of what my friends and relatives would think if I told them. Once I left high school, I told that secret to a few friends who told me they did not believe either and that brought us even closer.

I was, at that point, so angry at my parents for making me believe in something so absurd that I started sharing posts on Facebook about atheism which my parents saw and realized I was an atheist. I was in that angry stage for quite a while. I was that edgy guy on the Internet arguing with people about how there is no god. It was a therapeutic way to appease myself and try to get rid of that anger.

Thanks to the way things are here, I slowly understood that my irreligiosity was normal and I calmed down. I still sometimes feel that anger, when I read about someone in Saudi Arabia being tortured for not believing in god or when I read that the US allows some bakers not to sell a cake to gay customers because of the baker’s beliefs in an imaginary sky wizard.

But I don’t go around trying to debate people anymore. I have better things to do with my life.

Jacobsen: Now, living in Canada and studying at a premier institution, what makes for the difficulty in the cultural transition? What makes this easier than living in Mauritius, especially in British Columbia with a much lower religiosity rate?

Parahoo: One of the good things about living in Canada and studying in UBC especially, it is that there are plenty of resources available to help us assimilate and understand the local culture better. My dad works in Dubai and I have been there many times.

So, I was not too estranged from more modern environments and, thanks to the Internet, I had an understanding of the way things work in the West. I had some anxiety issues at first speaking in English for that long and with as many people, in fact, many of my friends talk about how shy and quiet I was, at first.

As time progressed and after taking some accent reduction lessons, I assimilated in quickly and now, though I still have a bit of my initial Mauritian accent, it's easy for people here to understand me and it's easy for me to understand others.

Jacobsen: What is the central assumption about atheists and anti-theists in Mauritius? Do these impact life outcomes for the atheists, disagreeing with the general public? If so, how? What are some of the more severe instances of it?

Parahoo: As religion is a really core feature of the Mauritian society, if I were to openly tell people I am an atheist, they would probably look at me like I'm crazy. In some religious households, there may be a serious backlash.

I know a couple of Mauritians who left Islam and kept it secret from their parents out of fear for their lives and so they do not get kicked out of their homes. When it comes to working and living a professional life, being an atheist is a huge disadvantage, there is a lot of communalism going on in the society itself. Hindus vote for Hindus or give jobs to other Hindus, etc.

The way I define my antitheism is basically that I oppose believing in a god and I find a god belief as being irrational (I believe that there is no god) and I think religions are a net loss to society. When it comes to being an antitheist openly, that would definitely be worse.

Not only are you then going against the status quo, now, people also know that you oppose the belief in their higher power; that you find their beliefs irrational and that they would be better off without their imaginary higher power.

This position would probably leave you jobless. Unless, you agree to conform to their religious beliefs and do not disrespect them, but keeping your mouth shut when they have religious celebrations in the public space, when they have a morning prayer in your high school every day and that you have to stand there and listen.

Also, you have to respect other people's beliefs so do not complain if you are awakened by the Hazaan from a nearby mosque at 5 am. Though you will not be arrested merely for stating an opinion, you may run the risk of being beaten up by a mob of illiterate religious people who fiercely believe and want you dead for hurting their feelings.

In fact, if this interview gets seen in Mauritius, who knows what may happen to me if I do go back to Mauritius?

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

Shaykh Uthman Khan on Bias, Prejudice, and Xenophobia Against Muslims

November 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Shaykh Uthman Khan completed his ‘Ālimiyyah degree from Madrasah Taleemul Islam from the United Kingdom. He received a traditional Master’s Degree in Arabic and Islamic Sciences and Specialized in traditionalism and the traditional sciences. He also received an Academic Master’s Degree from the Hartford Seminary in Muslim and Christian Relations and specialized in Theology, Philosophy, Religious Scripture, Historiography, and Textual Criticism and Analysis.

His other academic achievements include certificates in Adult Psychology, Accounting, Phonetics, Phonics, and Phonology. Here we talk about anti-Muslim bigotry, Islamophobia, and terminology.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, when we look at the landscape of North America and some of Western Europe, we can see increases in what has been termed Islamophobia, which, in more colloquial terms, is anti-Muslim bigotry.

What are some of the more negative impacts on Muslims who have been living in these countries for a long time? If someone has been a citizen for a very long time, a Muslim who is Canadian, a Muslim who is American, and so on.

One of the obvious negative impacts of Islamophobia could be smears. It could be slurs against them. It could be attacks against them. Some might be more subtle in terms of an individual’s self-concept.

An older person might think, “Do I even belong?” For younger people, they might think, “Do I even fit?”, especially in adolescent years when they are trying to find their identity. What are some of the more nuanced impacts of things like Islamophobia?

Shaykh Uthman Khan: [Laughing] I think Islamophobia itself is overrated. Basically, the reason I feel Islamophobia is overrated: because I feel that Muslims put themselves into Islamophobia. They created this whole situation.

Jacobsen: What would be some of the mechanisms socially and culturally to create Islamophobia in the first place, not only as a term but as a phenomenon?

Khan: Sectarianism is one of them. Not assimilating with the West. “Assimilating” is a bad word. The mixing with the West and becoming more Western. A lot of cultural baggage, which tends to define what basic Islam is.

This cultural guise becomes a problem in how Islam is defined. There is a generation gap between how the older Muslims see Islamophobia and the younger Muslims see Islamophobia. It is essentially how they themselves see Muslims.

So, they will see Muslim in a certain way based on what the media is telling them. There are so many disparate ways to look at it.

Jacobsen: Also, part of that sociological conundrum comes from some sub-sects of Islam within North America or the West generally being insular. So, some Muslim communities in the West keeping excessively to themselves and becoming self-enclosed enclaves.

Khan: Yes, of course, you have two types of Muslims. Ones who are traditional. You have those who aren't traditional. It goes with every religion. So, everyone who does not follow in a particular way become an outcast from the system. When they are outcast from the system, the intra-religious problems become an issue.

Jacobsen: Should we even be using the term Islamophobia?

Khan: That's a good question. The term "Islamophobia," it is a made up word but I am afraid of Islamophobia and any harassment that can come my way because I am a Muslim.

But I feel the reason I am afraid of Islamophobia is because Muslims created this situation paired together with the way the West has portrayed Muslims to be. You paint a scary picture and promote it through the media. What else would you expect?

Jacobsen: Also, I note, at least, two definitions of Islamophobia in the media. One is the one any or most reasonable people would agree with. It is the obvious bigotry against Muslims as individuals. Another conflates that with bigotry against Muslims as individuals but also critiquing ideas.

That second definition, I think, is where people have their most disagreements.

Khan: Critique of the ideas means what?

Jacobsen: If someone says, "I disagree with the ideology of Islam. I do not think Muhammad was a prophet or the last prophet."

Khan: So, are you talking about disagreeing with the ideas or Islamophobia against the people who disagree with the ideas?

Jacobsen: I think it's a disagreement on the ideas. I think someone would be very likely delusional to think there isn't bigotry against Muslims as individuals, as other sectors of society experience bigotry against them as individuals.

Khan: Yes.

Jacobsen: I think they conflate when someone says, "I'm a polytheist," or, "I'm an atheist. I disagree with the monotheistic conception of the universe propounded in things like Islam and Christianity." People will say, "That's Islamophobic," in some cases.

But that doesn't get used for Christians in that case. That term then is used for both anti-Muslim bigotry as well as the critique of ideas.

Khan: I haven't seen that so much here, though. I haven't experienced it so much. I have experienced them both together, like when I am reading in the news. It goes together, based on the fact that Muslims are doing a particular thing.

People say, "We don't agree with the Muslims and what they're doing." So, they are having an idea with Muslim ideology – everyone believes in their own thing – but why is there Islamophobia because of it, or is there islamophobia because of it?

Jacobsen: There may. It may lead to it. For instance, some people may have the phrase in their head, “They don’t believe in my God.” In a way, it is a disagreement with the conception of God in Islam and then acting out based on it.

Khan: That’s interesting [Laughing]. I haven’t experienced it. It is part of the bigger Islamophobia. The bigger picture is having some sort of prejudice against Muslims.

I am not going to believe one side. It takes two hands to clap. There are the monopolized Muslims. They will promote a particular ideology and sectarian idea. The closed Muslims, those not willing to make civil society. Pair that with the media portrayal.

As for within an ideology I don’t know if I would call it Islamophobia. Within Islam, one sect would falsify another sect because it would falsify their beliefs but that is not Islamophobia.

Jacobsen: Now, I see. That’s interesting. Within some of these big net definitions of Islamophobia, they would include one sect of Islam disagreeing with another sect of Islam as Islamophobia, which is interesting. Would it clear the air in the conversation to explicitly make that distinction between people and ideas by using terms that have a prefix like “anti-” in terms of “anti-Muslim bigotry” rather than “Islamophobia”?

Would that be a small turn of phrase to grease the wheels of the conversation publicly, in terms of what we’re condemning and what we’re not condemning?

Khan: What do you mean? I understand what you’re saying. But you mean a change of term.

Jacobsen: In place of Islamophobia, we use anti-Muslim bigotry.

Khan: I don’t like both terms [Laughing]. To use Islamophobia and to use anti-Muslim bigotry, either/or is fine. The word Islamophobia has a bit of a bad rep now. Anti-Muslim bigotry: but it is a pretty general term across the board for all Muslims.

I don’t think we need to change the term. Islamophobia is still there. It is so vast and general. A lot of people don’t know what it means. [Laughing] anti-Muslim makes more sense. Because the term “Islamophobia has the word “Islam” in it. It is more ideological, “I am hating you. I am going to torment you because I do not agree with your ideology.” Versus anti-Muslim bigotry which reflects the different crazy situations that took place in Canada and the US. They were attacking Muslims and not Islam. Two attacks could have been to two people with different set of beliefs and both identifying as Muslim. For example, the Sikh individual who was mistaken as a Muslim and attacked.

They were mainly attacking Muslims. They did not care about the ideology. The term Islamophobia has more of an ideological connotation versus anti-Muslim bigotry, which is more of a Muslim connotation. It is just like Christianity versus Christians.

Jacobsen: Yes.

Khan: It is a totally different ball game now.

Jacobsen: I like it. For instance, we can note the likely more dangerous threats in, at least North America, of these ethnic and nationalist supremacist ideologies or people oriented towards that way. They have explicit bigotry against black people. It could even be in a church. One of these white young men goes to a church and kills several African-Americans.

Khan: Yes.

Jacobsen: We don't make sophisticated intellectual arguments. We simply identify, "This is a person who has bigotry against African-Americans, against black people, and kills them for it." It amounts to what I have heard called "homegrown terrorism."

Khan: Yes.

Jacobsen: It is a similar thing. A person looks at a woman wearing a *hijab* and thinks, "I hate that person, because she's Muslim." Whereas, these other people think, "I hate that person, because they have black skin."

Khan: Do they hate them because they wear the *hijab* or do they hate them because of their beliefs? I am talking as a theologian. It's both. It's Islamophobia, hating Islam, while also hating a Muslim.

Jacobsen: That person would be harassing or harming a young woman with a *hijab*. They wouldn't know about this woman. "Is she Ismaili? Is she Sunni? Is she Shia? Is she part of the Nation of Islam?"

Khan: Yes.

Jacobsen: It is one of those pixelated two-dimensional images of a person that they have in their head.

Khan: Would you consider that Islamophobia or anti-Muslim?

Jacobsen: It would be this weird characterization, or, rather, this caricature of a faith that they have in their heads. That they identify with this person wearing particular garments.

Khan: There's no specific term for Christianity. There's no specific term of Judaism.

Jacobsen: We do not have the phobias for those.

Khan: The existence of the terms – for Islam – tends to put Islam on the spotlight and creates it to be more of a target. Imagine if those terms didn't exist. That anytime an Arab person did something. No one would assume Muslim, whether a Persian person or a brown person. In a way, we have created an enemy by creating the term.

Jacobsen: That is an intriguing point. If I understand you, it is an automatic othering.

Khan: That's right. It is an automatic othering.

Jacobsen: It even arises in an American context. For instance, if one takes ethnic and geographic heritage, people will say, "African-American, European-American, or Asian-American."

Each with a hyphen to connect the terms [Laughing].

Khan: Yes.

Jacobsen: So, yes, I think, in some ways, it does poison the conversation.

Khan: Yes.

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

Ask Mandisa 7 – Atheists in the Holiday Season

November 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How can nonbelievers celebrate holidays like Halloween?

Mandisa Thomas: We can celebrate them however we want. I think it is important to understand what is behind a holiday before celebrating it. Christianity has demonized Halloween in particular. It is seen as the Devil's holiday. It is witchcraft and Satan.

I love the horror aspect to Halloween. It creates some really good movies. My kids love to dress up for Halloween. I have been dressing them up since they were babies. It is really enjoyable. I think that any good reason for us to celebrate something or to have fun is a really, really good idea.

Jacobsen: What are some misconceptions about holidays that, maybe, atheists have, simply enjoying the time with friends, families, or acquaintances?

Thomas: I think that atheists think that they cannot participate or partake of certain holidays once they leave religion behind. For example, Christmas is seen by many religious people as the celebration of the birthday of Christ. Historically, it is inaccurate. There are many religions that contradict that.

Christmas is also a pagan holiday about having fun. It is also about gift giving. It is an effective way for folks to have a good time. I think some atheists may not like the commercialism of Christmas, for example, which is understandable. Some atheist parents may teach their children about Santa Claus. Others may not.

I did not tell my children that Santa Claus wasn't real until they were old enough to figure it out for themselves. They are okay with that. I think there are many atheists. It can be challenging. Because to engage with family members, there is a lot of praying and religion.

It can be very difficult to make the decision as to whether to want to stay involved or not. But what we have done, as many atheist organizations (BN), we started hosting secular holiday potluck. It is for people who did not want to be around family or who would have been estranged around family.

Then they can fellowship with us. There is always a good alternative for people if they don't have one.

Jacobsen: When I think about what you said, I think about a phrase coming from some conservative Christian circles: "the War on Christmas."

Thomas: There are many Christians who feel the “happy holidays” thing is an attack on their belief. But I think many of them are mis-educated or misinformed about the origins of the religious holiday. They must understand that they are living in a very diverse world.

That said, “Merry Christmas,” isn’t always the best thing to express. They are not the only one with beliefs and cannot push them on other people. There are many other people celebrating all other holidays with Hanukah for Jewish people and Kwanzaa for many African-Americans.

There are holidays that take place around the Christmas holiday that should be acknowledged. It is a privilege that many Christians have assumed. Now, it is a fear that it is going to be taken away. But it really isn’t. It is simply other people having the opportunity to practice their traditions.

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

Thomas: Thank you!

Ask Mandisa 8 – Progressive Politics, Atheism, and Firsts

November 19, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, you just had election cycle, yesterday. Why do people tend to, not necessarily in a bad way, want to have things happen instantaneously when, in fact, they happen slowly over time with bumps of rapidity?

Mandisa Thomas: I think in this area and in this age of information and the internet and technology. I think many people, especially some young people, want to see change happen overnight. What must be understood is that many of the problems that we have in today's society didn't happen overnight, it is institutional and took time to build, so it will take time to dismantle.

Also, people's memories tend to be very short. That once something good happens then they can be apathetic, like President Obama being elected. Then they don't think a president like Trump can be elected. It is important for people to be involved consistently, not just on the global level but on the local level.

The States runs in those areas: local, state, and federal. It is important to get involved. They think it is an exciting thing. But often, it is boring and can be tedious. I think it turns people off, but we cannot allow ourselves to become so disillusioned that bad things start happening over and over again.

Jacobsen: What were some of the big wins from yesterday?

Thomas: The state of Colorado elected its first gay governor. The state of Massachusetts has its first black congresswoman. There was a Muslim woman elected to Congress. There was a lot of progress when it comes to Congress. The Democrats are now the majority in the US House. There was a narrow governor's race in Georgia and Florida. The first potential black governors. The Florida race was almost tied.

It was very neck and neck. The Georgia race will be a recount because there were allegations of voter suppression in the state of Georgia, which affected mostly minorities and the black vote. There is going to be a recount there. There's also the first openly atheist woman elected in the legislature.

Those sorts of things were there. I know states like Texas had Beto O'Rourke trying to be Ted Cruz, but this was close race. It showed the number of people who took out the time to vote and who believe in change.

Jacobsen: If you take the last 18 years, what was the single biggest win, politically, for atheists and the nonbeliever community in America?

Thomas: Of course, I think it was the election of President Obama. What that means, President Obama was the first US president to recognize the presence of nonbelievers. What that meant for the United States, the change was coming. Even though, he identified as Christian president.

He acknowledged there are differences in the United States. Whereas before, this was not acknowledged at all. There are now more openly – even though the number is pretty low – atheist representatives in national and state governments. That acknowledgment is crucial to those of us who want to get involved and make these changes.

There are some laws on the books, which say atheists cannot hold a seat in public office. That needs to change. The more we speak out, the more we continue to be involved. We can, hopefully, start overturning these ridiculous laws.

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

Thomas: Thank you very much.

Dr. Leo Igwe on the Risks in Leaving Religion in Nigeria and an Upcoming Conference

November 22, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Leo Igwe is the founder of the Nigerian Humanist Movement and former Western and Southern African representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. He is among the most prominent African non-religious people from the African continent. When he speaks, many people listen in a serious way. He holds a Ph.D. from the Bayreuth International School of African Studies at the University of Bayreuth in Germany, having earned a graduate degree in Philosophy from the University of Calabar in Nigeria. Here we talk risks in leaving religion in Nigeria.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are some risks that come with renouncing religion in Nigeria?

Dr. Leo Igwe: Various risks are associated with abandoning religion in Nigeria. However, these dangers depend on which part of Nigeria that one is living and then one's social status. Generally, the risks include ostracisation, abandonment, and severance of family and community ties. In the Nigerian situation where the state is weak and ineffective, severance of family ties can be quite traumatizing. Those who renounce their religious faith are treated as an outcast, as individuals who have betrayed the family trust. For instance, a Nigerian woman who renounced her religious beliefs has this to say regarding how the family reacted:

My parents and I attended the Deeper Life Bible Church in Lagos. While in the Children's Church at Akowonjo, I wondered how God received and spent the tithes that were collected. Several years later, I discovered the lies in religion. One of them was the constant message that Christ was coming. Unfortunately, he refused to show up. This led to my doubts and then, I started to connect the dots. Immediately my parents got the news of my unbelief, they threatened to disown me. They deleted my phone number from their phones. My mother told me not to call her again.

Many young persons across Nigeria suffer a similar fate or find themselves in the same predicament. Those who renounce their religious faith run the risk of loss of employment, political and business opportunities. Apostates suffer mob attack and murder, arrests, harassment, prosecution, imprisonment, and execution. Nigeria is one of the countries in the world where apostasy is a crime and the state could execute those who renounce their faith. And, this is especially the case in the sharia implementing states in Northern Nigeria

Jacobsen: How will those risks in renouncing of religion in Nigeria manifest themselves at the individual and the collective levels?

Igwe: At the individual level, the risks manifest through threatening telephone and text messages, -and these days- via Facebook messages and emails. Individuals who abandon their faith are denied freedom of thought and expression. Apostates are censored online and offline. Religious believers regard them as enemies of the society and as persons who should be silenced, neutralized or eliminated. They designate the writings of religious disbelievers as blasphemies, as insults on religion, on God or on Allah. In fact, apostates are criminalized for who they are

and also for what they say or write. At the collective level, there is a denial of rights to association and assembly. Atheism is an underground movement in many parts of Nigeria due fear of mob violence, persecution and prosecution by the state.

Jacobsen: How can those risks be reduced?

Igwe: Separating religion and state is critical to reducing these risks and dangers. Hope lies in a state that is not biased for or against any religion. Unfortunately, this is not the case in contemporary Nigeria. Religion and politics mix in such a way that hampers the ability of the Nigerian state to exercise the right to protect atheists, apostates, blasphemers and those who criticize religion. The situation is more dangerous in the sharia implementing states where Islamic jihadists operate with impunity. In these places, the state must disestablish Islam and sharia implementation otherwise it will not be able to decisively deal with these risks. In fact, throughout Nigeria, Christian and Islamic religious privilege must be abolished and nonreligious, irreligious and critics of religion must be treated equally before the law. The government must recognize the criticism of religion as a human right and as an intellectual duty not as a punishable crime.

Jacobsen: How can these be combatted at the policy and political levels?

Igwe: The government needs an inclusive policy that treats religious believers and critics, those who embrace religion and those who renounce their religious faiths, those who have no faith equally. The government should stop portraying itself as Christian or Islamic government, but as a government of the Nigerian people whether they are religious, nonreligious, irreligious, anti-religion, critical of religion or religiously indifferent. There is a need for an effective human rights policy that emphasizes the right to freedom of religion and freedom from religion, including the right to practice one's religion, change one's religion, criticize religious beliefs openly and publicly. The risks that are associated with leaving religion will drastically reduce if an open society where people can freely profess, renounce and criticize religion is enthroned.

Jacobsen: What is the upcoming event?

Igwe: The event is a humanist convention that focuses on leaving religion in Nigeria. At this meeting, attendees will explore the risks, challenges, and opportunities that are associated with abandoning religion. The main aim of the event is to provide a space for those who have renounced their religion to share their struggles, stories and experiences. Too often, Nigeria is portrayed as a deeply religious nation, as mainly Christian in the south and muslim in the north. The country is presented as if there are no atheists, skeptics, agnostics or freethinkers in the region. What is often ignored is that there are real dangers that go with leaving religion and that in some parts of the country renouncing religion is a matter of life and death. This event is convened to address this challenge and to devise means and mechanisms to minimize the risks and dangers in leaving religion.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved?

Igwe: People can become involved by helping to publicize the event on social media, sponsoring or supporting attendees. Nigeria has made international headlines as one of the countries being ravaged by Islamic extremism. Indeed, religion is at the root of many problems that the country is facing. In the past years, Boko Haram militants have killed and kidnapped thousands of Nigerians and displaced many more. In Southwest Nigeria, a religious crisis is brewing over the wearing of hijab by Muslim girls in public schools. So it is important to highlight this initiative

that is meant to foster secularism, tolerance, reason, dialogue and human rights in one of the world's most religious nation.

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

Igwe: You are most welcome.

Ask Mandisa 9 – Physical and Mental Boundaries: Do Not Trespass Where Not Wanted

December 6, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Recently, there was an incident. It was illegal for a man to go into the Indigenous community. The reason was for missionary and evangelistic purpose. Why don't you feel so bad for him?

Mandisa Thomas: For one, the person felt as if it was their purpose to preach the word of God to the Indigenous folks, even though it was illegal. These people were protected by the law of the land they were in. The person tried to get into their land illegally to preach to them.

He was shot on the spot by bows and arrows. In the same way, we have laws here in the States. Other countries have laws and guidelines. There are many Americans think that they can go to different countries and ignore the laws.

It was dangerous for this person to ignore these folks. He paid a local fisherman to go around the around. They have since been interested because it was illegal. I do not feel bad at all. Here was a person who caused their own death.

They were responsible for the dangerous situation that they put themselves.

Jacobsen: What have been the reactions?

Thomas: Most on social media have been the same. This person got what they deserved. You should not force religious beliefs on others. I have others who expressed the idea that this person *deserved to die*. There could have been a better way to handle that.

However, even if someone thinks that it is right or wrong, it was a consequence of this person's actions. Even if this person had done some research on the people, they had to know that there was a possible dangerous outcome for engaging with them.

So, as soon as you know a group is that violence, then, you leave them alone. Even if people do not want to admit it, as it is still taboo to say that people bring their deaths upon themselves, that's true.

In this case, that person was ultimately and solely responsible for the outcome. If they had parenting from a parent organization, they should be responsible as well. Because it is stupidity and blatant disrespect for their culture and ways.

Historically, there have been visitors to third world countries that have been invaded. There is a reason for this group being protected. It should have been respected.

Jacobsen: How does this relate to the objectivity, universality, and subjectivity of ethics?

Thomas: It relates to the idea that we as human beings see things differently. We have to take our nature into account as human beings. In the interest of exploration or what people think what they are doing is right, it often can be very wrong.

There are some people who are rigid in what they think their ethics should be. It can be very, very what is considered “tunnel vision.” That what they think is right is, therefore, right without regard for other people.

Every situation is different. It is important to take evidence as well as what is going on in our society and in our world to make that determination. In this case, I can only speculate that this person who was killed by the Indigenous community may have felt that these people were evil and it was his job to convert them, to the way of Jesus Christ.

However, someone looking at Christianity. It could be said that its own set of ethics and values are above reproach. If anything, Christianity, in and of itself, can be very immoral. Much of this can come from skewed perceptions of what they think is right.

Oftentimes, without really thinking about the consequences, they think that they are changing the world in some way. Sometimes, it is not for the better. This person did not realize that his attempting to “cleanse” these people may have been bad, because he may have been contacting them with foreign antibodies from his own person.

Thinking about this from a well-rounded perspective: what good or harm can come from it, it should inform people’s ethics about circumstances when they are traveling and are trying to spread their good word to people.

Jacobsen: This relates to universal ethics as well. The December 10, 1948 document the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* can be a good framework to view the rights of Indigenous peoples as well as the rights to freedom of belief and freedom of religion, which seems more in line with the things that you’re speaking about.

Even though, we will have different surface ethics. There does seem to be a consensus in the international community in what tends to be right and what tends to be wrong, whether in religion, belief, or in regards to Indigenous status.

Does the ability of individuals and groups to have rights conflict with evangelism seen around the world for many faiths, not simply Christianity alone?

Thomas: Sometimes, it does conflict. Because we often push that people are allowed to believe what they want to believe. If it is an isolated incident where people are practicing their belief and not harm others, that is one thing. It is within the communities.

There can be people harmed by the set of beliefs, often women and children. However, there must be lines drawn when it comes to actually try to go about evangelizing, awareness, or ‘education’ – if you will.

In those cases or most of them, they are by a case-by-case basis. It can be seen subjectively. Even when we see things that are wrong, certainly, it can be within certain communities and peoples throughout the world.

There may be things that we see as horrendous. But it is still our responsibility as human beings to know when to intervene and when not to intervene. In particular, when it came to colonialism

in countries in Africa and elsewhere, I do not know if it is a lesson that we will learn anytime soon.

We will have to see and then make a determination from there. We will have to keep informed about what's going on in other countries, especially before we have the opportunity and to go and visit.

Travel is something that we encourage people to do, but also travel with caution and engage all circumstances with caution, where you can make an informed decision and informed actions as a result.

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

Thomas: Thank you!

Ask Mandisa 10 – Evidence-Based Sexual Education

December 9, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, there is a split between abstinence-based sexual education and modernized sexual education: non-evidence-based and evidence-based sexual education. You had an incident. What happened?

Mandisa Thomas: My middle-school aged son gave me a note, from the class and the board of education. It was about attendance at a lesson about sexually transmitted diseases. There would be a strong emphasis on abstinence until marriage as the main way to prevent AIDS.

There was a committee of parents, educators, ministers and others who approved the material, which really was a concern for me because this is a public school system. So, I thought, “Why are there ministers on there?” That was a concern for me.

I had no problem with my son learning about sex education. We learn that at home. I sent an email to the administrator saying that I was concerned about ministers being on the committee because it would possibly exclude the LGBTQ students.

Also, that the abstinence-only education with the strong emphasis on abstinence was oversimplifying the issue of STIs and STDs. Really, there are statistics showing abstinence-only sexual education do not work.

Because there is a high teenage pregnancy rate and STI/STD rate. There is something wrong with this education. I am very concerned that it employs fear tactics on teenagers, which can be emotionally trying and be unrealistic.

That is a wrong approach to this. I sent the note to the administrator and to the county.

Jacobsen: I am sorry for the inadequate potential sexual education provisions for your kids. I am sorry this is happening to you as a parent. Two things come to mind for me. One is the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* with an explicit statement about the best interests of the child.

Then the others are numerous international right documents of the right to evidence-based sexual education. This covers the whole gamut from contraceptive methods, family planning, safe and responsible sex and sexuality, and so on.

These, continually, will produce better outcomes, statistically, for kids when they are given the proper tools. Also, it respects their right to choose who they are intimate with or how they are intimate.

So, this is deeply concerning. But this isn't a new issue, especially in the United States. Is it?

Thomas: It is not. The schools have been accepting abstinence-only education for years. I think it should be one aspect that is taught. I think there should be a strong emphasis on consent, what qualifies as consent, but that should be applied across the board no matter what the gender is.

Also, I think it must take account of other societal issues. When it comes to sexual encounters and emotions and feelings regarding that, there is a whole bunch that needs to be incorporated. The waiting until marriage is not the optimal approach.

It has not been effective. It will not continue to be effective.

Jacobsen: What does a nonbeliever perspective with an emphasis on science-based and evidence-based sexual education mean here?

Thomas: It takes into account statistics. It also takes into account the changing atmosphere and the changing society. Now, we do have children who strongly identify as teenagers as LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, etc. – and that means that we have teenagers who already may not want to get married.

Marriage doesn't have to be the end goal. There should be statistics applied that are realistic. It gives a very, very short-sighted view of marriage, and sexual health and sexual awareness. That means that you do not necessarily need to have children.

For the LGBTQ kids, the having kids may not be an issue. For STIs/STDs, some of them are not contracted directly through sexual contact. Some can be transmitted through casual contact. The knowing the difference and teaching it honestly will give children and adults a more well-rounded perspective and information as to how they can protect themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally.

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

Thomas: Thank you!

Ask Mandisa 11 – Leadership and Character

December 13, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: With respect to leadership, there is a notion. That notion is of a certain invulnerability of them, among other things. What is the non-invulnerability of leaders? How does this play out practically in the case of Black Nonbelievers, Inc.?

Mandisa Thomas: We had the experience of encountering many types of people who want to be part of the Black Nonbelievers, Inc. As a manager, I have not only worked to develop my staff but also to develop myself.

When it comes to being a leader, there are expectations that are pretty high. But I try to be as understanding as possible. We still have our separate lives. We cannot be everything to everyone.

It can be very frustrating at times when you have to navigate those people who are not as good leadership material. We have had our ups and downs. But we have always try to work through that.

People in leadership with BN know that they have our support. However, there is also the expectation that they work on themselves.

It is not a guarantee. But it can be rough. It is something that we must do once we commit.

Jacobsen: What are optional for leaders? What are must-haves for leaders?

Thomas: Good communication means that you're following up regularly and are tactful and diplomatic and cordial to others. There is something about that within the leadership, which makes us unique in how inviting we are to other people.

There does need to be a stick-to-it-iveness. If you go on a project of importance, you should commit to it. If you cannot do it, make sure, you are asking for help and allow yourself to be helped. We will not have the answers to everything.

Once you put yourself through the realm of correction or you are making errors where you can't be corrected, that is a problem. It denotes a lack of accountability or responsibility.

This is especially true in leadership positions. We should learn from mistakes in order to not repeat them again. That tends to be a pretty tough area at times.

Jacobsen: Also, for effective leadership, what is the give-and-take of leaning on others and having others lean on you?

Thomas: As leaders, we must know who we can lean on. There are people looking to us for support and the sense of trust. There is a tendency to be more of that than we can have for ourselves.

You must have a good circle of people who you can trust and talk to. So, that you can prepare for the masses or others who are looking for your support. We must be prepared that it is never going to be balanced.

There will always be an expectation that will fall on us. I am not sure that we will be completely understood by many. But I appreciate those who do understand and give support.

It also helps to keep communication going and knowing when, and who, to talk to, or to bounce ideas off. Who can you talk to? “Hey, I could have done better. What do you suggest?” Always say, “Thank you,” to those who support you in that way.

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

“Canada is a Christian country”

December 16, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Vice News reported on a recent conservative and Christian event, not always easy to separate in the current sociopolitical context. This was in, of course, Ontario, and Mississauga in particular. Canada Christian College hosted the event.

There was purportedly ‘eager anticipation’ for the appearance of Ontario Premier Doug Ford at the event. The evening in Mississauga was filled with “musical performances, prayers, and speeches.” All featuring Christian congregations of various flavors.

The president of Canada Christian College, Charles McVety, hosted the event. McVety, as you well know, remains hard-and-fast held to the socially conservative Christian religious tenor of the nation, as well as hyperbolic non-news outlets including *Rebel Media*.

As reported, “Christian leaders from Sri Lanka to Ghana all showed up to offer prayers onstage but the night’s biggest highlight was the appearance and speech by Ford, who attended the event with his wife Karla and their daughters” (Zhou, 2018).

McVety parroted Ford’s line of “true man of the people” because McVety did not know of a premier to come to “a Christian event like this one” before (Ibid.). He, McVety, praised Ford’s efforts to remove the modernized sexual education curriculum in Ontario, which was put in place by the Liberal Party.

McVety stated that the sexual education curriculum taught “radical teachings” (Ibid.). Unfortunate for Ford, he has several ongoing court challenges from LGBTQ parents, and young people, because of the repeal of the curriculum, where the interim material is the health and physical education curriculum from 1998 (Paling, 2018).

At a Christmas concert, McVety argued, “Gender is immutable. You can’t change gender” (Ibid.). The curriculum repealed in Ontario represented more diverse family structures including LGBTQ families, e.g., “two mothers or two fathers,” or other ideas including “that different people express their genders in different ways” (Ibid.).

Members of the PC Party, including Mississauga-Malton MPP Deepak Anand and Niagara West MPP Sam Oosterhoff, welcomed Ford onto the stage. Following this, Ford began to boast about accomplishments of his party.

Ford exclaimed, “We’re reforming the education system and carrying out the largest public consultation with parents ever!... We’re listening to the parents out there for the first time ever” (Zhou, 2018).

Ford continued to brag on trashing cap-and-trade and working to have Ontario’s law enforcement given the ability to remove “guns and gangs” from the streets of the province (Ibid.).

In a potential presaging of political aspirations of the individual and the Evangelical community, McVety, at the finale of the event, called the wife of Doug Ford, Karla, the “first lady of Canada” (Ibid.).

In a historical note, Zhou (2018) brought forward the history of McVety focusing on sexuality and sex in sociocultural and political moves. For example, he started an online petition. He asserted that the Liberals, at the time, were attempting to repeal laws, which, in turn, would permit adult men to have anal sex with children as young as 16-years-old.

As well, McVety argued the Toronto Pride Parade was, or even is, sex tourism. Thus, none of these trends remain new to the grouping here. At the event, Ford called the people present “good Christian people” (Ibid.).

One pastor of Miracle Family Temple, David Loganathan, present at the event stated, “As premier, [Ford]he has visited Muslims and Hindus, but Canada is Christian and so are its forefathers, so it’s more important for him to come here to support us...The foundation of Canada is Christian and we have to work to maintain that.... Canada is a Christian country” (Ibid.).

So it goes.

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Prime Minister Trudeau: Conservatives “Fearmongering” and “Spreading Falsehoods”

December 17, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

When facts fail, go to plan B, which always tinged plan A, anyway: fear, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made a call out, recently (Wright, 2018).

It was directed towards the conservatives. In particular, the use of populism in the sense of negative nationalism or faux patriotism. The issue on the floor was immigration with Trudeau declaring the immigration issue enforced as a political issue, which could put the future of Canadian society at risk.

Trudeau in an interview spoke to a broad consensus within Canadian society about the good of immigration for the nation in spite of other countries beginning to question immigration more.

“The decision that the Conservatives have taken recently to, for example, go after the global compact on migration in a way that is deliberately and knowingly spreading falsehoods for short-term political gain and to drum up anxiety around immigration is irresponsible,” Trudeau stated, “is not the way we should be moving forward in a thoughtful way on one of the big issues that is facing our country” (Ibid.).

The fulcrum here is “deliberately and knowingly spreading falsehoods” (Ibid.). This reflects the constant reiteration of falsehoods becoming the part of political platforms to pose as if consistent-with-the-facts and, therefore, legitimate as part of normal discourse.

This seems like a trend, whether with the broad consensus on climate change and the misrepresentation of the facts and, thus, skewing the timeline of the needed solutions or the legitimate ways in which to solve the problem or attenuate global warming to some degree.

Another is in the appropriate and modernized sexual education curriculum in the current context of the less bounded and more scientific discussion on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Trudeau wants a debate on immigration kept within bounds of “meaningful areas of policy,” Wright reports (Ibid.).

Trudeau continued to opine, “But the fearmongering, and the misinformation that is being deliberately and knowingly put out by the Conservative party right now, is very dangerous to something that has been an extraordinary advantage and benefit for Canada for generations” (Ibid.).

The Press Secretary for the Conservative Party of Canada Leader, Brock Harrison, about Trudeau, stated, “He resorts to personal attacks and phoney arguments whenever he’s criticized for it... Conservatives will continue to hold him to account over the lengthy delays in processing and billions in added costs caused by his failure to secure the border” (Ibid.).

Within the United Nations becoming a signatory remains important, it means the individual Member States, ideally, would take internal national resolve to work on the solutions and implementation of them, regardless of the political or international climate of inaction.

164 Member States of the United Nations became signatories to the UN *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* (2018). This sounds almost conservative in its safe, orderly, and regular orientation on migration.

The compact is seen as the first large-scale agreement for international migration in all its facets and nuances (Wright, 2018). Indeed, its principles sit with the Charter of the United Nations (Global Compact on Migration, 2018).

Also, in affirmation of the rights of every human being inherent in the principles and values of the United Nations, it stated, “Refugees and migrants are entitled to the same universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, which must be respected, protected and fulfilled at all times” (Global Compact on Migration, 2018).

The concern in the rise of the aforementioned negative nationalism or populism, or those on whom their political base may find ideological comfort, could rest with the question of national sovereignty of the nation-state of Canada as a Member State of the United Nations. That’s a fair question.

However, if examination into some of the text, we can note one part with the label “National sovereignty,” which states, “The Global Compact reaffirms the sovereign right of States to determine their national migration policy and their prerogative to govern migration within their jurisdiction, in conformity with international law” (Ibid.).

A reaffirmation of the sovereign right of States is retained in the document. Ultra-conservative groups in some of Eastern Europe have utilized fear of migrants to fan some public concern for political economic value (Wright, 2018).

But the stated objectives of the document stipulate, in Objective 2, to “Minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin,” and, in Objective 4, to also “Ensure that all migrants have proof of legal identity and adequate documentation,” as well as, in Objective 11, to “Manage borders in an integrated, secure and coordinated manner,” in addition to Objective 12 stating the need to “Strengthen certainty and predictability in migration procedures for appropriate screening, assessment and referral” (Global Compact on Migration, 2018).

By the implication of its potential robust implementation, this would reduce the number of people compelled to be forced to leave their home countries, their communities, and, even potentially, families while having proof of identity and done while managing borders properly with reasonable screening, assessment, and referral for them (Ibid.).

As a part of the document, and to the accusation of Trudeau about “fearmongering” and “deliberately and knowingly spreading falsehoods” of the conservative leadership, Objective 17 of the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* stipulates, “Eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration” (Wright, 2018; Global Compact on Migration, 2018).

As succinctly stated by Wright (2018), “Scheer came out strongly against the compact on the grounds that it would give foreign entities influence over Canada’s immigration system, claims that have been rejected by many immigration-law experts.”

Wright continued to note the conservative “hammering” against the liberals over asylum seekers, where this reflected conflict with Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Quebec Premier Francois

Legault who each want “\$200 million or more” from Ottawa to cover the costs of the two provinces (Ibid.).

More than 38,000 “irregular migrants” arrived in Canada since 2017 (Ibid.). Asylum seekers, according to an Angus Reid Institute poll, could be a problem for the liberals. These issues resonate when conservatives raise the issue, based on an assessment of Shachi Kurl, Executive Director of the Angus Reid Institute.

Wright (2018) stated that Trudeau wants to address the fears of the public, which he would probably argue, as per the call out, is being stoked by the conservatives in spite of the explicit contents of the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*.

His aim is to meet the public’s concerns while orienting to what Canada has signed on to, as an international obligation. Trudeau pointed to Eastern Europe and America as blights in the international conversation regarding anti-immigration political rhetoric.

Trudeau said, “This process is working to keep us safe... There is a careful approach (by the Conservatives) to try and scare people, and as we’ve said, it’s always easier to try and scare people than to allay fears in a time of anxiety.”

Now, it’s here, again.

Besides, the entire conversation seems amusing – and tragic, and to some extent arrogant – on some level, given the unprecedented, massive, and non-peaceful immigration that took place at the founding of the nation.

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End of the Year BCHA Interview with Ian Bushfield

December 18, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Ian Bushfield, M.Sc., is the Executive Director of the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA). The BCHA has been working hard through 2018. Here we talk about some of the updates.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The British Columbia Humanist Association has a number of great campaigns including Fair Property Tax Exemptions, End Blasphemy Laws, Public Funds for Public Schools, and Secular Addictions Recovery, among others. How are these playing out now? What is their level progress?

Ian Bushfield: The big news, as your readers will hopefully be aware, is that Canada's blasphemy law is no more! Following years of lobbying by Humanists and secularists across Canada, the Government of Canada finally passed a bill that included the repeal of section 296 of the Criminal Code, which was the prohibition on blasphemous libel.

On our other campaigns, things are moving along steadily and we're looking to push a lot of them forward with what should be a sympathetic BC government in 2019. This is why we've combined a number of these campaigns under a Secular BC banner, which we'll present to Premier John Horgan in the new year.

Jacobsen: As well, there are frequent meetups with some upcoming ones in Kelowna and Vancouver. How are these helping to build some community and maintain important discussions within the existing community?

Bushfield: Building nonreligious communities has always been the core function of the BC Humanist Association and we're so excited by the work being done by organizers in Vancouver, Kelowna, Comox, Victoria and elsewhere in this province.

These groups are almost always built and run by volunteers so the dangers of burnout remain constant. I'm hopeful that we can start to develop more structures in 2019 to make it easier for volunteers to step up and support the important backbone of this movement.

Jacobsen: If people have some interest in some of the more recent and ongoing discussions, they can look into the BCHA podcast. How old is the podcast now? What are some upcoming discussion topics?

Bushfield: We actually started regularly posting recordings of our Vancouver Sunday meetings three years ago this month. There are now 120 different lectures up there, covering everything from science to philosophy to the latest in our own campaigns.

One of my favourite lectures is a 20-year old recording we had of Svend Robinson from when he was an NDP MP. We digitized that off an old cassette tape from our archives.

In it, Robinson talks about his efforts to support secularist causes in Ottawa, and how presenting a petition to get God out of the Charter got him relegated to the NDP's backbenches at the time. Robinson's actually now looking at a return to federal politics so it might be interesting to go back and listen to.

Jacobsen: What is the current state of science education within the province? How are creationists and others working to deny the young proper science education?

Bushfield: British Columbia really has a two-tiered education system. On the one hand, the public system is really strong. On every international comparison (which all have their limits), BC students perform exceptionally well.

The previous government also brought in a new teacher and pedagogical expert-led curriculum that is providing a lot of space for students to really develop as critical thinkers.

It also gives teacher's the autonomy to ensure the content students learn is current and relevant. Of course, there are still class size issues and an urgent need for greater support for students with special needs but I'm pretty optimistic about BC's public schools.

However, our government also gives most private schools about 50% of the funding of a public school. A majority of these schools are faith-based and we've shown that a number of those are open about the fact they teach Biblical creationism on top of the BC curriculum in science classes.

The government came down on public school boards in the 1990s that were doing this and we're calling for a similar approach today. At the very least, the government needs to get out of the business of funding religious indoctrination.

Jacobsen: How can humanists become more involved with the BCHA in the province, e.g., membership, volunteering, donating, and so on?

Bushfield: You named it. We're an entirely membership funded and driven organization. People can become a member through our website, make a donation or even just sign up for our updates.

We're also on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and love interacting with people who share progressive and secular values there. We're going to have more volunteer opportunities coming up so people can make sure to be on our newsletter and they'll be the first to hear about those.

Jacobsen: How can they become officiants or chaplains within the humanist tradition?

Bushfield: Unfortunately, our officiant program is in a bit of a state of stasis at the moment. Without the ability to perform legal marriages, we're limited in what we can do and the officiants we have trained haven't had a ton of work so far.

We're hopeful that we can get the Government of BC to make the necessary changes soon and then we can kickstart the program later next year.

Jacobsen: What two topics seem most concerning for 2018/19 relevant to the humanist community, e.g., human rights violations or anti-science education, to you?

Bushfield: The thing that's really weighing on my mind these days is the resurgence of nationalist movements around the world and how disappointed I've been by the responses of many self-identifying Humanists, which range from downplaying its dangers to outright embracing its talking points.

You don't need to dig deep into the history of Humanist thought to see that Humanism has always been a movement that supports a more universal, global and democratic agenda.

While institutions like the UN and European Parliament have their flaws, they are a step toward the global parliaments envisioned in many Humanist manifestos. When Christian nationalists and

prominent atheists are mouthing the same talking points about immigration or trans rights, I feel we've really lost our way.

Otherwise, I think Humanists, and humanity broadly, still hasn't come to terms with the scale of response we need to tackle the growing crisis posed by climate change. Our province's own CleanBC plan is a promising start but even it feels like it falls short of the work that needs to be done, and it's one of the only plans with momentum in Canada.

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

Blasphemy Laws, Fear and Hostility, and French Ex-Muslims: Waleed Al-Husseini

December 19, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Waleed Al-Husseini founded the Council of Ex-Muslims of France. He escaped the Palestinian Authority after torture and imprisonment in Palestine to Jordan and then France. Here we talk about updates on French ex-Muslims from Al-Husseini.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Sir, any new books upcoming? Any new events for ex-Muslims on the horizon?

Waleed Al-Husseini: New book not yet, but we will have events in September in London we just try to prepare it.

Jacobsen: For those in the context of countries without blasphemy laws, what is the difference in daily life? How do blasphemy laws change the way someone lives their life in a country?

Al-Husseini: Let's talk about Europe because in the USA, and elsewhere, it's different. The difference is that you can say whatever you want. But we still have some limits, look at what happened to that woman from Austria. She was condemned last month for blasphemy because she called Muhammad a pedophile.

After this case, you can see, based on the reaction, how much here in Europe; we are still not free to talk about everything, especially taboo topics. That's why the situation for ex-Muslims is dangerous.

It is dangerous for all of us. Really, I can't imagine the future how it will be. All these things. But we still can talk and not be arrested or killed like in an Islamic country. 2 months ago, we signed a call against blasphemy law in Poland.

Jacobsen: What are some threats to freedom of expression and freedom of association in a context where people who leave religion are afraid to speak out in an honest way about their experiences?

Al-Husseini: Our threats come from Muslims more than other religions. We could be attacked in the streets and anywhere by normal Muslims. I do not necessarily mean jihadists.

For associations, it's also different because we get attacks by Islamic accusations in the name of Islamophobia or some organization calling themselves anti-racist and attacking us in the name of so-called anti-racism.

All just to not offend Muslims; while when you kowtow, you help moderate Islam too. But if we keep going without realizing the ills of the crisis, we will never be moderate.

Jacobsen: Why are so much fear and hostility directed at those who leave religion?

Al-Husseini: Because of losing life, and because the other options are violence; they are ready to kill you if you leave Islam. This is the most dangerous thing, especially so for ex-Muslims. And some will lose their work or their families.

Jacobsen: What are some important recent developments in the ability of ex-Muslims to express their views more freely?

Al-Husseini: Internet, social media, and YouTube are the places most ex-Muslims are able to talk about themselves freely. However, with Arabic media, they invite us just to make a show and also for the journalist to show himself as a good Muslim and so on.

There is still a lack of knowledge about atheism or secularism because they mix both. Sometimes, they don't know what atheism is, and all their information is coming from some purported stupid old crisis of atheism.

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

Critical Women: A Month or So, or A Millennium or More

December 19, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Rev. Gretta Vosper of West Hill United Church in Scarborough, Ontario, went through an approximately 3-year ordeal – almost 4 in fact – in the uncertainty of station in the Christian denomination The United Church of Canada, arguably the most progressive sect in the nation and much of the world (not my opinion alone).

Take, for example, the fact of the matter as the first church to permit the ordination of women, circa 1936 with Lydia Guey-Mook (University of Toronto, 2017; BC Conference of the United Church of Canada, 2018).

Also, we can take Vosper stating that The United Church of Canada is the “most progressive denomination in the world, as far as I’m concerned” in a podcast with Ryan Bell (Garrison, 2016).

In a conclusion-of-the-ordeal article, following the first article a couple years prior, Garrison (2018) notes, “Vosper hopes to create resources for the development of secular communities that have these multilayered social connections within them.”

A community was the point the entire time. Vosper remains a person oriented around the construction of community. She has also been labeled a “brave woman,” and rightly so (Thomas, 2018). The reason, as noted by Thomas, “... her situation grabbed headlines when she wrote a letter to the church’s spiritual leader after the January 2015 terrorist massacre at the Charlie Hebdo newspaper office in Paris. Her point: Belief in God can motivate bad things” (Ibid.).

More pointedly, Vosper denounced the belief in a supernatural “being whose purposes can be divined and which, once interpreted and without mercy, must be brought about within the human community in the name of that being” (Longhurst, 2018).

This was, in part, a basis for Vosper, personally, to be unable and unwilling to reaffirm the original vows during ordination in The United Church of Canada. There was supposed to be a hearing for Vosper, and then delays in the hearing occurred for some time – until recently.

As reported by Longhurst, “...before that hearing took place, the Toronto Conference and Vosper reached a settlement on Nov. 7 to let her keep her job” (2018). However, the church released another statement in reaffirmation of some beliefs following the announcement of the reaching of a settlement (The United Church of Canada, 2018a).

“In a brief joint statement, the Toronto Conference, Vosper and West Hill Church said the parties had ‘settled all outstanding issues between them,’” as reported by Longhurst (Longhurst, 2018; The United Church of Canada, 2018b).

The articles, since the November 7 press statement, continue to come out, even more than one month later (Stonestreet, J. & Morris, 2018; Bean, 2018). According to Vosper’s lawyer, Juliana Falconer, there was a rational calculation on the costs and benefits of a continuation of the disagreement, for all parties (Ibid.).

Douglas Todd, a long-time religion and belief commentator, lamented the lack of open reasoning for the decision by The United Church of Canada (Todd, 2018).

Todd argues The United Church of Canada is the main source of “worm theology,” which amounts to engagement in identity politics and followers who “perceive themselves as fundamentally flawed, guilty and unworthy” (Ibid.).

While also considering the prior statement of The United Church of Canada, we can see the earlier tone, as declared:

The Committee read the submissions and listened very carefully to determine whether Ms. Vosper’s beliefs are in essential agreement with the statement of doctrine of the United Church. This is a crucial question asked of all potential ordinands to determine whether they are suitable for ministry within The United Church of Canada.

We have concluded that if Gretta Vosper were before us today, seeking to be ordained, the Toronto Conference Interview Committee would not recommend her. In our opinion, she is not suitable to continue in ordained ministry because she does not believe in God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. Ms. Vosper does not recognize the primacy of scripture, she will not conduct the sacraments, and she is no longer in essential agreement with the statement of doctrine of The United Church of Canada. (Henderson, 2016)

But with some cultural knowledge or research into the belief of clergy in congregations around North America, there is a long history of doubting leaders alongside the larger disbelieving laity, who may simply suspect but not explicitly know about one another.

One such project was set forth by Tufts University Professor Daniel C. Dennett and Independent Qualitative Research Consultant Linda LaScola, called The Clergy Project (The Clergy Project, 2018). (If you look close at the banner collage image at the top of the main webpage of the website, you can see Vosper’s photo.)

Vosper simply becomes another in a long line of brave individuals, as noted by Thomas (2018), working to expand the landscape of Christian and other spirituality in the early 21st century. A woman freethought pioneer within the tradition of The United Church of Canada.

The conclusion of the ordeal for Vosper has left some letters to the editor with laments, including the following from Steve Thorkildsen, “What will be next? School principals who don’t believe in the value of educating children? Doctors who don’t believe the natural progression of diseases should be interrupted? Engineers who spurn precision and believe that approximations are close enough? Our new Age of Reason doesn’t seem so reasonable to me” (Hamilton Spectator, 2018).

But even within The United Church of Canada, the head of the denomination is happy to keep Vosper (Stonestreet & Morris, 2018). Discomfort from some on the outside and resolute comfort, even happiness, on the inside.

One commentary, by Antonio Gualteri (2018), openly opined, “Now I wonder if the terms of the settlement between the two parties were based more on labour law than theology, though we may never know given the condition of confidentiality.”

In a nuanced view, he considers the critical issue not the atheism of Vosper but the approach to the *Bible*. While, at the same time, Vosper has spoken to these subtler concerns in prior writing, as cited in the article by Gualteri (2018).

That is to say, she (Vosper) states, directly, the problematic contents of the texts comprising the *Bible* with the “obscure,” “irrelevant,” and “dangerously prone to misguiding” contents of it (Gualteri, 2018; Vosper, 2016).

Perhaps, in other words, the issue remains not Vosper’s approach to the *Bible*, but, rather, with the applicability of the purported holy text to much of modern secular life and spirituality in standard interpretations, in contradistinction to the noteworthy but, likely, wrongly – inversely so – placed concerns of Gualteri (2018).

Vosper, in response to a question about “atheist minister” being, supposedly, an oxymoron, stated, “Not if you understand the history of biblical and theological study. For well over 100 years, we’ve questioned the authority of the Bible and recognized it was written by humans. When you do that, everything is up for grabs, including the idea of a supernatural God.”

She seems correct, in part, but this tradition of questioning of the *Bible* by prominent and intelligent women exists much farther into the historical record, including back to some of the earliest women geniuses in the Western philosophical tradition (Adler, 2018).

I speak, of course, of one of the few great women polymaths permitted to flourish, for a time, in the ancient world: Hypatia of Alexandria. She had a number of distinct statements about fables, myths, miracles, superstitions, and religions:

Fables should be taught as fables, myths as myths, and miracles as poetic fancies. To teach superstitions as truths is a most terrible thing. The child mind accepts and believes them, and only through great pain and perhaps tragedy can he be in after years relieved of them. In fact, men will fight for a superstition quite as quickly as for a living truth — often more so, since a superstition is so intangible you cannot get at it to refute it, but truth is a point of view, and so is changeable.

All formal dogmatic religions are fallacious and must never be accepted by self-respecting persons as final.

Taking the historical account and comparing to the current, we can see, at a minimum perhaps, an amicable solution, as per the joint statement, to the updated (a-)theological stances of Vosper within the “most progressive denomination in the world” and another woman, Hypatia, outside of the church in the ancient world, i.e., cut to pieces and mutilated to death by a Christian mob.

Both “brave” but, certainly, different contexts. In a sense, for the church and the Western critical tradition, and the popular reactionaries to freethinking women, this is, certainly, progress, of a kind, once more – and within a suitable Western tradition and Christian denomination.

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Pass the Brilliant Person: The Einstein Traditional God Rejection Letter

December 22, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Full letter at the bottom.^[1]

Einstein's recent letter to hit some of the popular press headlines references "God" in addition to the *Bible* (BBC News, 2018a). At the age of 74, Einstein wrote a 1.5 page "note" or letter to Eric Gutkind, a German philosopher of the time (Ibid.).

Often, it is titled the "God Letter" (Barron, 2018). At times, Einstein identified with the term "agnostic" while rejecting atheism (Rense, 2018). Some interpret this as an open rejection of religion as a whole by Einstein, not necessarily true (Osborne, 2018).

Indeed, flat wrong, Einstein, two months after the letter to Gutkind, stated the personal sensibility of a deeply religious non-believer (Christie's, 2018). In youth, though, Einstein "manifested... a sudden but passionate zeal for Judaism, a short but memorable phase that reached its conclusion with Einstein's exposure to science at around the age of 10" (Ibid.).

Einstein, as written years later, through the reading of popular science textbooks and upon reflection of the contents of the texts comprising the *Bible*, stated the "impression that youth is intentionally being deceived by the state through lies; it was a crushing impression" (Ibid.).

The letter, in a New York-based auction, acquired a worth of 2.9-million-pound-sterling (or GBP), equivalent to about \$4 million Canadian dollars (CAD) (Sherwood, 2018). The common interpretation of the letter, given the clarity of time and new generations, remains a rejection of traditional conceptualizations of a God and the standard interpretations – literal and metaphorical – of the *Bible* (Willingham, 2018).

Einstein did not adhere to an atheistic viewpoint of the universe, as many of you know. Interestingly, the letter was written in response to a book written by Gutkind entitled *Choose Life: The Biblical Call to Revolt* (Johnson, 2018).

Letters from other individuals from Einstein garner similar renowned and monetary valuation, not including one to a young female scientist while, certainly, another to the late Theodore Roosevelt with the one to Roosevelt's worth estimated between \$1.2 to \$0.8 million (USD), approximately \$1.63 to \$1.09 million (CAD) (BBC News, 2018b; Christie's, 2002).

To claim Einstein as a traditional religious individual would disserve Einstein's intellectual legacy, even cheapen the worldview, some labelled the Einsteinian, rather direct, stance expressed in the letter a "diatribe" (Robinson, 2018).

Peter Klarnet, senior specialist in books and manuscripts at Christie's auction house, argued, "...one of the definitive statements in the Religion vs. Science debate" (Willingham, 2018). A note from the auction house stated, "This remarkably candid, private letter was written a year before Einstein's death and remains the most fully articulated expression of his religious and philosophical views" (BBC News, 2018a).

Important to note, since the letter was written one year prior to Einstein's death, this may, indeed, reflect the antiquated cosmologist's advanced age religious and theological views as stone tablet (Willingham, 2018). That is to say, Christie's, though seemingly bold in the declaration, seems correct in the assessment.

One dissenting voice was noted by Gillespie (2018) on the definitude of the religious and theological views of Einstein, which was the biographer of Einstein, Walter Isaacson – who is prominent and respected.

Richard Dawkins stated, “This letter was about something very important to Einstein, I suspect” (Sherwood, 2018). Something of which Einstein thought about in a critical manner since the age of 13, saying he had “abandoned his uncritical religious fervour, feeling he had been deceived into believing lies” (Ibid.).

Atheists and theists alike partake of name-dropping in history to bolster positions for themselves. Willingham (2018) touched on the vein here. The notion of an authority figure of world renowned representative, in some frame, of one's own views and, therefore, the famous smart person reflective of a similar level of intelligence or respectability of oneself.

The more accurate view about Einstein's worldview reflected the mathematical harmony and apparent beauty in the simplicity of the principles of nature, of its logical parsimony and precision. One found in Baruch de Spinoza, a Jewish-Dutch 17th-century philosopher, known for a pantheistic view of the universe without magic or miracles.

Some characterize the non-interventionist God of Einstein as either a Deity or a Pantheism. Simply Nature or the laws thereof, God does not care about individual human beings' lives in this idea of God. Such an important question, thinker, and answer, to so many, the auction went for 4-minutes (Gillespie, 2018). Intriguingly, but, perhaps, not surprisingly, the Gutkind family owned the letter until 2008 prior to a former auction of the letter in a Bloomsbury Auctions in London (Ibid.; CTV News, 2018).

Einstein, born in Germany and with Jewish heritage, went straight to the point in the letter, as elderly men have things to do and things to think about, e.g., a Theory of Everything. He did not have time to read the full book by Gutkind, though he read most of it (Letters of Note, 2009). Gutkind disagreed with Einstein on free will and the role of God in an individual's life (Mejia, 2018).

Because Einstein's famous metaphorical words about God not playing dice with the universe represented an image of absolute truth in the world glued to determinism without an intervening God and, therefore, no movement for freedom of the will or a role of God in the life of each person for all time (The Week, 2018; Christie's, 2018).

Einstein in the letter reflects on the lack of “ego-oriented desires” as an “un-American attitude” aligning the sentiments of Gutkind and Einstein, i.e., Einstein started on a non-confrontational point of view after reading “a great deal” of Gutkind's text (Letters of Note, 2009).

Alas, Einstein set the word “God” as a derivation of human frailties and the *Bible* as “a collection of honorable, but still purely primitive, legends which are nevertheless pretty childish,” where no interpretation can alter this conception and “the Jewish religion like all other religions is an incarnation of the most childish superstition” (Ibid.).

In the latter case, narratives and superstitions intended for children; in the former case, not hostile inasmuch as descriptive of the limited organisms, in time and in space, grasping at what little light the rules of nature will permit of themselves, principles of existence glimpsed through an evolved and bounded mind with proportional limits in ability to know the cosmos.

Taking on the stance of humanity writ species, Einstein understood the Jewish peoples as simply another group, rather than “chosen,” and no better than the others and, in fact, “are protected from the worst cancers by a lack of power” and not some divine decree or selection (Ibid.). Although, other early life written sources represent more racist views (Roos, 2018). He may have recanted personal opinions over time.

In the concluding half of the letter, Einstein leaves the boxing gloves at home to gather chalk dust flaking off the equation-filled board and then offers an olive branch. At first, he states:

In general I find it painful that you claim a privileged position and try to defend it by two walls of pride, an external one as a man and an internal one as a Jew. As a man you claim, so to speak, a dispensation from causality otherwise accepted, as a Jew the privilege of monotheism. But a limited causality is no longer a causality at all, as our wonderful Spinoza recognized with all incision, probably as the first one. And the animistic interpretations of the religions of nature are in principle not annulled by monopolization. With such walls we can only attain a certain self-deception, but our moral efforts are not furthered by them. On the contrary. (Letters of Note, 2009)

In this reference to Spinoza as a solution to the faux superiority posited by Gutkind, we find echoes to a consistent view of the universe as a mathematical harmony without a wink lost over human affairs and parochial belief systems, or claims to racial superiority. He then stated:

Now that I have quite openly stated our differences in intellectual convictions it is still clear to me that we are quite close to each other in essential things, i.e; in our evaluations of human behavior. What separates us are only intellectual “props” and “rationalization” in Freud’s language. Therefore I think that we would understand each other quite well if we talked about concrete things. (Ibid.)

In this, we can see a distinct split between the intellectual and emotional common sentiment.

On a rather thoughtful, though not entirely unbiased but probably mostly true, note, Christian thinktank Theos senior fellow, Nick Spencer, stated, “Einstein offers scant consolation to either party in this debate. His cosmic religion and distant deistic God fits neither the agenda of religious believers or that of tribal atheists... As so often during his life, he refused and disturbed the accepted categories. We do the great physicist a disservice when we go to him to legitimise our belief in God, or in his absence” (Sherwood, 2018).

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Endnote

[1] *The word God is a product of human weakness* (2009) in full states:

Dear Mr Gutkind,

Inspired by Brouwer's repeated suggestion, I read a great deal in your book, and thank you very much for lending it to me. What struck me was this: with regard to the factual attitude to life and to the human community we have a great deal in common. Your personal ideal with its striving for freedom from ego-oriented desires, for making life beautiful and noble, with an emphasis on the purely human element. This unites us as having an "unAmerican attitude."

Still, without Brouwer's suggestion I would never have gotten myself to engage intensively with your book because it is written in a language inaccessible to me. The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weakness, the Bible a collection of honorable, but still purely primitive, legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation, no matter how subtle, can change this for me. For me the Jewish religion like all other religions is an incarnation of the most childish superstition. And the Jewish people to whom I gladly belong, and whose thinking I have a deep affinity for, have no different quality for me than all other people. As far as my experience goes, they are also no better than other human groups, although they are protected from the worst cancers by a lack of power. Otherwise I cannot see anything "chosen" about them.

In general I find it painful that you claim a privileged position and try to defend it by two walls of pride, an external one as a man and an internal one as a Jew. As a man you claim, so to speak, a dispensation from causality otherwise accepted, as a Jew the privilege of monotheism. But a limited causality is no longer a causality at all, as our wonderful Spinoza recognized with all incision, probably as the first one. And the animistic interpretations of the religions of nature are in principle not annulled by monopolization. With such walls we can only attain a certain self-deception, but our moral efforts are not furthered by them. On the contrary.

Now that I have quite openly stated our differences in intellectual convictions it is still clear to me that we are quite close to each other in essential things, i.e; in our evaluations of human behavior. What separates us are only intellectual "props" and "rationalization" in Freud's language. Therefore I think that we would understand each other quite well if we talked about concrete things.

With friendly thanks and best wishes,

Yours,

A. Einstein

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“Going to Hell for Laughing” Administrator Interview

December 27, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How was religion or non-religion part of early life?

Administrator for Going to Hell for Laughing: My parents are Lutheran and raised me in church. I always dreaded church; there was never a time I remember enjoying it.

I stopped going when I was 16 and my dad, a civilian contractor with the Air Force, deployed to Saudi Arabia with the Air Force. I was too big for my mom to drag to church so I just stayed home.

Jacobsen: When did atheism become the stance for you?

Administrator for Going to Hell for Laughing: I didn't apply the label "atheist" to myself until college.

Jacobsen: How was religion or non-religion influential on your views about the nature of humanity to the world? What seems like a good summary statement or few on the traditional religious claims to truth on offer?

Administrator for Going to Hell for Laughing: I had taken courses in World Civilizations, Philosophy, and Comparative Religion and realized that every culture has invented its own mythology to explain the unexplainable. Over time science has filled all the gaps that superstition used to fill.

I was a "live and let live" type of atheist until 9/11. It became crystal clear to me that we will never have peace on this planet as long as we're killing each other over whose imaginary friend is the real one.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the online atheist sphere? What was your first impression of it? How did this change over time? Why was Going to Hell for Laughing founded? What is your role as its administrator? What are some fun and interesting aspects of posting materials, seeing comments, and, potentially, interacting with the audience?

Administrator for Going to Hell for Laughing: A few years ago I started figuring out how to use Photoshop and make memes. I made a few that did really well and then I kind of moved on to other things after hitting 30K followers. My biggest meme ever had nothing to do with religion.

Unfortunately it brought with it a lot of religious idiots who didn't realize they had liked an atheist page. After that everything I posted got a bunch of stupid comments from stupid people and it kind of sucked the fun out of it. I loved making memes because they get shared by atheists and seen by their theist friends.

A great meme encapsulates one idea succinctly in a unique way; I see it as planting a seed in their brain that they can't dodge. If the average believer goes online and can't help but have lots of these inconvenient ideas planted in their minds, eventually some of them will bear fruit.

And at the very least them seeing their deeply revered beliefs mocked will make them realize they really have nothing (like evidence) with which to retaliate. I love it when believers are forced to concede that they've come up empty.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time.

Interview with Terri Hope – Founder & Leader, Grey Bruce Humanists

December 28, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Terri Hope is the Founder and Leader of the Grey Bruce Humanists, and a former Humanist Officiant. Here we talk about the Grey Bruce Humanists.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are the events and services provided for members of the Grey Bruce Humanists within the community?

Terri Hope: We hold a meeting with a guest speaker every other month on a Sunday morning. (sometimes more often). We have a ‘social dinner’ at a local restaurant during the ‘off’ month. We also have a meeting on the first Wed. evening of the month at the local library. Topics vary... We make donations to local and international organizations.

Jacobsen: How can individuals become involved in the Grey Bruce Humanists?

Hope: All you have to do is get your name on the email list. There are no dues, forms, etc. We pass a ‘hat’ after meetings. Needless to say, we’re not rich!

Jacobsen: Humanism emphasizes reason, compassion, and science. Why? How does this work within a secular community including the Grey Bruce Humanists?

Hope: These values make the most sense for us. Scientific principles can be demonstrated. Reason and compassion make for a more generous, ethical life. We offer donations when we can. We educate with speakers who demonstrate these values. We try to assure that everyone has a voice at meetings.

We welcome everyone to meetings as long as they understand that there can be no attempts to ‘convert’ others.

Jacobsen: What are some of the positive expectations for 2019 for the Grey Bruce Humanists?

Hope: We already have our roster of speakers for 2019. Our planning group plans to update our donation policies, website and Facebook page.

Jacobsen: In the management of community and the work to provide for the needs of the members of it, what are the pluses and minuses, positives and negatives, of the work there?

Hope: Lots of pluses. In a small city, we have about 125 people on the list. Between 10 and 25 people attend the meetings. There seems to be a group who enjoys the meetings, people, social opportunities, etc.

Negatives? Not enough volunteers. Being 3 hours from Toronto makes it hard to book people who’ve written books, made the news, etc.

Jacobsen: What are the general demographics of the Grey Bruce Humanists? How does this differ from the general surrounding culture of the area?

Hope: Similar. We are an older community, both in Owen Sound and in our Humanist group. We do however have a number of active members who are younger. (20’s, 30’s)

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with donations, becoming a member, or showcasing the Grey Bruce Humanist community?

Hope: As I mentioned, people donate what they wish at meetings. They ask to be added to the email list and can easily ask that to be removed. We have not tried to 'showcase' the group except by participating in local events which may be organized for the public.

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

Interview with Brian Dunning on Skepticism

December 29, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Brian Dunning: I was raised in a very conservative home, in a conservative town, in conservative company. Luckily I personally managed to avoid ever having had any interest or belief in religion.

For most of my school years, my family was Mormon, so I was dragged kicking and screaming for three hours of services every Sunday. I hated every moment of it, though I did make some good friends among the other guys my age.

They also had a great boy scout troop which did a lot of backpacking and camping, all of which I thoroughly enjoyed. However, I was the guy who never closed his eyes during the prayers.

Jacobsen: How is skepticism important in the electronic era?

Dunning: I don't think it's any more or less important now than in any other time. Many of my colleagues disagree with me, on the principle that the Internet gives everyone such better access to misinformation.

But I argue that it gives equally ready access to good information, and people don't have any different set of tools than they've ever had to tell good information from bad.

Jacobsen: What best defines science? What best defines skepticism? How do non-science and pseudo-skepticism/dogma relate to them? What are some examples of them?

Dunning: Science and skepticism are basically the same thing: the application of a high standard of evidence to answer a question. That means putting aside your preferences and your own experiences, something that's very hard for most people to do.

Our brains tend to put more weight on our own experiences than on empirical evidence, especially when it gives an unwanted result.

A healthy young person may embrace a fad diet, feel energetic, and attribute it to the diet when really they're just young and healthy and active; and suddenly, this person will remain firmly convinced that there was something magical about that diet. This is the form most misinformation takes when it spreads.

Jacobsen: In America, what are the main sources of pseudoscience, fraudulent claims? How does this impact the general public? What are some humorous examples and some tragic ones, too?

Dunning: The answer to this question is the same everywhere: people want magically easy answers to complicated problems. That's why snake oil salesmen have always been successful, and always will be: they sell magical solutions in a bottle.

Conspiracy theories are magically simple explanations of a complicated world. Alternative medicine claims are magical cures for health problems (both real and imagined).

And just about every other book is selling a new diet — either the superfood you must eat or the horrible food you must avoid — as a magically easy way to become slim and fit no matter what your genetics have foreordained for you.

Jacobsen: In the work on dissemination of critical thinking terms, methodologies, and ideas into the public sphere, what is important in the communication to the public for better receptiveness for them and delivery from you (or others)?

Dunning: This is the million dollar question. Most misinformation is sold because it sounds amazing, and people love sensationalism — just look at the descent of the History Channel, Nat Geo, Science Channel, and the like.

Those of us who encourage the embrace of good information need to recognize what attracts eyeballs, and constantly find better ways to package the lessons of critical thinking inside exciting entertainment.

Jacobsen: When societies move away from science, critical thinking, and evidence, how does this negatively impact the functioning of society via poor policy and other decisions?

Dunning: It's quite simple. When you base a decision on bad information, you get a bad decision. Knowing how the world really works is crucial if you want to navigate your way through it properly.

Jacobsen: How can folks, nationally or internationally, become involved in skepticism's efforts to reduce the level of junk thinking happening throughout American society?

Dunning: Often, when I get a new listener or meet a new fan at a conference, they'll say something like they always felt this way but never knew that "being a skeptic" was a thing.

So find some skeptical programming that you like and share it with your friends. Get them hooked on skeptical podcasts when ever you're in the car.

There are plenty of skeptics out there, they just don't know it yet.

Jacobsen: What are the main concerns regarding claims sold to the general American public moving into 2019 for you?

Dunning: Honestly, the same as always. People believe their friends and their favorite pundits far more readily than they'll believe sources they're predisposed against. That was the case yesterday, it's the case today, and it will be the case tomorrow.

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

Interview with Michel Virard – Co-Founder & President, Association Humaniste Du Québec

December 30, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are the events and services provided for members of the Association Humaniste Du Québec within the community? How does Francophone Canada experience the history of humanism in this country?

Michel Virard: The AHQ has been providing film screenings and lectures to our members since 2006. The screenings are regular monthly events while the lectures total about six lectures per year.

With a few exceptions, all those events are related in one way or another to our mission, which is the development of critical thinking and the promotion of secular humanist values. We also hold potluck dinners twice a year. Last one was “La Fête des Lumières Humanistes” on December 22nd.

Since the Quiet Revolution in Québec, there have been Francophone associations dedicated to the protection of the non-religious in the province. However, none had the word «humanism» in their name.

Most prominent was the 1981 *Mouvement laïque québécois* (MLQ) itself a reincarnation of an older movement, the *Mouvement laïque français* (MLF) created around 1960. In parallel with those movements dedicated mainly to the secularisation of the state education, there has been a thriving skeptical movement, the *Sceptiques du Québec* (SQ), created in 1988.

I joined the SQ in 1992 as administrator and animator and I had a lot of fun at the expense of paranormal proponents: at the time, we had a 1-million-dollar prize to anyone able to prove a paranormal power. We punched holes in homeopathy (I committed a “homeopathic suicide” in the presence of a CBC reporter), numerology, astrology and the like.

Around 2003-2004, it became apparent that neither the MLQ nor the SQ could pretend to represent non-believers. Internal squabbles in both organisations convinced me and Bernard Cloutier that we needed a separate organisation for non-believers in the supernatural. Hence the creation in December 2004 of the *Fondation humaniste du Québec* and in June 2005, of the *Association humaniste du Québec*.

Over time, the FHQ (the *Fondation*) bought a complete floor in a former nun’s building in Montreal. Since 2010, the *Centre humaniste du Québec* has been used by many secular organisations such as the MLQ, the SQ and the AHQ (of course). In 2012, the IHEU (International Humanist & Ethical Union, based in London, UK) made its yearly General Assembly in our *Centre humaniste*.

To our knowledge, as of today, the Humanists in Québec are the only ones to own their premises in Canada. Also, the Fondation has enough regular revenues to guarantee the operation of the Center for many decades.

Jacobsen: How can individuals become involved in the Association Humaniste Du Québec?

Virard: Simply by asking to be received as a member and paying the yearly fee (25\$). To be received as a member you sign the inscription form which states that you have read our 8 humanist principles and that you agree with all of them.

Principles 2 to 8 are the exact translation of those found in the 2002 Amsterdam declaration. Principle 1 was added by Bernard Cloutier to make sure there was no ambiguity on our position relative to divinities, soul, reincarnation and the like.

Jacobsen: Humanism emphasizes reason, compassion, and science. Why? How does this work within a secular community including the Association Humaniste Du Québec?

Virard: In the end, compassion is the result of two scientific ascertainments. One, we are all highly social beings. Two, we all want to survive and be happy.

Philosophical ethics help us to figure out a certain number of principles derived from these ascertainments. Principles are short cuts when we don't have time to analyse in deep details the entire cluster of the expected consequences of our intended actions or when it is hopelessly too complicated.

But the expected route for a humanist is first to see if the analyse is possible and only second to fall back on "canned" principles. More about Humanism Ethics in a paper from our late Pat Duffy Hutcheon (Modern Humanism, a definition) which is attached.

Jacobsen: How is a specific set of provisions respectful to and important for Francophones – whether monolingual, bilingual, or a prolific polyglot – within the Canadian humanist community?

Why is this relevant within the historical context of the at-times tensions between Anglophone and Francophone communities within Canadian society, for those who may not know reading this on the day of publication or years onward from it?

Virard: Apart from myself serving as a bridge between anglophone and francophone Humanists, we must accept that there are very few connexions between the two humanist constellations. The reality of this country is that true bilingualism is a capacity we can expect only from a small minority of Canadians.

All the events organized by the AHQ are in French. Making them bilingual would instantly destroy the AHQ appeal. We learnt that the hard way a long time ago. Currently, no articles from Humanist Perspective or from Québec Humaniste are translated and published into the other magazine.

The only issues that could interest both constituencies are related to the Criminal code (ex: blasphemy law, Dying with dignity concerns, Canada Charter of Rights and Freedoms, etc.). Most numerous issues in Canada of interest to Humanists are actually related to provincial questions thus the need to translate is not very high.

I must add that occasional attempts by Humanist Canada to «represent francophone humanist, too» are not likely to succeed. And trying to create a truly bilingual humanist organisation would be an incredible waste of time and money knowing the diverging nature of our respective interests.

The pragmatic way to handle that is to have enough contacts between AHQ and HC so we have good cooperation on the (limited) number of common issues.

Jacobsen: What are some of the positive expectations for 2019 for the Association Humaniste Du Québec? What some existential risks for the equality and freedom of humanists in 2019, potentially?

Virard: Central to our action in Québec, will be our continued struggle to get rid of the “Religious Culture” course imposed upon all children and teenagers in the state schools since 2008. For us, it is clearly a course in “credulity promotion” since it presents six religions (excluding secular humanism, of course) seen only through the rosy lens of their myths and rituals.

Not a single word about their historical deeds, nor their responsibility in many human conflicts nor their inherent contradictions with ethics and science. In other words, it is a propaganda machine so brainwashed children end up believing that having a religion is a must in order to be “normal”.

Furthermore, the course always represents religious people through their most fundamentalist versions. So a Muslim girl is ALWAYS represented with a head covering, a young Jew is always represented with a kippah, and a young First Nation girl always with some feathers...

We believe this course was created as an expedient way to keep a large number of former religion teachers on the payroll: they moved from a Catholic or Protestant curriculum to a slightly expended curriculum since Christian teachings are still given the lion share of the new curriculum (for “historical reasons”, of course). We think the ÉCR course in its present form, is, indeed, an existential risk for the future of secular humanism in Quebec.

Jacobsen: In the management of community and the work to provide for the needs of the members of it, what are the pluses and minuses, positives and negatives, of the work there?

Virard: Since we are not expecting too much from our members, we won’t be too disappointed. Most work is performed by Board members. This is especially important when we have to meet government officials. So we have a porte-parole, an editor in chief, a webmaster, an event manager (that’s me for now), a treasurer, all of them are Board members.

We ask for help from volunteers to maintain and improve the Centre humaniste. Since the beginning, I have insisted on having name stickers to anyone coming to our events (movies, lectures, potlucks).

This has been helpful to form bonds between members and into developing a sense of community. I half-jokingly tell everyone that the reason I co-create the AHQ was in order to give an “identity” to the non-believers, and I think we succeeded.

Jacobsen: What are the general demographics of the Association Humaniste Du Québec? How does this differ from the general surrounding culture of the area? How does this add, not detract, from the inclusivity and available flavors of views and experiences of the national humanist community?

Virard: As with most Humanist organisations, the demographics are skewed toward the elders with somewhat more men than women (60/40 is kind of a rule of thumb). There is no much surprise there: these are the same bias we find essentially in all general humanist organisations.

Retirees are important to us: they have time to think and time to help (and money to boot). We do have younger members but they tend to come and go. University groups have a short half-life

and women are more attracted to strictly feminist groups (we have lost women board members to women's rights groups).

Regarding diversity, I think we are not doing badly, we have members from all parts of the *Francophonie* such as Senegal, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Belgium, France, as well as from Egypt, Italy, but also from the English speaking community in Montreal (of course, they do speak French, too).

Our most popular video on our Youtube channel – QcHumaniste – (with 120 clips) is a lecture on the Koran by a member from Morocco (about 94,000 views).

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with donations, becoming a member, or showcasing the Association Humaniste Du Québec community?

Virard: You can make a donation or become a member through our website: <http://assohum.org/nous-contacter/devenez-membre/>

We can make presentations of the AHQ to audiences around Quebec (Ontario, New-Brunswick) to French-speaking potential humanists. In addition to Montreal we have three active regional groups or “chapters”*: Trois-Rivières, Quebec-City, Gatineau. Just write to info@assohum.org.

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

* The term “*chapitre*” (chapter in French) as an assembly of persons is frowned upon by francophone because it is almost always reserved for monastery usage, meaning the «assembly of canons» or for Hell's Angel bikers...

Interview with Tim Mendham – Executive Officer & Editor, Australian Skeptics Inc.

December 31, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Tim Mendham: Australian born – several generations dating back to mid-19th century, Anglo-Celtic background, English speaking (no other languages spoken in the household), minimal background in the Anglican church – rarely attended church, full Atheist by late teens.

I have been a member of Aust Skeptics since it was founded, acting as secretary, treasurer and editor during the 80s (all volunteer basis), life membership in later 80s, and from 2009 appointed executive officer (only paid skeptical position in Australia, and one of only a few in the world).

Jacobsen: How is skepticism important in the electronic era?

Mendham: By electronic, I assume you mean digitally-based communications? The rise of social media has meant that pseudoscientific theories and ‘solutions’ proliferate rapidly and often without any alternative explanations offered. This means that “it’s there in black-and-white” implies factuality of many spurious claims.

Demise of critical mainstream media – often suffering in the face of the rise of ‘entertainment’ oriented outlets – restricts the opportunity for alternative/scientific/skeptical input, therefore general skepticism as an aspect of critical thinking is even more necessary.

At the same time, these current forms of communication can be used by skeptical organisations to reach a broader audience, especially the young, who often only use digital media as their information source. Skeptical groups need to take advantage of all avenues of communication, traditional and modern.

Jacobsen: Does skepticism within Australia seem on the rise or on the decline in general? Where are there greater risks of gullibility and fraudulence?

Mendham: When the Australian Skeptics was first formed in 1980, for some years it was seen as a fringe novelty, particularly by mainstream media. However, over the succeeding years the skeptical movement in Australia has made a concerted effort to raise its profile as a source of considered, intelligent and science-based information, particularly via media appearances.

At the same time, it has been noted that in some areas the presentation by proponents of pseudoscience and pseudomedicine has become more sophisticated, which requires a similar level of response. The skeptical movement has grown in overt expression, somewhat following in the footsteps of the recent more activist atheist movement.

Whereas once upon a time skepticism was an amusing but possibly socially embarrassing pursuit (‘spoil-sport’, ‘negative’) followers are now open about their beliefs. However, this might be at the cost of the following for more formal skepticism – magazine subscriptions have fallen (as they have for all forms of published media) and our largest conference attendance was in 2010 (we have held conferences every year since 1986).

This particular conferences included a large number of overseas celebrity speakers from the skeptical fraternity, many of whom had never been seen in Australia before (Randi, SGU, George Hrab, Eugenie Scott, Pamela Gay, Brian Dunning, Simon Singh, as well as some local identities, such as the founder of Aust Skeptics, businessman Dick Smith, popular science communicators Dr. Karl Kruszelnicki and Dr Paul Willis).

However, Australia lacks any great number of the high profile self-professed skeptics found in the US, UK etc who appear regularly in the media under a skeptical umbrella (Dr. Karl would be the most noted exception). We also do not have a great deal of locally-developed science-based programming on TV or radio, though there are many outlets for this in digital media, which therefore reaches a younger demographic.

The greatest areas of risk of gullibility and fraudulence are similar to those that exist globally – pseudomedicine, anti-vaccination, psychic mediums. High profile conspiracy theories and religious fundamentalism/creationism are considerably less of an issue in Australia than, say, they are in the US.

Various Australian Skeptics groups – especially those in New South Wales (Australian Skeptics Inc) and Victoria (Vic Skeptics) – are noted for being highly activist on both local and international matters.

We have been involved in campaigning for science-based policy and the need for improved and consistent effectiveness of regulators. A lot of this activity is also through grassroots organisations, which work via a network of individuals, some formal Skeptics and some just skeptically-minded.

Jacobsen: What tends to be the main sources of anti-scientific and extraordinary supernaturalistic claims in Australian society?

Mendham: Non-critical media – popular TV programs and some low-level ‘current affairs’, some talk-back radio, public presentations (especially psychic mediums) and committed online media.

Jacobsen: What are the targeted objectives of Australian Skeptics Inc.?

Mendham: see <https://www.skeptics.com.au/about/our-aims/>

Jacobsen: When societies move away from science, critical thinking, and evidence, how does this negatively impact the functioning of society via poor policy and other decisions?

Mendham: A distrust of authority – not necessarily a bad thing with politics, but it also applies to those with relevant scientific expertise – matched with an unsupported trust in those offering ‘alternative’ theories and practices, simply because they are alternative to “them”.

This has especially expressed itself in an active anti-vaccination movement, though in Australia it’s easy to overestimate the extent of this movement. Outside of some ‘alternative lifestyle’ regions and some well-to-do suburbs where parents “can’t be bothered”, there is a high participation rate for vaccination – national average 94%, with about half of the remaining 6% being unable to vaccinate through being medically compromised.

Therefore, about 3% of non-vaccinators are anti-vax. All levels of government support vaccination – federal and state governments have instituted science-based policies that restrict

the access of unvaccinated children to publically-available and government-subsidised childcare, as well as cutting certain welfare payments to the parents of unvaccinated children.

In these cases, religious-based objections are not allowed. Other than that, in Australia it is only some fringe political groups that do not largely respect science-based policy – that doesn't necessarily mean science-supporting policy, though the public sector represents the largest component of R&D funding.

Jacobsen: How can folks, nationally or internationally, become involved in Australian Skeptics Inc.?

Mendham: They can subscribe to our magazine (<https://www.skeptics.com.au/the-magazine/> – <https://www.skeptics.com.au/product-category/subscriptions/>). We also have a small range of merchandise. Otherwise, there are regular skeptics-in-the-pub meetings in most states, our annual conventions, and a range of social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, our website, plus a fortnightly free newsletter to keep interested parties up to date.

Jacobsen: What are the main concerns regarding claims sold to the general Australian public moving into 2019 for you?

Mendham: Little changed from previous years – anti-vax, psychics. There is a need for regulators to lift their game and be active in some of these pseudoscience areas.

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

Interview with Barrie Webster – President, Victoria Secular Humanist Association

January 1, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Barrie Webster is president of the Victoria Secular Humanist Association (VSHA) and the Memorial Society of BC. Here we talk about the VSHA community.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are the events and services provided for members of the Victoria Secular Humanist Association within the community?

Barrie Webster: We are an incorporated society under the BC Societies Act and have an active program:

During the September to early December and January to early May periods, we have our Sunday Speakers Program, 10:00 to 11:30 am every other Sunday at the Cedar Hill Rec Centre.

On the first and third Wednesday evenings of the month, we have the Humanist Cafe, 7:00 to 8:30 pm at the James Bay New Horizons. Topics are generally taken from current events.

On the second and fourth Wednesday evenings of the month, we have an affiliated function, the Philosophy Salon, 7:00 to 8:30 pm at the Bent Mast Pub in James Bay.

Each Sunday morning, those who get up early meet for breakfast, 8:00 to 9:30 am at J J Morgan's restaurant in the University Heights Shopping Centre.

We celebrate the solstices with parties, in particular, the winter solstice, since it is a unifying (and secular) astronomical event that affects all on our planet. Our summer solstice party often coincides with the Canada Day holiday weekend.

We have a late summer party to get revved up for the fall season.

From time to time, we have field trips to various natural, historical, industrial, and museum sites to advance our scientific knowledge.

We maintain a website that is still under construction but is much more up to date than it was a couple of years ago. One of our newer members is looking after the VSHA website.

Jacobsen: How can individuals become involved in the Victoria Secular Humanist Association?

Barrie Webster: We advertise our events through email to our mailing list, our website, and MeetUp. Events are generally open to the public.

Jacobsen: Humanism emphasizes reason, compassion, and science. Why? How does this work within a secular community including the Victoria Secular Humanist Association?

Webster: Humanism is non-theistic but has a set of principles to live by. There are various versions of these principles; perhaps the most complete are the ones in the Amsterdam Declaration (2002) published by the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

If you look on the Web, you will find various sets of principles for Humanists, but the Amsterdam Declaration is one of the best. VSHA has its own set, too. There is, however, no Humanist dogma.

<https://iheu.org/about/humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>

Jacobsen: What are some of the positive expectations for 2019 for the Victoria Secular Humanist Association?

Webster: Our attempts over the past five years have been to make VSHA attractive to newcomers. Not only does this mean that we have to have attractive activities, we also have to be welcoming and, to the extent possible, respectful of the beliefs of others.

Many people who come to check us out are wavering between a religious community that they have become somewhat disillusioned with and our organization. If we tell them that religion is bunkum and that people who are religious are stupid, they are likely to run in the other direction.

On the other hand, if we demonstrate that we have a set of principles, that we are respectful of diversity, and show that our principles coincide almost entirely with their own, then we are likely to have them join us and take out a membership.

Jacobsen: In the management of community and the work to provide for the needs of the members of it, what are the pluses and minuses, positives and negatives, of the work there?

Webster: Views that are seen as being extreme usually turn people off. Positive efforts to do good things in and for the community are much more likely to make friends for VSHA. We are working on increasing this aspect of our organization.

Jacobsen: What are the general demographics of the Victoria Secular Humanist Association? How does this differ from the general surrounding culture of the area?

Webster: VSHA has had an aging membership for many years. We have been taking steps (slow but positive) to attract younger members and are succeeding slowly. Our oldest member is in failing health and is in his mid-90s but we have a number who are still intellectually active in their 80s.

Most are younger, but few are younger than 40. We did have a new young couple and their 17-month-old daughter come to our winter solstice party, though. They found us through our website.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with donations, becoming a member, or showcasing the Victoria Secular Humanist Association community?

Webster: VSHA is a registered charity. We take up a collection at most of our events (other than field trips, parties, and breakfasts).

We have work to do to showcase VSHA more, but have booths set up at various civic events. We also donate to three charities each year – a scholarship for a local college, one for the refugee centre in Victoria, and one for a Humanist school in Africa.

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

Interview with Perry Jacobs – Administrator, “AtheistHuman”

January 2, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Perry Jacobs is the Administrator of “AtheistHuman” & Atheists World Wide, and formerly ran the podcast “All Atheists Have A Voice.” Here we talk about Perry’s work and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to religion in personal and family life, was it a factor growing up? If so, how? If not, why not?

Perry Jacobs: I’m going to answer these questions piecemeal: *Reader’s Digest* version: I was raised Jewish, learned Hebrew and studied the Old Testament as required. I later became a “born again Christian”.

I studied the Old and New Testament with the leader of our church. I have studied eastern religions. I tried to remain a believer but I just couldn’t square the evil in both Testaments or the world with my conscious.

I’ve really been agnostic through it all until I had the epiphany through learning scientific truths, that there was no god and scientifically there is no need for any god to explain the universe or our existence. I’m known as AtheistHuman on Facebook and Twitter.

Jacobsen: What are some concerning aspects of religion in the electronic era?

Jacobs: I don’t have any concerns associated with mass media because it may actually help skeptics more than believers. Education is the greatest enemy of faith-based belief systems.

Jacobsen: Why found/administrate AtheistHuman? What was the inspiration for its title and founding?

Jacobs: I created AtheistHuman for two reasons. 1. When I posted on my personal FB page my wife got terrible blowback for my posts. She is a very low key atheist and her family, most friends don’t know it and are very judgmental. So I created an alias. I post political stuff under an alias as well (Another Hardened Liberal) on FB and Twitter.

The second reason is because I, like so many of our brothers and sisters, am tired of the judgemental, and in many ways criminal double standards persecuting non-believers for not assimilating and the persistent drumbeat of theists imposing their mythical whining upon the rest of us.

They have every right to their beliefs as we do. That being said, requiring others to believe that same way for acceptability is unacceptable.

Jacobsen: How is an online atheist community important for those with little access to local groups or community?

Jacobs: The online community is of all importance to literally hundreds of thousands of atheists as they may be marginalized and/or shunned or killed for their personal beliefs.

Many, as I once did, feel lost or alone. Community, a feeling of belonging, is all important. Many theists turn to religions mainly for the fellowship and support. There are power and safety in numbers.

Jacobsen: How can humor and laughter at the sacred provide some catharsis for the atheist community and individuals who are atheists?

Jacobs: I think that it's natural to ridicule things we find worthy of that ridicule. Humor also brings like-minded people closer and is a catharsis. Help sidestep the pain associated with the damage associated with theism.

Jacobsen: What are the main reactions to the group? What are some tasks and responsibilities involved with running the page?

Jacobs: I've been very fortunate to have found a niche forming a like-minded community and working with those that are new, on the fence or just not sure what they are. On Twitter, I've got about 23k followers.

There are many followers that help police the trolls. We are very diverse from all over the globe and different political views and varied personal beliefs. It's been awesome. I focus strictly on atheism. I'll debate when seriously approached.

Jacobsen: Any pivotal or interesting moments in the story of the Facebook page?

Jacobs: I manage AtheistHuman myself. I used to have a podcast, "All Atheists Have A Voice" interviewing everyday atheists about how they came to atheism and what issues they encountered in doing so. We took call-ins for the interviewee to answer.

I pay for everything myself and that got to be a strain. I've often thought of trying to get financial support but have shied away from that. I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea.

Furthering atheism and revealing the insanity of religious faith has to be the focus. That's why I started Another Hardened Liberal; to keep the message focused.

Jacobsen: Any final thought or feelings in conclusion?

Jacobs: My twitter feed grew with much work and maintenance over a few years with the help of an app but my FB page stalled out until I posted a meme that went viral with over 2,500 likes and over 4 1/2 million views.

I picked up 9k followers off that meme alone. I also have a partnership with Atheists World Wide and I'm an administrator on that as well. I cross-post the memes that get the most shares. Shares are how you grow a site. I try to help/partnership with other atheist communities. We help each other.

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

Jacobs: I've found this journey very rewarding and very frustrating at the same time. That being said I am dedicated to helping those that need a voice or are searching for like-minded brothers and sisters.

Thanks for the opportunity to answer your questions and thanks for what you do for the atheist community my friend.

In-Depth Interview with Fredric L. Rice – Co-Founder, The Skeptic Tank

January 3, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

This is a “sacrifice” edible plant food ritual placement in the Angeles National Forest with a burning candle. It is a Christianized ritual. This poses a threat in spite of the placement in water. Rice notes, “In 2002 we suffered the Curve Fire which was also started by ritual believed to be Palo Mayombe in nature. Belief in nonsense is usually not dangerous, but actions based on such beliefs is often deadly, as it was with the Curve Fire.”

Fredric L. Rice talks at length about his life, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The important and oft-said statement is extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. This is an important element of The Skeptic Tank.

What is the origin of the phrase? How has this been adapted to different concerns and voiced through different people over time? Why found Skeptic Tank? What have been some of its more important historical moments and contributions to the skeptic online repository?

Fredric L. Rice: The phrase “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” is often attributed to Doctor Carl Sagan, dating to 1979 though if I’m not mistaken, the phrase had been in use among scientists and skeptics long before Sagan made the phrase popular and well known.

Skeptics who organize in to groups of people who address, whether formally or informally, the scientific investigation in to claims of the paranormal recognize that the ideology summarized in the phrase is a fairly recent ideal. The roots of the Scientific Method began around the time of Hippocrates and Aristotle, with what we would consider to be modern science being applied some 1500 years later with Persian and English philosophers-become-scientists such as Roger Bacon and Ibn Sina.

I mention the advent of science because one of the things that skeptics recognize is that what constitutes “extraordinary” has been and continues to be subject to opinion. Newton, Kepler, and all of the great thinkers that came before all had various ideas of what constitutes what is extraordinary and what is not, so many of the greatest historic scientists considered the belief in the gods to be outside of the realm of skepticism.

As David Hume taught, only testable claims are subject to scientific inquiry, which makes theistic belief in the gods, goddesses not subject to scientific tests. Hume, as did so many others, pointed out that claims of the paranormal, however, including claims made about gods and goddesses, pixies, werewolves, fairies, ghosts and goblins, are all subject to science in those cases where testable claims about such things are made.

Skeptics may recall the Bay Area Skeptics in the early 1980s with their well-respected newsletter. In one memorial letter-to-the-skeptics which the BAS addressed in their newsletter which stuck heavily in my mind, a letter writer explained and described attributes about his Christian gods, noting “Jesus loves everybody, even atheists.”

The BAS suggested that before providing evidence that their Jesus god loved anyone, it would be helpful for the letter writer to provide evidence for the existence of their god outside of the imagination, and after such evidence as offered was verified, only then could the letter writer provide evidence that their gods loved someone. Professional evidence-gathering was a good idea, so myself and other High School students created The Skeptic Tank to accumulate and debunk claims of the paranormal with a focus on avoiding deity beliefs.

The Skeptic Tank was born in 1978 when myself and other High School friends wrote one of the first modern (at the time) Bulletin Board System software in Z80 assembly code for the TS-80 with magnetic tape cassette file and message storage. As the IBM PC became relatively inexpensive, The Skeptic Tank split off in to two entities, one of which was the very popular “Astro Net BBS” which covered a much broader arena of subjects, and the more modern Skeptic Tank which culled-and-removed years of on-line discussions and philosophical discussions of untestable claims.

What became a curious phenomenon in the early 1990s was watching Astro Net BBS become much more popular than the Skeptic Tank BBS was, even though Skeptic Tank was accumulating tens of thousands of text files and group discussions about claims of the paranormal and the scientific debunking – and public relations dissemination of same. More people seemed to be interested in deity-oriented religious beliefs than in the debunking of testable claims, so in the before-time, before the DARPA Net opened up commercially and became the Internet, two highly popular BBS core systems became dominant albeit with a large overlap of subject material.

Alas, the old Astro Net dissolved, with its files and old message archives being moved to the highly popular HolySmoke web site which is now defunct, and with about half of The Skeptic Tank’s original file base and message discussion archives surviving to the current form of the ‘Tank.

As far as the most notable of the half million or so files on The Skeptic Tank, the most popular, most aggravating, and most amusing file is the large text “*Vanishing Point: How to Disappear in America Without a Trace*” which I started writing decades ago, a text file which has been stolen, published, and sold in various versions without my permission.

The file has been read and downloaded tens of millions of times, peaking with the aftermath of the Presidential election of Al Gore, amusingly enough, and peaking again with the election of Trump. People search the Internet for tips about disappearing, it is a very popular fantasy in this highly-digital, high-surveillance society.

About 19 years ago a local police officer came to my door and left a note asking me to phone an FBI agent concerning a web page on The Skeptic Tank. Intrigued I called the FBI agent while I was at work in Pacoima, California and immediately asked what file could he be interested in despite having a suspicion that it was “*Vanishing Point*.”

It was. He wanted to know how many previous versions of “*Vanishing Point*” there had been and, if possible, to let him know if there had been any major changes in the past two years. A suspect in a double homicide had allegedly murdered his wife and her lover and had researched disappearing in America as well as had researched the disposal of human remains using the Internet, and “*Vanishing Point*” was the one web page that the suspect had allegedly dumped to paper at his local library.

Jacobsen: What are the key elements in skeptical thinking, critical thinking, and scientific methodology? How can these better inform the general public's view of extraordinary claims, e.g., miracle cures, Bigfoot, UFOs, astrology and horoscopes, crystal power, prayer, seasonal fad diets, and so on?

Rice: One of the biggest difficulties to overcome in debunking claims of the paranormal is not to laugh at the people who believe in such things. Laughing and mocking is the normal primate response to highly humorous and highly ironic exclamations of certain forms of belief, and if one attempts to adhere to David Hume-class skepticism, mocking is a bad thing to do, however difficult it is to avoid when looking at Creationists' claims, astrology, horoscopes, flat Earth and such.

If someone were to wake up one morning and honestly believe that during the night they have been taken over by aliens beaming sonic control messages in to their heads and now have no control over their actions, skeptics don't mock that, scientists don't mock that, mental health academics don't mock that, we search for a physical cause of what is "obviously" a malady caused by a real, biological phenomena. That's one form of paranormal belief which skepticism has no difficulty not mocking.

But when it comes to Creationism, astrology, Tarot cards, the flat Earth and other highly-laughable beliefs, it gets difficult not to laugh at the people who harbor them.

A highly successful way to address testable beliefs is to deep-dive, learn the broad spectrum of those beliefs, perform tests on the claims which are testable, and share the results. For example, the Astro Net BBS's system operator and creator learned astrology, reading countless books, learning enough math to be able to compute planetary positions and motions, and he became an advocate for the process of astrology even as he debunked the claims resulting from astrological computations.

Performing astrology, offering Tarot card readings, and committing the process of some things can become an enjoyable past time, even if you do not believe that the results have any predictive value beyond mere celestial mechanics, and so it was with the Astro Net and later the Skeptic Tank. Skeptics and believers alike learned real science, real math alongside pure bullshit, shared our findings, argued, fought, and discussed our findings, and exactly zero minds were changed: The skeptics moved on to some new claim of the paranormal while believers walked away continuing to believe, honestly believing that their encounters survived scientific scrutiny.

Such is the nature of belief.

When it comes to other arenas of testable as well as untestable beliefs – quack medical beliefs, flying saucer landings, alien abductions, crystal power, pyramid power, ancient astronauts – skeptics who have been advocating the scientific debunking of testable claims find that advocates of nonsense are starkly split in to three groups of people: (1) The con-man crook who knows that he or she is selling lies and does so for money. (2) The believer who may or may not lack a basic understanding of the Scientific Method who none-the-less believes in a suit of nonsense even as he or she rejects other avenues of nonsense (which includes people who have mental difficulties.) (3) The con-man who has suffered mental debilitation enough to start believing his or her own blatant frauds, such as L. Ron Hubbard with his Scientology and Dianetics frauds.

So when you ask about how to best inform the general public about why it is a good thing to employ reason, evidence, and science to claims, you're fighting a battle against criminals who defraud people, you're fighting against people who have no marketable skills other than to defraud people while your motives for advocating science are less tangible. The con-man sells miracle cures that will keep people's children from dying, if you believe, while you're selling the less-tangible ideal of the need for scientific reasoning in all things for the betterment and the survival of the species, if not the entire planet's biosphere.

Skeptics work to reduce misery among the hopeful and the hopeless, scammers work to the detriment of society. That's a hard hill for skeptics to climb, and after 40 years of organized skepticism, I have yet to find an effective way to combat bullshit, a problem which has gotten ever worse as financial and political interests work to ensure that people are kept uninformed, stupid, ignorant, and believing in nonsense.

Jacobsen: Who are the perennial fraudsters? Who are upcoming or new ones? How can the public protect themselves and others from their bogus salesmanship?

Rice: Alas, all of the old-timers have long ago fallen extinct, we no longer have the likes of self-proclaimed psychic Jeane Dixon, nor do we have the likes of any Uri Geller-like buffoon utilizing simple (yet effective) conjuring tricks to rook and swindle the rubes, marks, and suckers.

I say "alas" because what has taken their place is a flood of less-skilled-at-trickery men and women who have taken to the Internet to sell their scams and frauds, crooks who are further strengthened by foreign adversary governments who also utilize the Internet to sow fraudulent beliefs in populations to disrupt and degrade a nation's economic and scientific standing in a global market place.

About fifteen years ago, if I remember things correctly, a Chinese national was charged with accessing a computer without the owners permission, the so-called "Unauthorized Computer Access" law in California, Penal Code section 502. The Chinese national was in California and had hacked a well-known national Creationist organization in an effort to acquire the organization's mailing list.

Federal agencies got involved when it was discovered that the individual was employed by a well-known Chinese electronics company and had successfully hacked the Creationist organization's with the specific intent of acquiring the names, addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses of believers in Creationism.

Prosecutors determined that the eventual goal was not to take money from the believers but to join the Creationist arena to assist in spreading anti-science nonsense in the United States, a deliberate effort to adversely impact the reasoning and economic competition of Americans in an increasingly-global economy.

The Skeptic Tank was one of the set of computer servers that had been attacked, and I dimly recall wondering why someone in Simi Valley was SYN-flooding my servers, trying SQL injections, and buffer-overflows to test well-known vulnerabilities. It wasn't until some two years later that the FBI asked if I retained Radix or SysLog records going back that far before I learned about the incident.

I mention all this because with the advent of the Internet, the landscape has changed. Industrialized countries are now information-age countries, so it is through information and misinformation that anti-science adversely impacts us now.

What used to be con-men and women rooking the rubes for money has become well-funded organizations and nation-states joining the assault against reason for the political and economic benefit of those who advocate un-reason.

The only protection against falling for nonsense is to know that any one of us can fall for anything. Across 40 years of organized skepticism, the number 1 thing I have noticed is that any of us can fall for scams and frauds and that when we tell ourselves that we are immune from believing in nonsense, we are exactly the type of people that crooks seek.

I would like to underscore that, if I may. The belief that you can't call for scams and frauds is one of the main reasons why people fall for scams and frauds. The person who knows that he or she is susceptible to getting swindled is someone who is on the look-out and paying attention. The person who thinks that they can't be swindled are the people that swindlers seek first because none of us are immune regardless of our intelligence.

When it comes to belief, intelligence takes a back seat. It's why some people think they have gods despite otherwise being smart, together, rational, and despite their employment of science in all other things.

So my advice to people to avoid falling for nonsense, scams and frauds is this: Accept the fact that you are not immune, accept the fact that what looks to be solid evidence for an extraordinary claim will almost certainly fall apart once you dispassionately evaluate the claim.

Jacobsen: What makes the human brain distinctly capable of believing patent nonsense?

Rice: I blame leopards for that. And Darwin. The noise coming from behind that bush may or may not be a leopard, you can't see what's making that noise so you don't know whether it's a leopard or not, so what does Darwin suggest you do to avoid getting eaten and failing to pass along your genes? Believe without evidence that it's a leopard and to act accordingly by running away.

Our species was arboreal, our brains developed to map the world in three dimensions while simultaneously evaluating the risk of reaching for a tree limb that leads to darkness and unknown predators or food sources. What our ancestors worked with was close-up to hand, the world was within reach and manipulable to some extent.

Our species then became plains apes. That gave our species an added longer-distance perspective on the world and enabled us to see food sources and dangers at a distance. We adapted to evaluate risks and benefits from a broader perspective than most species whose ancestors have always been aquatic, or arboreal, or happy in their ecologic niche.

So our species, like all others to various degrees, developed an ability to measure risk versus benefit, and because we are a species that harbor the capacity to believe in things that are demonstrably not true, Darwin suggests that the ability to believe nonsense, and the ability to bifurcate and compartmentalize our thinking is a successful survival mechanism, at least successful so far.

One other thing I would note is what the future likely holds. As humans left agricultural society and entered the Industrial age, the world's populace split in to two half's, what we call the "first

world” countries and the “third world” countries. It is a stark bifurcation of economics and access to food, medicine, and anti-fertility drugs.

In industrialized nations, something around 1.3 million people die in vehicle-related collisions every year in a world population numbered around 7.7 billion. The number of people killed by leopards has declined sharply in the past couple of hundred years. From that perspective, cars are a risk that is acceptable, and leopards have also become an acceptable risk to humans. We literally believe that we are safe from cars and leopards because our risk evaluation faculties tell us that we’re safe.

Now we come to the warming climate and the ability for a percentage of the world’s populace who know about it to dismiss the risk of climate change. Roughly a third of any populace in an industrialized nation right now rejects the truth about human-driven climate change whereas the rejection among third-world people is much less (I don’t have poll data to offer on that, I go by news articles and on-line discussions for those numbers.)

When it comes to the human brain’s ability to believe nonsense, my point is that there is also the human brain’s ability to reject demonstrable fact, such as a warming climate. The very people who refuse to accept the fact of a warming climate are those who are being adversely impacted by the consequences of a warming planet right this very moment, while those who accept the research and publications covering climate change are generally the least impacted, so far.

Whose survival is dependent upon the acceptance or denial of demonstrable facts? Darwin says that it’s those who accept the real world around them and accept what their very own eyes tell them. I mention it because Darwin also says that believing bullshit is also a survival mechanism, thus our species has the ability to compartmentalize and literally believe things that we also know are not true.

Jacobsen: What is the true architecture of pseudoscience? How does this relate to cults, cult-like behavior, and fundamentalist ideologies?

Rice: One of the more disturbing things that The Skeptic Tank has been involved with over the years is with gangs, specifically with rituals and expected behavior of gang members. Initiation rites and the expected behavior of gang members sharply mirror those of traditional cults.

Operating at core within cults as well as within criminal gangs – as well as operating within police departments, large corporations, and any other grouping of humans – is human behavioral science. Cult leaders, gang leaders, corporate leaders, police departments, they all understand the basics how to control and manipulate other people within a layered political and economic hierarchy. That phenomena are *organized* control and manipulation of people in groups.

On the other hand, individuals who operate on their own to manipulate and control other people in ones and twos also understand the basics of human behavior, however that is often disorganized. Once an individual manages to rook a fair number of victims, that disorganized control of others becomes more and more controlled. Just take a look at the history of Scientology as a very good example of that phenomena.

The architecture of our species belief and spreading of nonsense is, as always, nature and nurture. Just as Darwinian selection molded our brains, so has social interaction with other humans molded our behavior. We get hit by people who teach us nonsense in large groups, as we get hit by people who teach us nonsense in ones and twos. The large arenas of nonsense: Religious belief in deity constructs, belief in magic diet fads which lack any basic science whatsoever,

astrology, Creationism, Chiropractic, and all the other mass piles of nonsense out there. The small arenas of nonsense: Horoscopes, biorhythms, Tarot card readings.

If we could isolate humans from the consequences of nurture so that they are not subjected to the nonsense beliefs of their parents, friends, and neighbors, what would result? (Other than possibly an unhealthy child who grows up in to psychotic adults?) I believe that we would end up with humans who would re-discover all the nonsense that their immediate ancestors believed in because our brains are hard-wired to make-up and believe things that we also know aren't true.

Jacobsen: How did the Satanic Ritual Abuse panic emerge? What is its basis, not in fact but in social psychology? As James Randi notes, anyone can be fooled. How was this a good example of this cautionary note from a skeptic pioneer?

Rice: Satanic Ritual Abuse panics appear to be cyclic in nature, they come on suddenly and then disappear just as suddenly. As readers may recall, the McMartin Preschool fiasco started with a woman with some significant mental difficulties who examined her child one day, found a rash and, because she couldn't accept the fact that keeping the child clean had failed coupled to her mental difficulties assumed that "something" at the preschool was responsible for the rash.

From such little things can spring the abject criminal nonsense that we saw with the McMartin incident. People – innocent people – actually went to prison in McMartin although they were eventually released after the False Memory Syndrome Foundation and other professional psychologists and psychiatrists worked with law enforcement to debunk the many "SRA" claims implanted in to children despite all lack of evidence.

The Skeptic Tank got involved in the McMartin Satanic Panic and assisted in small ways to develop and distribute information about false memory implantation in children by adults in authority. A great deal of scientific research had already gone in to the phenomena of making people confess to crimes and other acts which they did not commit, and in to making people honestly, actually believe things had happened to them which could not possibly have happened.

Communist and Fascist States have honed the behavioral science behind the actions which were utilized against the children and parents of McMartin, but lagging far behind the glut of research and experimentation in making people believe false memories was the means, the behavioral science needed to debunk, expose, and remove such false memories.

So we ended up with a number of SRA incidents over the course of some five years, driven in part by Janet Reno, the Attorney General of the United States who was herself a believer in "Satanists" roaming the United States ritually birthing, killing, eating, and cremating up to some 300,000 children in the United States annually.

Reno believed that "Satanists" were committing such activities despite any evidence to back-up her Christian beliefs, so she latched on to claims of SRA where they emerged and she worked to inflate such incidents, doing so due to her Christian religious beliefs.

If Reno had not gotten involved, the McMartin fiasco would have been a small blip, a number of parents who thought that there was sexual child abuse taking place who would have seen absolutely zero evidence for anything remotely like it who would have subsided and mostly accepted the fact that there was nothing happening – aside from one or two parents who had a history of mental difficulties who would cling to their beliefs regardless.

Years after McMartin had died down and the victims were released and vindicated, I was contacted by one of the mothers who I believe suffered from serious mental difficulties, she contacted me via Email to reiterate her abject belief that there were tunnels under the preschool grounds, tunnels that were “confirmed” after excavators found a crushed soda can.

Because she – and other people nationwide – believe that evidence for tunnels was found, they also believe that children were abducted through those tunnels, taken to a secret airfield which nobody knew about, flown to Peru where they were ritually raped, ritually slaughtered, parts of them were ritually eaten, and the children were magically sewed back together, transported back to the preschool, and were picked up by their parents at the end of the school day with no apparent indication of what had been done to them, other than an occasional rash.

Jacobsen: What makes some faiths and fundamentalism more dangerous than others, when things stop being rather benign – comparatively speaking – and humorous?

Rice: It used to be that someone believing in astrology advising the President of the United States (and holder of the world’s largest nuclear stockpile of weapons) was a concern. It used to be that politicians who control armies and weapons harboring anti-science beliefs were a limited, regional threat, threats controlled by the people around them: assistance, aids, lawyers, people who could control the man or woman who had power as well as held bizarre, un-true beliefs.

Thanks to the advent of science and technology, such people have the means to kill millions, tens of millions, if not destroy all mammals on this planet. Climate change denial among politicians paid by corporations who believe that their economic success or failure rests upon denial or acceptance is likely to result in a great many of us dying as populations are displaced, refugees migrate, water sources dry up.

Lynn Wilson worked on the United Nation’s climate change sub-group, and she suggested that the time to evacuate California is now. That was some four years ago and, of course and as expected, California’s human population continued to grow, nobody evacuated, at least not enough people to show.

In a sane world, with a sane species, with scientists demonstrating and describing how and why the planet’s climate is changing, with scientists advocating measures to mitigate what’s undeniably going to happen, California’s evacuation would be underway, some 30 million people would be working toward relocating, knowing what’s coming.

But corporations and the politicians that work for them see economic and political benefit by advocating a denial of what’s happening and what’s going to happen. And after all, change is difficult for our species to accept even as it’s happening, and a warming climate happening slowly so far is only adversely impacting a small percentage of us, so it’s fatally dangerous to ignore what’s happening even as we can all see it happening.

Jacobsen: How is Scientology a crime syndicate? Why should buyers, even sellers, beware of it?

Rice: The Scientology corporations a criminal enterprise because it engages in criminal activities. One can isolate the untestable beliefs that some Scientology customers have from the testable, falsifiable, fraudulent claims that the Scientology corporation makes.

I do not consider Scientology to be a cult first and foremost, I consider it to be organized crime first and foremost due to its history as well as due to what the corporation currently does to its

customers and to innocent people, reporters, Judges, prosecutors, the family members of victims who fall for Scientology's obvious, blatant frauds.

If you were to plot-out a Venn Diagram of Scientology's actions with the actions of other, more traditional organized crime syndicates, the vast majority of actions would overlap. If you were to diagram the beliefs of Scientology customers against the beliefs of traditional organized crime members, you would find few which overlap.

The dangers of falling for Scientology's frauds are almost always merely financial, statistically Scientology customers only get rooked and swindled for less than 2 years before they walk away and stop handing their money over. It is extremely rare for Scientology customers to stick with the scams long enough to become crooks themselves who scam others. That is the second danger of falling for Scientology: Falling so deeply in to it that you become a crook yourself, victimizing others.

Scientology is a lot like pyramid schemes in that some people who stick with it long enough "advance" to positions where they attempt to swindle other victims of their money, with the Scientology customer getting a percentage of the take.

There is one other risk when buying Scientology's programs: They are highly debilitating when inflicted for prolonged periods. Carl Sagan in *"The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark"* noted that L. Ron Hubbard had created a documented process which literally drives people insane, and looking at the consequences of Scientology, it certainly does appear to be an accurate summation of Scientology.

Scientology sells its customers what they call "Training Routes" or "TRs" for short. They literally consist of activities which work to subvert and then supplant a customer's primate behavior and reasoning faculties in an effort to make their customers pliable and obeying, all with an eye toward taking as much money from their victims as possible.

As an example, their "Communication Course" which is one of the first scams they try to sell to people involves TRs which involve sitting in a chair and then being ordered to do things. "Stand up" where-after the customer stands up. Then the Scientology operative says "thank you" and then instructs them to "Take three steps forward." The customer takes three steps forward after which the Scientology operative says "thank you" and orders them around the room, step by step until the customer is returned to her chair.

That activity advances to what Scientology calls "No Blink" and then "Bull Bait." A customer and a Scientology agent sit in chairs facing each other, kneed not quite touching, and the customer is ordered not to respond to anything that the agent says or does, not even blink their eyes. The agent goes on to perform actions, make jokes, whatever he or she can think of in an effort to make the customer react. If the customer reacts, the agent yells "Flunk! Lifting your leg. Start over!" and it starts over again.

This goes on for hours and hours until the Scientology agent says they "pass" and the "session ends," hours which the victim pays a considerable amount of money for.

During "No Blink" and many other "processes" that Scientology sells to its customers, people find that they start to hallucinate and to have their motile senses edited or culled by their brains. Victims of Scientology report that sitting there motionless for hours staring at someone else they find they can no longer feel the chair they're sitting in, they lose the kinetics awareness of where their arms and legs are located, "Bull Bait" is like No Blink except that the Scientology agent

gets further in to demeaning behavior, insulting and physically attempting to elicit a response from the customer.

What the intent here is to eliminate primate behavior and remove normal human self volition. Humans are omnivore primates, we have our eyes where carnivores wear them, out front. Staring at each other is a hostile behavior for carnivores, it means we're plotting to either screw you or eat you or otherwise cause you harm. Scientology forces abnormal behavior by forcing people to stare at each other, suppressing the normal primate flee/fight response.

Ordering customers around, literally controlling their limbs and their decisions, supplants their self volition and trains them to follow orders, including handing over their money upon demand.

Finally many customers who fall for this nonsense report that after their TR session ended, they honestly felt that it had done them good some how, that they had benefited some how. Being released from the tension of such activities is such a relief that it imparts a pleasant feeling. Induced hallucinatory events can impart a warm, comfortable, satisfied feeling, so customers who have subjected themselves to Scientology and walk away at most two years later often report that when they first started, they honestly believed that Scientology helped them some how, though they can't explain how.

Jacobsen: What are the more concerning anti-fact and pseudoscience movements and ideas cropping up, as we move into 2019?

Rice: Anti vaccination for emerging infectious diseases as well as vaccination for long-time viral and bacterial foes of humanity is a growing problem, right up there with the growth of climate change denial and the growth of Flat Earth belief.

I'm involved in the arena of emerging infectious diseases since I have worked professionally within offices maintained by the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) and I deal with potential disease vectors in the San Gabriel Mountains of California which has a long history of *Yersinia pestis* which causes plague and other bacterial or viral zoonotic organisms.

The growth of anti-vaccination ideologies and the belief that vaccinations some how cause autism is, I believe, going to be one of the largest arenas of concern in the coming years.

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

Interview with Louis Dubé – President, Sceptiques du Québec & Editor, Le Québec Sceptique

January 4, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Louis Dubé is the President of Sceptiques du Québec and the Editor of Le Québec Sceptique. Here he talks about his life and views.

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

Louis Dubé: I was born and raised in Quebec as a Catholic within the dominant French culture of the second half of the 20th century. Around 18 years of age, I began to seriously doubt the validity of religion as a world view. All religions seemed to me to be myths full of contradictions and to be inconsistent with many scientific findings in biology (evolution of species) and astronomy (our place in the cosmos). I eventually became skeptical of all claims that did not have a basis in physical evidence and a valid argumentation in the interpretation of relevant facts.

Jacobsen: What were some of the pivotal moments or educational lessons in being guided to a more skeptical outlook on the world?

Dubé: Before I was 20 years old, I had read the works of some French philosophers/novelists (Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre). But it really was the English Philosopher Bertrand Russell (“Why I am not a Christian”) who convinced me of the mythical nature of religions with what I then felt were very good and clear arguments against beliefs in religious dogma. At about that time, I also read about skepticism from one of its pioneers, Martin Gardner (“Fads and fallacies in the name of science”). Those two authors contributed largely to a skeptical approach to unsubstantiated claims.

Jacobsen: Within Quebecois Canadian culture, who are the perennial fraudsters? Who are upcoming or new ones? How can the public protect themselves and others from their bogus salesmanship? In fact, does Francophone culture provide a different filter for the forms of fraudulent, whether alternative medicine (e.g. Reiki), cultists, spiritualists, or New Age gurus, compared to Anglophone culture in any way? My assumption is most likely, “No.”

Dubé: Some 30 years ago, when our association “Les Sceptiques du Québec” was founded, astrologers and fortune tellers were relatively popular. Our skeptical organization dutifully debunked their claims and even offered (for about 25 years) a “prediction contest” to prove that anyone can randomly attain the same percentage level of good predictions. We naturally oppose the standard fare of paranormal claims: ghosts, channelling, UFOs, miraculous necklaces, imaginary monsters, etc. We also strive to disprove all sorts of pseudoscientific claims: homeopathy, free energy, miraculous cures of all types, conspiracy theories, ...

Education, our primary mission, is probably the surest way to protect the public from those false claims. It is not an easy task but it’s like what skeptics all over the world do, whichever language they speak.

Jacobsen: What are some of the activities, events, and tools provided through Sceptiques du Québec and *Le Québec Sceptique*, as you are the President of the Sceptiques du Québec and the Editor of *Le Québec Sceptique*?

Dubé: We organize monthly conferences and publish a magazine (70-80 pages) three times a year. The speakers we invite are academics, scientists, science communicators or authors of books relevant to skepticism. The articles we publish draw from the same types of people and from local skeptics. No subject, no matter how controversial, is off-limits. For frank discussions, we have also invited astrologists, ufologists, conspiracists, religionists, theologians...

We offer a \$10,000 prize to those who are willing to try to prove their paranormal claims following a rigorous experimental protocol. So far, none have succeeded. We also host on our Web site a French translation of Robert T. Carroll's *Skeptic's Dictionary* and of Stephen Barrett's *Quackwatch*.

Jacobsen: What is the way of thinking comprising skepticism? How does this differ from cynicism?

Dubé: Our type of skepticism does not come from a rigid and dogmatic philosophical position such as cynicism. It's more a method to ensure that our ideas are reasonably justified by quantifiable observations and reproducible test results. It is often said that true skeptics do not voice an opinion until being shown rigorous demonstrations, especially concerning extraordinary claims.

Our approach, like that of most skeptics, follows the scientific method: observe reality, form hypotheses and rigorously test predictions stemming from those hypotheses. Only correct predictions give a theory a chance of being right and useful.

Jacobsen: What are the approximate demographics of Sceptiques du Québec and *Le Québec Sceptique*?

Dubé: Our association has around 300 members and sells about 250 copies of each issue of our magazine *Le Québec sceptique*, published 3 times a year. We also host a skeptic forum where almost 500 000 messages have been exchanged over the last 20 years by over 5000 subscribers from the international French skeptic community and from other inquiring individuals – many expressing opposing views, which leads to lively discussions.

Jacobsen: Who are some allies in the Canadian – Anglophone and Francophone – fight against pseudoscience, pseudohistory, pseudomedicine, and general nonsense?

Dubé: We have a few allies in the Montreal area. Most are Francophone organizations such as the "Agence Science-Press" on the skeptical side and the "Association humaniste du Québec" on the secular side. The Anglophone "Office for Science and Society" of McGill University deals with a lot of pseudo-medical claims, so do several Francophone and Anglophone bloggers in Quebec.

We naturally keep in touch with some of the French international skeptic organizations: "Association française pour l'information scientifique" (France) and "Comité belge pour l'analyse critique des parasciences" (Belgium).

Jacobsen: What makes some faiths and fundamentalisms more dangerous than others, when things stop being humorous in their absurdity? How can these arise in cults, in religions, in economic ideologies, in hyper-nationalist fronts, and so on?

Dubé: Islamists probably represent one of the most dangerous religious fundamentalists; they exercise political power in several countries and some fund major terrorist organizations. There are also several Christian extremist faiths in North America, especially those against contraception, abortion, medical care and blood transfusion, whose influence we should attempt to diminish with scientific facts. When religion and politics mix, freedom usually suffers greatly.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more recent updates happening for 2019 for Sceptiques du Québec? What are some of the prominent pseudoscientific and fraudulent claims in Canadian society? Who are some of the prominent fakers in Canadian society, who need calling out by name and their fraudulent practices?

Dubé: Our primary mission is to improve critical thinking for our members and the general public. Fake scientific news poses great challenges in that respect. We will also continue to organize conferences and publish articles in order to improve scientific literacy and rigorous analysis.

Homeopathy, acupuncture and chiropractic have gained official status in our province against the better judgment of the scientific community. We will certainly oppose their hold on people unaware of the lack of evidence for their efficacy. Medical claims of different types will need to be addressed whether on treatment, medication or diet. We will no doubt continue to have serious discussions on many topics of interest to our membership regarding religion, ufology and conspiracy theories.

Jacobsen: Any thoughts or feelings based on the interview today?

Dubé: The need for critical thinking is as important today as it was in previous decades. Easy information access through the Internet presents the additional challenge of checking many more dubious stories. Fortunately, there are several skeptical and rigorous journalistic sources that we can rely on. We only need to be aware of our biases, regularly consult such reliable sources, check facts and try to exercise fair judgment. A lot of necessary and enjoyable work ahead of us.

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

Interview with Heather Pentler – Committee Member, Edinburgh Skeptics

January 5, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Heather Pentler is a Committee Member of the Edinburgh Skeptics. Here she talks about her life and views.

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

Heather Pentler: I was baptised Roman Catholic, my mum was raised Greek Orthodox but lived agnostically. She couldn't quite shake the indoctrination and didn't want to risk condemning us to hell if she was wrong, so I was baptised.

My dad was a staunch atheist and scientist. They always left it up to us to decide. I think I was about 6/7 when I gave up on the idea completely. My mum's family was Ukrainian and that was a big influence in my early life.

We used to celebrate all the festivals with the Ukrainian community near us but that always felt more about the community and the rituals than religion. I have never been able to grasp languages, unfortunately, but I did attend Ukrainian lessons until I was 8 but can't remember much more than the odd word.

Jacobsen: How did autism/Asperger's impact early life (please specify which as I am unsure which, or even if)? How did this become part of personal identity and change trajectories in life as well?

Pentler: I am not, as far as I know, autistic myself. I work for my day job as an autism support worker, working with university students. I never had much interaction with autism until I started working there 3 years ago.

Since working there I have received extensive training on autism and learnt a lot from speaking to my students. The isolation and feeling different from your peers can be an intrinsic part of autistic person's life but every autistic person is different so it may not be the same for everyone.

Quite a lot of the people I work with don't receive a diagnosis until later in their lives, this can sometimes make their childhood make much more sense as they understand now why they didn't fit into the neurotypical world.

Jacobsen: In Edinburgh, who are the perennial fraudsters? Who are upcoming or new ones? How can the public protect themselves and others from their bogus salesmanship?

Pentler: We have the same usual assortment of acupuncturists and reflexologists. Most places are careful with what they publish so there's little action that can be taken. There's a regular alternative medicine fair which we have attended a few times, to check on what they are selling. We attempted to get a stall there with full disclosure of who we were but they were apparently "full".

There is one practitioner of an alternative practice in Edinburgh which I've not heard of elsewhere called German New Medicine, it's a basic mind over matter methodology that claims that illness is caused by trauma and if you can resolve that trauma you'll be fine.

The main thing people can do to protect themselves is question if something sounds too good to be true it probably is, so question it. Also just because it's natural or ancient doesn't make it safe or effective.

Questioning claims by anyone is good practice especially if it feeds into your preconceived biases. This is more important today for news consumption than anything else. Check a story before you share it, nobody wants to inadvertently spread propaganda.

Jacobsen: What makes the human brain distinctly capable of believing patent nonsense? For example, what are some of the nonsensical purported cures for autism/Asperger's?

Pentler: Hope. That's what makes it so insidious. The purveyors of alternative treatments sell false hope to desperate people. I have a lupus and having a chronic illness is really shit (replace with "awful" if you don't want swearing) I frequently can't sleep and I am in a lot of pain, it's limited my career opportunities and future plans.

If I genuinely thought there was a magic cure I'd do anything to have it. I describe coming to terms with an illness, physical or mental as grief. You grieve for the life you will no longer have. Grief can make the best of us do crazy things.

The people who take up these treatments shouldn't be treated with scorn or derision, they have made a choice that made sense to them in their circumstances. The people who misled them and fed them hope of cure are the only people who should have any repercussion for their actions.

In the case of autism, it mostly comes from parents. I imagine they are grief stricken that the life they thought their child would have is not their reality and try to find something to change it. I hope in time there is greater societal acceptance of neurodiversity and parents will find it easier to accept their child for who they are.

There are fantastic things that autistic people bring to the world and we need to be more accepting as a society. Autism doesn't need to be cured, the neurotypical reaction to autism needs to change.

Jacobsen: What is the true architecture of pseudoscience? How does this relate to cults, cult-like behavior, and fundamentalist ideologies?

Pentler: Easy answers. The world is complicated and confusing, pseudoscience and cults explain everything in a singular theory that is easier to get your head around than the complicated truth. It can also give people a greater sense of purpose, not everyone can cope with the fact that we individually matter very little.

It reminds of the Total Perspective Vortex in Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, the idea that we are so insignificant in the majesty of the whole universe is difficult for our narcissistic brains to cope with (unless you're Zaphod Beeblebrox in a universe of your own making).

Cults, religion, pseudoscience usually give humans a special place that's easier to swallow than the truth that as far as we can tell our existence is just a blip in the grand scale of things.

It also gives a purpose, the vast majority of us are not going to leave an impact on the world, being part of something bigger than yourself can make someone feel like they have a legacy. It's easier to believe that our existence is purposeful rather than random.

Humans are good at spotting patterns and that can lead us down wrong paths because there's not always a pattern to follow. That urge to make connections accounts for conspiratorial thinking, pseudoscience and religion.

Someone who makes the connection that homeopathic remedy that took cured their headache is falling for the same fallacy as the person who thinks their prayers do anything.

Jacobsen: Why was Edinburgh Skeptics founded in 2009? How has it evolved over time? Also, what are the approximate demographics of its membership or audience?

Pentler: I wasn't part of the founding, in fact none of the current committee were. From what I understand it was started around the same time as other groups in the country and at the urging of their first speaker Chris French (he's a parapsychologist who helps run the UK Skeptic magazine).

They got involved in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival the following year in 2010. We run a 23 night run of talks in August as part of the Fringe Festival in the city. I have only been in Edinburgh since 2014.

So I can't really speak to what it was like before I moved here. The current demographics tend to be older 45+ and we have a pretty even gender split. Our Facebook analytics tell us our gender divide is 55% male 43% female which makes us happy. We try to ensure we have at least half our speakers be female when we can.

Jacobsen: Edinburgh Skeptics has podcasts, a newsletter, a blog, and events. How does each of these help with providing for the needs of the skeptic community in Edinburgh? How does this relate to other skeptic communities within Scotland as a whole?

Pentler: The podcast and newsletter both run around the events. The podcast is predominantly recordings of the talks we have had and the newsletter mostly announces upcoming events. Our events are a place for people to get together and develop a community. We also put on a stall at a local weekend festival in a park.

There we use horoscopes and parableia to explain some basic principles of skepticism to people who may not have encountered it before. There are usually stalls belonging to local chiropractors and acupuncturists so we like to bring a bit of rationalism to the festival.

We do this to try and engage with new and different audiences rather than just preaching to the choir. Our events are a chance for people to enjoy being part of the choir. We are relaunching our website in 2019 and hope to have more blog posts on the new website.

As the biggest and most well funded group in Scotland we try to help and share cost where we can. We're very close to the group in Glasgow and will often share speakers and split expenses. The other 2 groups in Scotland are unfortunately dormant at the moment. The smaller cities struggle especially as travel expenses can be very high to the furthest north cities.

Jacobsen: What makes some faiths and fundamentalisms more dangerous than others, when things stop being humorous in their absurdity?

Pentler: I think any faith that encourages isolationism is dangerous. Humans worked best together and develop the best ideas through exchanging thoughts.

If you look at it too hard even the humorously absurd ideas are dangerous because it demonstrates that detachment from reality which makes more dangerous actions more likely. I think The Book of Mormon is the best and funniest musical ever written though.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more recent updates happening for 2019 for Edinburgh Skeptics? What are some of the prominent pseudoscientific and fraudulent claims in Scottish society? Who are some the prominent fakers in Scottish society, who need calling out by name and their fraudulent practices?

Pentler: We are doing some exciting things in 2019. We are launching a skeptical fact of the day with a different skeptically related fact or concept everyday. Having been involved in skepticism for so long it's easy to forget that not everyone knows what a Barnum statement is or what homeopathy actually is.

We are hoping this will be good outreach and introduce different ideas to people. We are also running our 500th(ish) event with science comedian Robin Ince who hosts the BBC Radio Four show Infinite Monkey Cage with physicist Brian Cox.

We are trying a new type of event for the International Science Festival in Edinburgh this year and hosting a cabaret night with science, magic and comedy. It will also be our 10th Fringe run which will try to mark with a prestigious line up.

We would like to work with The Good Thinking Society to get homeopathy off the NHS in Scotland as they have managed in England and Wales. We don't manage to do as much as we would like in terms of activism. Our committee is only 4 people and we all work day jobs as well, so we don't always have the time/energy to do as much as we want to.

Jacobsen: Why is the phrase "respect people, challenge ideas" important to the Edinburgh Skeptics ethos?

Pentler: We felt it was important to not be arseholes. There was an issue in skepticism of people being derogatory to people who had fallen for alternative medicine or believed in the paranormal.

Here at Edinburgh we try to encourage people not to direct your anger at the people following the ideas but direct it at the ideas themselves. Calling someone gullible for taking homeopathy won't win people over.

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

Interview with Gayle Jordan – Executive Director, Recovering from Religion

January 6, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Gayle Jordan is the Executive Director of Recovering from Religion, Founder of Murfreesboro Freethinkers, Co-Founder of NaNoCon, and Assistant State Director of American Atheists Tennessee. She ran as an openly secular Democratic candidate in 2014 in Tennessee.

In the light of the massive work for secular progress and, more importantly and interrelated with it, women's equality or gender equality, the ideological fundamentalist religious and ultra-patriarchal male okie-doke holds lesser evidence-lacking and reason-less sway in more sectors of the public sphere.

Jordan's run and other women's victories in latter-2018 in the United States reflect this. Here we talk her life, views, and work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did religion and secular thinking come into early life for you? How did this continue throughout development, in brief?

Gayle Jordan: I was a religious person until I was 40 years old. I raised my 4 children in the Southern Baptist church. When those children became teenagers, and began asking questions about the faith, I entered into a journey of discovery and knowledge with them. Ultimately, one by one, we lost confidence in our beliefs, and left religion. This opened my eyes to the impact religion has on individual, communities, and politics, and I launched into secular activism with vigor.

Jacobsen: You ran unopposed in the Democratic primary. Why – the run and the lack of opposition?

Jordan: Like many small southern communities, ours experienced the wave of religious Republicanism in the 1990s. When I decided to run for state senate in 2016, Tennessee had a Republican supermajority in both legislative houses. There were many seats that had not seen a Democrat candidate for years. Our bench had deteriorated, with many rural counties not even having a county party in existence. I could see the effect of this lack of progressive voice and felt a moral calling to run as an advocate for healthcare (Tennessee has not expanded Medicaid), workers' rights, education, and infrastructure.

Jacobsen: How does running as an openly secular person change the tenor of the conversation around secular citizens, and secular women, in politics?

Jordan: My atheism became a major topic in the 2018 race. I had not intended to run on my secularism, but neither would I hide it. I received messages of support from a surprising number of non-believers throughout the campaign, that continues even now. Just as important, many believers thanked me for voicing my support of the separation of church and state. This is a Democratic principle that progressive religious people recognize is at tremendous risk, and that will require fighting to uphold. Conversely, it's my opinion that my willingness to be open about my lack of belief fed directly into the fear many conservative religious people feel about religion

losing its influence and position of privilege, so unfortunately, it likely has only widened that gap.

Jacobsen: As the Executive Director of Recovering from Religion, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position? What are some of the more heartwarming stories of recovery of which you know about or have been a witness?

Jordan: It has been one of the great joys of my life to serve as the ED of RfR. Our simple mission is to provide hope, healing, and support to those folks struggling with issues of doubt and non-belief. Now in our 10th year of existence, we staff a 24-hour telephone and internet chat Helpline, host an online Community and local support groups, and maintain a database of secular therapists. We are an entirely volunteer non-profit organization, which means every donor dollar goes directly into growing our programs and reaching those folks who desperately need the offerings we provide.

Because we have clients from the entire spectrum of religion and belief, the stories shared with us on the Helpline and in the Community reveal the deepest of emotions. Indoctrination, doubt, and recovery are all topics of conversation, but chief among the reasons a client reaches out to us is fractured relationships. Leaving religion is often a protracted and arduous process, and to have it compounded by the loss and/or hostility of one's loved ones, friends, and support network can be devastating, particularly in isolated, highly religious areas.

To be able to help someone who is in possibly the lowest point in their lives, and to accompany, support, and encourage them as they discard dogmatic beliefs and seek reason and rationality is a privilege I can't begin to describe. Many of our trained volunteer agents, many of whom have personally made this journey, cite this as the motivating reason they have partnered with us for years.

Jacobsen: How is religion a positive? How is religion a negative?

Jordan: There is no doubt that there is appeal to a life philosophy that offers immortality. So appealing, in fact, that folks discard their logic and skepticism in hope of never having to suffer the very natural human emotion of grief. I understand that even though I don't embrace it. There is also appeal in being instructed how to deal with very challenging concepts of sexuality, racism, inequality, human relationships, and human suffering, among others. In our fast-paced society, it is much easier to lean into dogma about some of these issues rather than wrestle with understanding and educating oneself. I think that religious people identify these perceptions as a positive.

However, these are the exact reasons why I see religion as a net negative. Progress requires engaging in our social problems, working toward resolutions, and implementing the solutions. The human condition, in my opinion, is enhanced precisely because of its impermanence, and allows us to more fully appreciate this fleeting opportunity we each have. I believe we as a society can only thrive when we accept the truth of reality, and the supernatural beliefs found in every religion by definition impedes that ability.

Jacobsen: You founded Murfreesboro Freethinkers. Why? What are its ongoing activities and objectives?

Jordan: I founded this local group purely because I wanted to socialize with other non-believers. When my children and I left religion, I lost my entire social network. As they began to leave for college, I felt certain there were other folks who were experiencing something similar, and I

began a simple Meetup group for Freethinkers in 2012. It has now grown to a group of 1500 members who gather for socializing, civic engagement, rousing conversation, and community. The group attends lectures and shows, hosts speakers, offers welcome coffees for new members, presents topical debates, and enjoys pub nights and trivia contests.

Jacobsen: You co-founded NaNoCon. Why? What is it?

Jordan: NaNoCon is the Nashville Nones Convention (Nones being those folks with no religious affiliation). It began in 2016 as a one-day, affordable conference offering speakers, panels, workshops, and fellowship. Nonbelievers in the southeast are overwhelmed by religious culture, and this conference has exceeded its attendance goals each year it has been presented. Speakers include Matt Dillahunty, Anthony Magnabosco, Mandisa Thomas, Darrel Ray, David Silverman, and many other leading voices from the secular community. As it launches into its 4th year, March 23, 2019, we again hope to draw attendees from the entire southeastern United States for this dynamic and timely gathering.

Jacobsen: Side question before politics, how did you get involved in Ironman athletics and triathletics? What are the benefits of it? How can others become involved in it, potentially benefit from the health positives of intensive exercise?

Jordan: I love this topic, and there's actually a connection between my triathlon experience and my atheism. In my questioning religion, I began to seriously research science, including evolution and human anatomy/physiology. As I began to learn that humans were not designed, but rather evolved, I became curious about how nutrition and movement factored into that process. This led to a new interest in fitness, and sparked a drive to compete and test my physical limits. I started with 5ks and short races, incorporated bicycling and swimming into my routine, and they rest is, as is said, history.

I am stimulated by the training, the camaraderie among competitors, the results I experience when experimenting with nutrition and exercise, and here recently the effect of fitness on aging and its symptoms. I'm also a proponent of fat-fueling as opposed to sugar-fueling, which is comfortably controversial and drives me to read, understand and self-experiment more.

I encourage others to eat well and move, but it's not necessary to participate in extreme sports to receive the benefit of fitness. I support everyone finding their own joy and groove by trying, failing, experimenting, and trying again.

Jacobsen: You are the Assistant State Director of American Atheists Tennessee. What tasks and responsibilities come along with us? Also, this may be changing too, with a move to another state.

Jordan: American Atheists is one of the leading secular organizations in the US, which fights for greater acceptance and understanding for atheists, and also fights to maintain church/state separation. Those objectives align with my personal convictions, and I have partnered with them to organize and coalesce nonbelievers in Tennessee. They have a clearly-communicated and finely-developed protocol for organizing groups at the state level, and it's so beneficial in highly-religious areas like Tennessee for secular people to have a means of support and direction.

As I contemplate a permanent move to Oregon, to be nearer my children, it's my intention to continue to partner with AA as state or assistant state director.

Jacobsen: In terms of the political activity, what were the big lessons for you?

Jordan: In all of the blue wave that the US experienced in November, TN Dems made no gains. I'm not entirely sure of what's uniquely wrong in Tennessee, besides the grip religion has on its citizens. I do, however, have an opinion of how to fix it, based on my experience. There is a lot of conversation about how to craft our message, how can Democrats make more appealing our points about healthcare/unions/education/etc. I think it's less about how to pretty up the message, and a whole lot more about simple organizing.

The older, white, religious, rural folk should not be our target. Tennessee has enough non-voters and new voters to make up the difference, and our time and effort should be spent on the old-school precinct-captain model, neighborhood by neighborhood, house by house. And I see 2 things that are going to make this method of organizing even more critical in the days to come:

1. People are leaving religion in numbers, even in TN, and the party can step up and step in to help create non-church-based communities. That trend will only increase.
2. The current administration has so damaged our national unity, our communities are going to be starved for cohesiveness and harmony once again. The Democratic party can lead the way on this neighborhood rebuilding effort.

Jacobsen: How can other secular political hopefuls bear in mind regarding these lessons?

Jordan: I wouldn't presume that this is a lesson that can be replicated in all districts. What I do think is universal, however, is for secular people to run and be visible. Over and over I was able to talk about how both my campaign and my life are based on equal parts compassion and reason, and that I was compelled to run because governmental policies affect how Tennesseans live and die and suffer. It brought attention to what a secular person values, even if they tried to distort my message with their strawman arguments.

That visibility is everything. Not to be too dramatic, but if someone is questioning whether to run, I would say that we know that we have truth on our side, that many people are listening, that we are speaking for religious freedom for everyone, that we are letting other nonbelievers know we're here, and that we are not allowing religion to dictate who runs for public office (regardless of the outcome).

Jacobsen: What seems like the negatives and positives of coming out secular as a political person?

Jordan: I suppose the negative in my experience would be that it likely cost the election. But that loss simply revealed what needed to be exposed and fixed, not that I shouldn't have come out as secular. Living a life guided by reason and truth so far outweighs any elected office it's not even a fair comparison.

Jacobsen: What states would be the easy wins for secular people in the United States? Should secular political hopefuls look to those states to make a change in the public perception and representative of secular people in general and secular women in particular?

Jordan: Having lived in the deep south, and now living in the Pacific Northwest, I can certainly say that there is a tremendous difference in culture from state to state. And because of the grip religion has on the south, tactics that may be successful elsewhere are not likely to overcome that influence. When people become convinced that their voting instruction comes directly from a deity, that it is sacred, there is no amount of reason and logic that can alter that.

That is why I so fervently believe we have to support efforts and organizations that work to protect the 1st Amendment, the Johnson Amendment, and other legislation that keeps church and state separate. The Secular Coalition of America is the lobbying entity that works tirelessly to achieve that. American Atheists, the American Humanist Association, and the Freedom from Religion Foundation constantly file lawsuits and write amicus briefs in the fight for religious freedom.

Jacobsen: With some hindsight, what were some of the more horrifying responses to your political life? What were some of the more amusing? Did most of the negative, or positive for that matter, reactions to your political life reference being a woman politician or a secular politician more?

Jordan: When I am invited to present a talk about my experience running for state office, I share via Power Point images of some of the horrendous flyers the Tennessee Republican party printed and mailed to households. Distorted pictures of my face, language about my “kooky liberal beliefs”, criticism of my support for the LGBTQ+ community, and hateful rhetoric about atheism and atheists are all tactics my opponent used. I have an email that my opponent sent to all area pastors urging them to tell their congregants to “vote against the atheist in this special election”, clearly an unconstitutional violation of religious liberty. The Lt. Governor of Tennessee called me the “Most dangerous woman he’s known in his 40 years in politics”, and the chairman of the TN GOP called for the Democratic candidates for governor and US senate to publicly disclaim my candidacy.

Sadly, those tactics were effective, but it also helped expose the lengths and depths to which the GOP will go in order to gain a seat. Many area Republicans reached out to me to express their vote and support, and the leader of the local Tea Party even publicly announced his support of my campaign due to my opponent’s unethical and unconstitutional behavior.

In your question you ask whether I got more resistance being a woman or being a secular person. In this case, without a doubt my atheism was much more of an issue than my being a woman.

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

Ask Mandisa 12 – The New Year and Social Skills

January 6, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

***Mandisa Thomas** is the Founder of **Black Nonbelievers, Inc** (**Twitter** & **Facebook**). One of the, if not the, largest organization for African-American or black nonbelievers or atheists in America.*

The organization is intended to give secular fellowship, provide nurturance and support for nonbelievers, encourage a sense of pride in irreligion, and promote charity in the non-religious community.

I reached out to begin an educational series with one of the, and again if not the, most prominent African-American woman nonbeliever grassroots activists in the United States. Here, we talk about 2019 and the social skills in atheist outreach.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The new year is in; we're looking at new media, new exposure, and new interest.

Mandisa Thomas: First of all, Happy New Year to everyone, we really got support. We were published in the *Miami New Times* as well as the *Indianapolis Reporter* about black Millennials being less religious than the older generations.

I was also featured in an episode *Freethought Matters* put on by the Freedom From Religion Foundation. We also received an inquiry from a black travel magazine called *The Grio*. This is significant because the black community is still highly religious.

Which makes it more difficult for atheists coming from the community to find others as well as to speak about their non-belief and atheism, this publication reached out to us. It will be addressing the African Diaspora, which means the scattering of those with African heritage around the world.

They want to know about blacks who do not believe. Over the years, we are seeing some interest and curiosity from black media publication about our organization and what our point of view is, what our perspectives are. This is great.

Because as an organization, we encourage people to engage offline and in person. We host a number of events to encourage people to do so, to provide the opportunity in addition to hearing from some speakers and activists. To write for a publication that is targeting the black community, which will allow people to get a better understanding of our position, it is giving the opportunity to us.

We are looking forward to more of that in the future.

Jacobsen: How is it important to have a more diverse set of outlets from which to speak rather than those who are only, typically, within the community?

Thomas: It is important because it is an important part of the outreach that we do. It would be safe to speak only within secular publications. But when we reach out and accept invitations and engage other communities, it gives us the opportunity to reach people who did not know that there are organizations and a community that will support them.

We don't always want to preach to the choir. We want to speak to those who do believe but do not understand who atheists are and what they do. Because you never know who you will be able to work with in addition to who you know from the past.

Jacobsen: What can secular organizations do in terms of being receptive to outreach to them and to reaching out to the religious?

Thomas: Other secular organizations can participate in more community activities, even if there is a religious presence there. It will be good for us to sign up, to set up a table at community events. It might be good to set up an "Ask An Atheist" table.

It might be good for us to simply put ourselves out there. As much as our community is looking to support our fellow atheists and humanists, we also find ourselves feeling pride in our intellectual skills. Our social skills can use some work.

It is part of it. We are people, just like everyone else. It is good for people to see that side of us and to speak up. Because, in this day and age, there are more people agreeing with us than we think.

Even though, there are some fundamental differences between us. We must become comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. We encourage believers to do that, to read their Bible, to do research on their religion. That, certainly, applies to other areas of our lives. We shouldn't be exempt from that as well.

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

Thomas: Thank you very much.

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