

Canadian Atheist Set X

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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Canadian Atheist: Set X

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I feel honored to contribute to Canadian Atheist.

Scott

Canadian Atheist

Interview with Jacob Mounts – Assistant State Director, American Atheists Kentucky

January 7, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Jacob Mounts is the Assistant State Director of American Atheists Kentucky. Here we talk about some early life and work by him.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you?

Jacob Mounts: I grew up in a typical American Midwest family with both parents and one younger sister. I grew up in a small town of less than 3000 people at the time. I went to a public school for my education from K-12.

I did all the typical things a young boy would do growing up. I played sports like baseball, basketball, football and track & field. I was in the Boy Scouts. I was involved with school groups like the art club, science club, foreign language club.

Despite all this, I wasn't liked much by my peers and as I grew older I became more and more introverted with only a few select people that I would interact with regularly.

Undiagnosed depression would also be something that I would have to deal with for much of my life didn't help with the social aspects of life during that time either. The introversion and depression would both be something that would stick with me through most my life until these last couple years.

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Jacobsen: How were religion and faith influential on you if at all?

Mounts: Both sides of my family are/were religious. My father's side is Methodist while my mother's side is Catholic. My father worked a lot and his involvement with such things were few and far between.

To say that he wasn't religious when I was growing up I would say would be a safe assumption as he rarely attended church services except for an occasional holiday whether it was at the Methodist church or Catholic church.

However, as for my sister and I, we would still attend the Methodist church functions such as vacation bible school and guild dinners fairly regularly along with the occasional church service with my father's side of the family. These things were easier to attend as the church was located in the town in which I grew up.

Religion and faith was something my mother had much more influence with in this regard during my childhood. Despite the fact that none of the Catholic churches we would ever attend were in our town and were at least a 20min drive away from where we lived, we would regularly attend Catholic services.

Sunday school classes and the litany of necessary achievements to progress through the Catholic indoctrination process was something that would be completed as I grew up. We would help clean the church during the week and engage in other church functions whenever we could.

By the time I was in high school my level of involvement with the church was more extensive. Youth group had become more important and as one of the top “students” I was eventually invited to go on pilgrimage to the famed Medjugorje in what is now Croatia (formerly Yugoslavia back when I was there).

It is one of the sites where the Virgin Mary was said to have appeared to some local children. At the time this experience had a profound influence on me. Returning from the pilgrimage trip, I became extensively more religious to the point of seriously considering becoming a Franciscan monk if I could. I started becoming much more involved with religious activities in my daily life and seriously started looking into that becoming my primary purpose in life.

(It is interesting to note, however, that this increased knowledge and study into the history of the Church and religion as a whole would also be what initiated my 180-degree turnaround and leaving the church altogether a quick couple years later.)

Jacobsen: How does religion around the world, and in your locale in Kentucky, appear to receive special privileges in the upbringing and the filling of the minds of the young, whether punitive & rote or exploratory & curiosity-driven educational systems?

Mounds: Special privilege and influence is quite evident throughout the world with regards to religion. This is the case not only with the Abrahamic religions but with all those that I have looked at thus far today and throughout our history.

We are pattern seeking and look for reason and meaning for pretty much everything in our lives. When we don’t understand something then it is typical for humans to place our own interpretations on what happens in the world around us.

For a good portion of human history this lack of understand was related to a god of some sort. When negative things happened that we didn’t understand we tried to find ways to appease this “god” who had done these things to us or we had somehow brought upon ourselves.

These repeated rituals become religion and start to gain structure over time. When we are young we are highly influential and are trusting of our elders to educate and guide us to understanding of the world around us.

The unfortunate aspect of this is when as adults we fail to utilize our critical thinking abilities, try to learn the facts of the nature as to why things are the way they are and continue to place a supernatural cause and reason on that which we don’t understand.

This gets passed on to our children and can lead to detrimental effects on those potential exploratory and curiosity-driven educational systems be it formal or informal in nature.

In the state of Kentucky where I currently reside now, this unfortunate scenario continues to play out on a daily basis where religious thought, biases and even just the general thinking

process/mindset regarding any number of things ends up having great influence. This has both positive and negative results in our society. Negative effects of religious thought are abundant and easily recognizable.

Biases that come about as a result of religious teaching influence is evident with such things as legislation coming out of Frankfort, planned parenthood and related healthcare, organizations being able to discriminate based on personal religious belief especially towards the LGBTQ+ community, educators being able to utilize cherry-picked verses from the bible to further indoctrinate our school children into these biases, etc.

Positive effects of religion...a sense of community and support when needed, but even this can become very tribalistic in its approach if circumstances allow for it.

Again, these effects become reinforcements for the young and influential. Community and social support systems are things that a secular society can bring as well without the need for religion; however, the current government systems allow privilege for religious organizations to maintain a majority for such programs in our otherwise secular lives.

Jacobsen: How did you find and become more deeply involved in the atheist community? How did this become an aspect of community through American Atheists Kentucky?

Mounts: My involvement in the atheist community has only become about as of the last couple years. While I have been atheist nearly all of my adult life, I have been a “closet atheist.”

The changes only started to come about after my father, whom you’ll remember wasn’t very religious growing up, became involved with some fundamentalists while seeking out his religious interests as he neared retirement.

For him, this grew into religious zealotry and one day it came to a head between the two of us when I finally came out and admitted that I was an atheist. A heated argument between us ensued despite my attempts to reason and rationalize his thoughts. At the end he disowned me and we haven’t spoken since.

Since that day my level of activism and being an open atheist has grown considerably. At first I didn’t know where to start. I wasn’t aware of other such people in the area where I lived.

I didn’t know of any other secular or atheist group locally and so I started my own on Meetup. In just a little over 2 years I have been privileged to have met many people in this community not only in my local area but also from networking across the United States and around the world.

These numbers continue to grow as my involvement increases. Today, I work with several secular groups that help the homeless, elderly and LGBTQ+ communities. I support groups fighting inequality and human rights issues.

I continue to be active on the national level with American Atheists as an Assistant State Director here in Kentucky as well as supporting southwest Indiana. The last two years have been great and I look forward to what might be in store for 2019.

Jacobsen: Does an open voicing of non-religious opinions impact social and familial relationships for the individual in Kentucky?

Mounts: Being an open atheist in this area can be quite difficult sometimes. Yes, it does put a strain on relationships sometimes to the point of unfortunate termination as I previously mentioned.

Discussing secular issues when you have differing views can be hard to do whether it is with family, local politicians or just everyday people. The grasp of religious indoctrination and the biases that come with certain viewpoints is very tight in this area.

It is difficult to have an honest discourse with many people without people taking the questioning of long-held thoughts and ideas as a personal attack. Politicians are even less likely to budge as their constituents have great influence on whether or not they continue to hold public office.

Anyone who questions or might potentially threaten that is likely to be attacked or dismissed with prejudice.

Jacobsen: What books have been influential in personal philosophical life for you? What about films or documentaries?

Mounts: There have been a number of books from such well-known authors as Hitchens, Dawkins and Harris. Books that most people are already aware of like Hitchens' God is not Great, Dawkins' The God Delusion and Sam Harris' Letter to a Christian Nation.

However, there are some others who might be a little lesser known like my friend Dr. William Zingrone's book The Arrogance of Religious Thought: Information Kills Religion and John Loftus' Unapologetic.

Of course reading up on historical philosophers such Socrates, Hume, Sartre, etc., have had influence as well though I don't consider myself well-educated in that regard aside from a cursory study of them during my school years.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on some of the concerning developments in fundamentalist religions in the US, what trouble you? Who troubles you?

Mounts: Fundamentalist religion in the US troubles me greatly. One can see the effects and influence throughout the government sector especially. From top to bottom legislation is being pushed through that supports discrimination towards virtually anyone who isn't a conservative Christian nationalist.

Attacks on the Johnson Amendment look to tear down the wall that separates church and state, medical doctors not keeping their Hippocratic Oath to "do no harm" while at the same time refusing medical treatment to those who don't fit into their personal religious views, denial of social services to the LGBTQ+ community, abortion and planned parenthood is also at the forefront...all these things can be found to have roots in religious ideation and interpretation of the Bible.

To point the finger at any specific person that troubles me would be difficult. It is more of the groups of people, the money and political influence large corporations have in Washington. It is those who blindly follow these groups and support them thus increasing these powerful few that troubles me.

Jacobsen: How has religion been a force for good in history? How has it been a force for evil in history?

Mounts: Religion as a force for good? The only "good" that I can see coming out of religion is the sense of community and support where people come together to help each other in times of need.

We are social creatures and a sense of community and outreach is a necessary part of our psychological well-being. The downside of this is the “force of evil” that becomes inherent as a result of that sense of unchecked “community support.”

Tribalism, nationalistic pride, racial prejudice, sexism, classism...human history is filled with examples of this. The division of “us and them” creates much conflict in our lives when people don’t take the time to have proper discourse and come to an understanding of one another.

We become set in our ways. The uncertainties in life and with death create potential for this divisiveness. Religion as a foothold in this regard and have been used as at least a partial excuse for many of the “evils” in our history.

From today’s child abuse and sexual assault in the Church to Islamic extremism, from the Inquisition to the Crusades, wars of the Greeks/Romans/Turks...wherever there is a particular “god” to be appeased the potential for mankind to create atrocities is likely to be found.

Jacobsen: What are some of the provisions for the community through American Atheists Kentucky? How can folks become involved with the wider non-religious community, e.g., donations, volunteering time and skills, providing professional networks, and so on?

Mounts: There are lots of potential things a person can do to become involved. As mentioned, donating time/money/skills to groups that support the homeless community is a constant need, food banks need help in processing and handing out goods, being there to support initiatives that help the unfortunate as a result of catastrophe, community projects to clean up parks and wildlife areas...there are lots of opportunities out there.

The key thing is deciding to become involved in your local communities. Once you’ve found your interest in helping reach out to local organizations and/or check with your local atheist and secular humanist groups. Chances are there is a group nearby, and if not...start one.

This is how I started to become involved just two years ago. Today I support not only my local communities but also regionally with protests. I network nationally and internationally with other non-religious groups to gain ideas.

Social media like Facebook and Meetup is a great start for those who want to become involved. Even if you have to go through a religious organization as is often the case particularly with homelessness initiatives, chances are there are going to be secular and non-religious folks there helping out in some form.

Until such time that the privileges that come with religion are set aside and secular non-profit groups are able to gain a foothold in our society, we must find ways to work through them while starting our own initiatives to combat social issues.

Groups such as American Atheists and others are there to help point you in the right direction and can help get you in contact with the right folks. Feel free to contact us at American Atheists and look for us on social media.

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

Interview with Edward Seaborne – Administrator, “The African Atheist”

January 8, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Edward Seaborne is the Administrator of “The African Atheist.” He is 46-years-old, and a father of 2 girls and married to an atheist wife, too. His parenting methodology is not to force religious or areligious views on his children. Here we talk for a bit.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How was early family life and education? Was religion incorporated into this in any way?

Edward Seaborne: I have to clarify something before I answer this question. So the South Africa when I was a child and the South Africa today are basically two completely different countries.

I was raised in the Apartheid South Africa. As you are well aware this was a country ruled by mostly “White Afrikaans Men” and because of this we were an extremely religious country.

The majority of the Afrikaans speaking families went to the Nederduits Geherformde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) and the majority of the English speaking were either Baptist or Methodist.

My mother was Afrikaans and my father was English. My earliest memories of church in South Africa was that of the Dutch Reformed Church, but from about the age of 7 we belonged to the Methodist Church. At about the age of 16 my mother joined the Baptist church and we went along with that.

I went to an Afrikaans Primary and High school and at that time religious studies and prayers was almost a daily part of your school day. We used to have to pray and sing hymns during all our school events and this was just the norm for all schools.

This however has changed in the last few years and my teenage daughter goes to an all girls school where no religion is taught and they have non secular “prayers”.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on pivotal people within the community relevant to personal philosophical development, who were they for you?

Seaborne: I don’t think I would be able to answer this question and give you names of people who influenced me in becoming an atheist. I was never exposed to any atheists when I decided to break away from my religious background. For me it was more like a defining moment in my life where a tragedy made me wonder about this so called “God of Love”.

I think I was 17 or 18 when my sisters baby daughter passed away from a mysterious illness. She was about 11 months old and I thought to myself how this god could just take a baby from a family.

My sister stood in the stark white hospital corridor and her words were “Jesus also needs pretty angels”. I on the other hand thought that this was a cruel and horrible thing to do and at that moment in my life I decided to question my Christian upbringing.

Jacobsen: What about literature and film, and other artistic and humanities productions, of influence on personal philosophical worldview?

Seaborne: Unlike today I didn't have the luxury of internet and social media where I could read about people like me with similar religious views or even non-views. After finishing school, I was drafted into the Navy as part of a conscription to fight the terrorists.

That was the ANC, that at that time was a banned group. Today I can say that the South African military during the late 1980's and early 90's was controlled by the same mentality as the country and you had to tow the line.

You went to church & you sang hymns and said prayers during parades. I can't remember ever actually reading the bible or saying any prayers during my time in the Navy. I guess this was a time in my life where I drifted further away from religion without knowing why.

In my early 20's I started to read the bible and actually study it in-depth. I didn't study it to find religion, but basically to form arguments against it. I remember I had this Good News Bible with copious amount of notes in it.

I started to ask more and more questions and nobody in my family could actually answer me. I started to read more about evolution and for the 1st time things started to make sense.

Darwin gave me the answers to the questions I had that was missing from the religious texts. I remember reading a book about how the Vatican hid the body of Jesus and this in turn led me to find out about the Deuterocanonical and Apocryphal books that never formed part of the bible.

This made me think about other things that religion and the churches keep from us. I started trying to learn more about other religions including the Muslim, Hindu and even the satanic bible.

Jacobsen: When did you find the atheist community inasmuch as one was available to you?

Seaborne: This might come as a surprise to you, but I think the 1st time I ever really heard the word Atheist was while watching a short comedy sketch by Rowan Atkinson (Mr. Bean). He played the role of the devil welcoming everybody to hell.

The internet being in its infancy gave me the opportunity to do some research and I started to speak to people about religion and my views on it via Irc (internet relay chat). I met up with a few members of the channels I was part of and this would basically be where it all started for me.

Jacobsen: Why found The African Atheist? What have been some of its stages of development?

Seaborne: Why did I start The African Atheist? It was basically started on a whim one evening. I wanted a place where I could be anonymous and post my meme's and a few articles. I never intended the page to be much more than an outlet for my self-expression, but without people knowing it was me.

I have to clarify this anonymity. Friends and family know my religious views, but many of my work colleagues and other connections had no idea about my religious views. Even if we as South Africans have moved forward in many things religion is still one of those topics you don't go against. I guess this leads perfectly into your next question.

Jacobsen: What are some unique difficulties facing African atheists? How does this extend into the online sphere as well?

Seaborne: South Africa and maybe Africa as a continent are still very backwards in their views on religion and religious practices. There are a number of North African countries where saying you are an Atheist is a criminal offence. I have traveled to Libya for example and if they had to find out my views on religion I would have been incarcerated.

South Africa on the other hand might be far more free and equal, but in reality this isn't completely true. I honestly feel that if my Employers had to know my stance on religion I would more than likely not have been hired. Recently a friend of mine went to Supreme Court of South Africa to enforce the banning of religious teaching in public schools.

So how does religion extend into the online sphere and how does that affect me daily. Honestly on my personal page it doesn't affect me that much anymore as I can simply unfriend somebody on Facebook when their posts become overbearing, however in the more public areas I daily battle with the sending of religious (mainly Christian) texts and pictures.

I have even been bombarded by a minister who on a regular basis sent me religious scriptures. I replied to him stating that for every one scripture he sent me I will be sending him 2 atheist memes in return. His texts ended quite soon thereafter.

Another story I can tell is when I confronted a Hindu community online for how their Diwali celebrations and the letting off of fireworks impacted on animals, the aged and people with certain mental conditions. I received a reply from one individual that I should just sedate the little boy with Autism as it is their religious right and there is nothing I can do about it.

I admit that my reply may have been rather uncalled for and me cursing his "Blue god" was out of line. The aftermath of this incident was me being called a racist, receiving threatening messages and calls and even threats of being charged with a human rights violation and hate speech.

Jacobsen: How can people help and become involved with the African online community?

Seaborne: There is a growing community for Atheists in South Africa and Facebook allows for you to join a number of groups. As with many groups on Facebook you have to ignore the obvious trolls, but every once in a while, somebody posts something of interest. I feel that the best page or group to join would be SAAM (South African Atheist Movement).

Jacobsen: What have been some of the positive developments for the African atheist population?

Seaborne: As mentioned before I think the biggest step forward must be the court case between OGO and the South African Department of Education. Further to this I am seeing more and more people (myself included) becoming open about their Atheism. SAAM members have taken part in events wearing t-shirts with atheist slogans on them.

We really still have a long way to go in South Africa before "discrimination" against those with non-religious views come to an end. It is however something that I battle for in my own way on a daily basis.

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

Interview with Ann Reid – Executive Director, National Center for Science Education

January 9, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Ann Reid became the Executive Director of NCSE in 2014. For 15 years she worked as a research biologist at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, where she was responsible for sequencing the 1918 flu virus. She served as a Senior Program Officer at the NRC's Board on Life Sciences for five years and most recently, as director of the American Academy of Microbiology.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Moving into 2019, what are the main newer concerns about science education for the public?

Ann Reid: In general, the past two years have seen an upsurge in activism around public school funding with teacher strikes in several states. The severe cuts to education funding seem to have reached a point where the general public is realizing that the public school system is in real trouble.

The deep cuts have affected science education too, of course, with low salaries making it impossible to keep science teaching positions filled with qualified people, slashed professional development funding making it difficult to keep current teachers up to date, and decreased budgets leading to larger class sizes and inadequate lab and field supplies.

Thus, in addition to specific concerns about how topics such as climate change and evolution are taught, there are serious systemic concerns about the health of the educational system in general.

Specifically, though, science education advocates are concerned that the extreme stance the current administration has taken on climate change, completely rejecting the clear scientific consensus, will have an impact on how the topic is taught in schools.

Similarly, the sympathetic stance the current Secretary of Education has expressed for “balancing” evolution with creationism or intelligent design concerns many people. Our sense is that these attitudes will have an effect, but largely indirectly.

The U.S. federal government has little direct control over what is taught in public schools; curriculum standards are set at the state level and priorities in meeting those standards are set at the district level. So the federal government cannot unilaterally, for example, declare that climate change should not be taught.

However, the federal government can have indirect impacts, for example by cutting funding for programs that provide extra funds for science education, or by taking down the sections of federal agency websites that include climate change teaching resources.

Most efforts to interfere with climate change or evolution education arise at the state or local level, and are occurring in the same places that they occurred before this administration.

A more pervasive, but even more indirect effect is that the increased polarization around these issues will make teachers in places where the topics are controversial more likely to avoid teaching them because of fear of conflict.

Jacobsen: What continue to be the perennial anti-science movements within America?

Reid: I think that the phrase “anti-science” confuses more than it clarifies. There isn’t really an “anti-science” movement – instead, there are interest groups that reject particular areas of science because the scientific conclusions come into direct conflict with deeply held beliefs or values.

Those who reject evolution do so because they believe it contradicts the Bible, which they believe to be literally true. These people are not anti-science in general, just anti-evolution.

Those who do not accept the reality of climate change do so because they believe the scientific community is not to be trusted on this issue – a long-standing tenet of the Republican party has been that environmentalists want to impose burdensome regulations that will cripple the economy and twist science to support that agenda.

Climate change is seen as yet another example of this “environmentalist agenda.” Again, these people would not think of themselves as “anti-science” – they see themselves as the clear-eyed realists. I’m not saying either of these stances is correct, just that it’s more useful to see where the opposition is coming from rather than using the blanket term “anti-science.”

To answer your question, though, evolution and climate change remain the topics that are most frequently targeted by efforts to interfere with how they are taught. While not really an issue when it comes to schools, there are also organized efforts to cast doubt on or reject the consensus science surrounding vaccines, GMO’s and reproductive health.

Jacobsen: With the current Trump Administration and the emboldening of misinformation networks, have things become harder in terms of the education of the public and the prevention of miseducation too?

Reid: As I mentioned in my first answer the impact of the Trump administration is indirect and serves rather to harden the existing polarization rather than to create entirely new problems. Perhaps surprisingly, the extreme positions taken by the Trump administration energize its opposition at least as much as they satisfy its base.

It seems to us at NCSE that more people are alert to the threat of interference in science education than they were before; the threats are largely in the same places they’ve always been, but people are much more attuned to them.

As an example, in 2017, the climate change-denial organization known as the Heartland Institute mailed a packet to tens of thousands of science teachers that included a pamphlet entitled “Why Scientists Disagree about Global Warming” aiming to convince teachers that they should tell their students the science around climate change is unsettled.

NCSE responded with a set of resources giving teachers the facts to counter the false claims in the mailing ([here](#) is an example), but we were not alone. The mailing drew a huge amount of media attention.

That’s all good, but what’s interesting is that Heartland sent out essentially the same packet in 2015 and while NCSE tried to draw attention to it, it was basically ignored. A lot more attention is being paid to threats to accurate science education than in the past.

Jacobsen: What allies and organizations have been instrumental in the continuation of the extended conversation and activism of the NCSE?

Reid: There are so many that I'm reluctant to begin listing them for fear of offending those I don't mention. But certainly the National Science Teachers Association, the National Association of Biology Teachers and the National Association of Geoscience Teachers have been tireless advocates for accuracy in science education.

The Alliance for Climate Education has been a valuable partner, producing a series of webinars on NCSE's new climate change [misconception-based active learning lessons](#).

Jacobsen: One of the important and under-recognized members of the organization has been Eugenie Scott, especially in work regarding the creationism and evolution sociopolitical controversy. What has been the legacy through the NCSE of Darwin's Golden Retriever?

Reid: To my mind, Genie's most enduring contribution was to recognize early and often that it is crucial to avoid framing discussions about evolution education as battles between religion and science, or religion and reason. Most Americans are religious, but the vast majority of Christian denominations have no problem with the science of evolution.

Consistently casting the problem as one of ensuring scientific accuracy in the classroom rather than a cultural battle meant building a much larger coalition of people fighting to protect evolution education.

Similarly, when NCSE added climate change to its mission, Genie recognized that opposition to climate change grew out of deeply held values and ideological positions and that it was important to stand up for the science without condemning people's political affiliation.

Jacobsen: What organizations and people remain problematic in their promotion of non-science or simply bad science?

Reid: Again, it is hard to come up with a definitive list. Any group advocating for an issue with a scientific component is likely to present the scientific evidence in the most convincing possible light – that might range from simply and more or less innocuously framing questions in the most appealing way all the way to outright deception.

At what point does that become “problematic”? It isn't difficult to put the Heartland Institute on the far end of the spectrum – it does actively work to deceive and sow confusion.

Answers in Genesis, the organization responsible for building the Creation Museum and the Ark Encounter, also actively attempts to present its religious beliefs as if they have a basis in science.

And, of course, there are far too many examples in the current administration of politicians and political appointees ignoring scientific evidence, at best, and actively distorting it, at worst.

The bottom line, though, is that wherever an organization or individual falls on the spectrum of presenting scientific information misleadingly – egregiously or not – NCSE's position is that consumers and future citizens need to have the skills to evaluate claims for themselves.

A great science education needs to be accurate, of course, but perhaps even more importantly, it needs to be effective: ensuring that students leave school knowing what constitutes a good scientific question and what kind of evidence is needed to address it, how evidence is collected and evaluated, how to determine whether a website or publication is scientifically credible...in short, knowing how science works and having confidence in one's own ability to think scientifically.

When NCSE designs evolution and climate change activities or lessons for teachers and volunteers our ultimate goal is improving learners' ability to engage confidently with scientific questions.

Jacobsen: How can the public become involved and active in the light of the current wave of anti-science movements?

Reid: As I mentioned, people seem to be more attuned to potential threats to science education and there is more interest on the part of the media in covering the topic.

We would love to see more people paying attention to who is running for the school board in their own districts and what is going on at their state's Department of Education, getting to know their local science teachers and volunteering at their local schools, showing up at political candidates' events and asking questions about science and science education. We've always advocated for that, but it has certainly never been so important or urgent.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved through donations, volunteering of skills, provision of professional networks, and so on, with NCSE?

Reid: Donations are crucial, of course, because they allow us to maintain the capacity to respond whenever science education comes under threat.

They also allow us to expand our Teacher Ambassador program, which enlists local master teachers to train their peers in effective ways to teach evolution and climate change, and our Science Booster Club program, which brings fun, hands-on, accurate climate change and evolution activities to community events, especially in places where the topics are often avoided due to fear of conflict.

Teachers are encouraged to join our network "NCSEteach" for monthly news and resources. Anyone interested in keeping up with NCSE's work is encouraged to join (a \$45 donation gives you a subscription to our quarterly newsletter), sign up for our free e-newsletter, and following us on facebook or twitter. Contact us directly if you come across any efforts to interfere with science education in your community – we are here to help.

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

Interview with Doug Thomas – President, Secular Connexion Séculière

January 10, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Doug Thomas is the President of Secular Connexion Séculière. Here we talk about some background and views of Thomas.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you?

Doug Thomas: Early life was very good for me. My parents were comfortable middle class Canadians, although we moved around quite a bit since my father was a banker and was moved every time he was promoted.

My mother was a primary and sometimes elementary school teacher so education was always a priority. They were of the generation that could have gone on to university, but had to start working because of the depression and the war.

I am the third of three sons and born just after WWII so I benefited from some luxuries that my older brothers did not get. There are more pictures of me as a child than there are of them because film was hard to get when they were younger.

Jacobsen: Did religion or faith play a role in early life?

Thomas: My parents were what I would call practicing Christians. They focused on the morals and ethics that they received from their religion, not on the scriptures or rites. Dad was an Anglican and Mom was Presbyterian.

They compromised when they were married by going to the United Church. Anyone who has studied Anglican and Presbyterian theology will tell you that is not really a compromise, but a move in another direction.

The point is that, for them, it wasn't important since they perceived the moral and ethical values as the same. I grew up in a series of small towns and villages ranging in population from about 500 to 2,500 with enough churches that they could have shared eaves troughs.

Everyone was "Canadian religious." They went to different churches, but worked together for community. A memorable example was the Orange Day (Irish Protestant) parade in one community. They wanted a white horse for the "king" to ride.

The only one available belonged to a Roman Catholic and it would not be ridden by anyone, but its owner who donned the costume and rode in the Protestant parade. In a small town, a parade is a parade.

As soon as I learned something about scientific method and about historical research in high school, I started to move away from religion since I no longer believed in it. Fortunately, I moved away to go to university at about the same time that I became thoroughly agnostic. My parents were OK with this as long as they felt I was still moral and ethical.

Then I discovered that there were other agnostics and atheists in the world and that agnostic/atheist girls washed their hair on Saturday night as often as Christian girls do.

Jacobsen: Through the Secular Connexion Séculière, what have been some successes in advocacy for atheists in 2018? What have been some successes for secularism in 2018?

Thomas: Successes in advocacy or, in SCS' case, lobbying have been small, but important. Through the year, we have been able to develop some alliances in the federal cabinet and with some MPs. These will be useful when Parliamentary committees are looking for witnesses for hearings on subjects we are interested.

Section 296 of the Criminal Code of Canada (CCOC) has been removed after the Senate dragged its feet in passing the legislation to eliminate archaic sections of the CCOC. I must point out that the removal is the result of efforts by all three national secular groups (HC, CFI, and SCS) as well as efforts by many local groups and individuals.

In fact, this is a very good example of the incremental progress I am talking about. The 296 success is the result of many letters, meetings, comments all taking many hours on the part of many individuals. All this to make one small change in the CCOC that most humanist regard as an obvious one.

Jacobsen: How have religious fundamentalists tended to take advantage of privileges exclusively bound to religious identity throughout Canadian history?

Thomas: This has been pretty much "same old, same old." The income tax act, particularly the rules for charitable status has remained the same so churches can still be charities simply on the strength of promoting their own religion without any commitment to community service.

In contrast, secular humanist charities must commit to community services and provide evidence that they have carried these out. The disparity on building fund rules continue – churches can have one automatically while secular humanist groups have to apply on a case by case basis.

All churches, fundamentalist or otherwise, bask in the assumption that their ideas and culture are the norm and the rest of us are the kooks to be tolerated at best and often attacked and even ridiculed. Since they are Canadian they are polite about it, but the patronizing tone shines through when they "allow us to be here" as if they have or should **have the authority to say so.**

Jacobsen: In those atheist and secular wins within the country, not as superiority but simply equality with the religious, what have been the fundamentalist religious interpretations, or rather misinterpretations, and, subsequently, mobilization of, typically, conservative sectors of Canadian society against those wins?

Thomas: Although the replacement of the Lord's Prayer with a moment of silence (a moment of sleep for adolescents) in school opening ceremonies happened years ago, fundamentalist Christians still claim that they are denied the right to pray in schools. Of course, they can do so during the moment of silence.

The big backlash in Ontario has been the election of the Conservative government with solid support from the religious right who want control of the education system. They particularly supported the government's return to the 1998 sex education curriculum.

This removes the information about homosexual and transsexual people as well as the information about the dangers of social media. Fortunately, most Ontarians see the problem with this and have put pressure on the Ford government to restore these vital pieces of information to the curriculum.

The same people tend to be climate change deniers or at least human responsibility deniers who pressured the Ford government to reverse any progress that has been made toward reducing greenhouse gasses from Ontario.

At one and the same time, the unity of religious groups is a problem for the rest of us who have to cadge together ad hoc groups to make our point to governments and a lesson we need to learn. If we secular humanists could just get our act together without niggling over infinitesimal detail we would be far more effective in separating church from state in Canada.

Jacobsen: Of the concerns within the nation, what are those? Who leads them? Why those, especially in terms of ramifications for the secular aspects of Canadian society?

Thomas: Systemic discrimination against atheists in Canada is the core problem in our governmental systems. There are laws that discriminate against us about which even or more astute government leaders are unaware or which they choose to ignore.

Social discrimination against atheists is also present in Canada. Beneath the patina of politeness, religious believers and leaders continue to favour people of faith and resist any attempt to change cultural standards.

They still equate non-belief with evil or at least shady behaviour. That is a result of their leaders preaching this nonsense and a result of their lack of interest in reading anything outside their comfortable confirmation prose.

Both of these types of discrimination are a problem for atheists who, at the very least, do not reveal their non-belief for fear of being judged negatively.

A couple of years ago I did an informal survey of university atheists asking them if they would put their membership and leadership in atheist clubs on their resumés as religious students often do regarding religious clubs. The answer was a universal no.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on some of the concerning developments in fundamentalist religions south of the border and its impacts on social and political life here, what trouble you? Who troubles you?

Thomas: The influence on the American election of 2016 by the religious right who managed to elect the least religious president in years because they knew he would continue to seek their vote regardless of responsibility is disturbing.

The justification for separating children from their parents by Jeff Sessions on Biblical grounds is a clear symptom of the damage this has done. However, the most concerning person is Mike Pence.

As Vice President, he is one heartbeat or one impeachment vote from becoming the most powerful rightwing fundamentalist Christian in the world. The damage he could wreak is truly frightening.

All of this has given licence for rightwing fundamentalists to assume they should be in control here and has resulted in the election of the likes of Andrew Scheer who is a closet fundamentalist as leader of the Conservative Party.

The motions at the Conservative policy convention this year have a much more fundamentalist tone than before. I already mentioned the Ontario election, but the same licence is apparent here.

Jacobsen: How has religion been a force for good in history? How has it been a force for evil in history? What have been the remedies for the evil parts and the boons to the good parts?

Thomas: I think there is little doubt that it has been a force for evil far more than a force for good. The whole Christian era in Europe is full of atrocities committed in the name of religion. In the Middle East it has been the root of conflict for a long, long time.

In Canada, the worst atrocities of the Residential School system were perpetrated by the religious operators of the schools. Only the Jewish faith did not participate and that was because they were being maligned, persecuted, and denied influence as much as the indigenous population.

The Muslim world is no better and may seem worse only because their social philosophy is approximately at the stage where Christian social philosophy was in the middle ages.

Religious wars are, by far, the most vicious wars even when in today's "politically correct" world they are not labelled as such and are not directly blamed on religion in spite of evidence to the contrary.

Wars are irrational and are best supported by irrational movements like religion. Other than some anecdotal stories of comfort for some individuals who have toed the religious line, I cannot think of any net positives for religion in Canada or abroad.

Jacobsen: What are some of the provisions for the community through Secular Connexion Séculière? What are some good targeted campaigns for all secular organizations to work together on in 2019 for the betterment of Canadian society – more fair, just, and equitable for all?

Thomas: SCS intends to continue to do what it has been doing – to work persistently and consistently toward eliminating such legislation as Section 319 (3b). That gives religious people the right write hate literature and deliver hate speeches as long as they support their argument from religious literature.

SCS continues to raise issues regarding the inequitable requirements for charitable status in the Income Tax Act. We continue to do this by lobbying the federal government, its ministers and members of Parliament. This is not dramatic, but is the only real way to make progress.

SCS has an accommodation project underway that asks school boards to make two accommodations for atheist children, both of which would protect their right to freedom from religion.

The first is to play instrumental versions only of O Canada, and the second is to allow students to memorize the non-theist words to O Canada that are published on SCS' website (<http://www.secularconnexion.ca/a-national-anthem-for-everyone/>) when they asked to do so as an evaluated assignment.

We are also trying to raise the political awareness and political participation of non-believers across Canada. Writing one's MP is important, but asking questions about party policies regarding such things as Section 319 (3b) at all candidates' meetings is also important.

Jacobsen: How can folks become involved with the wider non-religious community and Secular Connexion Séculière in particular, e.g., donations, volunteering time and skills, providing professional networks, and so on?

Thomas: Donations are critical and subscribing to SCS website and following the issues is just as important. I am sometimes asked why we don't have an organization like Freedom From Religion Foundation in Canada. I have to answer that we do – SCS. At the same time, I assume that this question contains the concern that no group in Canada has the high profile that FFRF has.

There are two answers to that. First, FFRF is an American foundation working under the American constitution that has a clear amendment separating church and state and that is regarded as an almost holy document by Americans. The Canadian equivalent is a series of Supreme Court of Canada rulings that guarantee our right to freedom from religion. Hardly ad copy material.

Second, FFRF, perhaps because of the first reason, and also because atheists are confronted more socially in the US by fundamentalists who don't have the Canadian politeness patina, has more than 30,000 contributing members.

The last time I talked to FFRF's Dan Barker, he was trying to decide whether to build a new building to accommodate more staff or renovate the present one. He was also about to decide which candidate to hire to fill the third full time lawyer position. My decisions in this realm revolve around whether SCS can afford another trip to Ottawa on my part (Cost- about \$600.00).

In other words, Canadian non-believers don't feel compelled to contribute in anything like the amounts their American counterparts do and our efforts are severely hampered by that lack of contribution.

To see how important that is, remember that human rights in Canada are individual rights. If the school boards we have approached are not ready to make the O Canada accommodations we have asked for then we will have to rely on the parents of an individual student to take a school board to the human rights tribunal in that province. This could involve court cases. This will involve far more support commitment and far more money than we have now.

In addition, our national humanist groups must stop siloing their work. More open communications, more co-operative and coordinated efforts are required to make progress in truly separating church and state in Canada.

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

Interview with Donald Lacey – State Director, American Atheists Arizona

January 11, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Donald Lacey is the State Director of American Atheists Arizona. Here we talk about his early life, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you? Did religion play a role in it?

Donald Lacey: My earliest memories began in 1957 when I was almost 5 years of age. We were an Air Force family living in Denver. My father was a Staff Sergeant and my mother didn't work.

We lived in a small rented house near Lowry AFB. I had a sister that was a couple of years younger and it was at this time that religion started playing a role in my life.

Our family recently converted to Catholicism. I can almost remember my baptism. Being true to the Catholic precepts, my parents stopped using birth control.

Thus, my youngest sister was a surprise in February 1958 and the end of my father's religious adherence to the rules of Catholicism. My mother stayed with it, but my father stopped going to church all together.

I was raised Catholic by my mother. Blind belief in the religious teachings did not last long. I began questioning before my first communion when I was introduced to the Baltimore Catechism.

Q: Who made the world?

A: God made the world.

Q: Who is God?

A: God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things.

Q: What is man?

A: Man is a creature composed of body and soul, and made to the image and likeness of God.

Q: Why did God make you?

A: God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him, hope in Him, and love Him with all our heart.

First, the questions were of little interest to a 6-year-old, but mostly, the answers were illogical and unsupported by anything in my experience. Asking other questions were not allowed by the nun teaching the lessons.

My parents had primed me to fear her. They told me that the nuns could physically discipline me. I had no choice but to remain silent and memorize the prayers.

Religion during my early life represented conflict and forced subjugation to an unreasonable demand that I believe the unbelievable, but it also represented my only interconnection to the world outside my family.

It allowed me to be on my own at times, and I participated in activities such as church choir and being an altar boy. I enjoyed being a Boy Scout and going to church bazaars.

A break in the confusion and turmoil occurred in the fourth grade. I was in Catholic school in Pocatello Idaho. We were learning about the Greeks and their religion.

Their gods lived on a mountain. It occurred to me that if they wanted to prove that their gods were real, all they had to do is climb a mountain.

I couldn't believe that people who had such an opportunity would blindly follow their religion. I asked Sister Mary Henrietta, "Did the Greeks in fact believe that their gods were real?" She answered, "Yes."

Then I asked, "In a thousand years, how are people going to take the things that we're taught to believe in?" The question died in the air with no answer, but I knew then that we were destined to outgrow superstitious beliefs.

I came out to my parents as a non-believer in 1968, as a freshman in high school, at the age of 14. It was clear to me that going to CCD classes was a waste of time and I didn't believe in anything that the church had to offer.

This is when I had my one and only discussion with my father about religion. He told me that I was an Agnostic. The word sounded good and by his understanding of the word, it seemed to fit my situation.

I didn't believe but I wasn't saying that there was no God. My feelings haven't changed. I still don't make the claim that there is no God or gods but now, I know that means that I'm an Agnostic Atheist.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on pivotal people within the community relevant to personal philosophical development, who were they for you?

Lacey: My philosophy grew out of interactions with many individuals and I was not coerced into not believing in God or gods. My father did not push his non-belief on me.

Whether it was because of idealistic principles or to maintain a harmonious relationship with my very Catholic mother, is not certain.

I never saw him get into a religious discussion with anyone but through him, I understood that one could be a non-believer and still be accepted by his friends, his coworkers, and his bosses.

I found the influential members of the community only after I had decided to become a non-believer but like my father, it really didn't define me during my working years.

I didn't get into many religious discussions and the people around me never knew where I stood regarding religious belief. My current activity in the community came after I had made the decision to retire.

First, I found people in the Skeptical community. I became interested in James Randi and Michael Shermer. I particularly liked them because they were striking at the heart of the issue—people believe in dumb stuff!

James Randi attacked superstition, not just religious belief and Michael Shermer made a career out of figuring out why people have irrational beliefs.

I found the influential Atheists through my association with the Skeptical Community. They were not “pivotal” in that I was already a non-believer. They were, however, people within a larger community.

I mostly agreed with their ideas and I tried to learn from their experience. Their existence is evidence for a large, often unseen, community of freethinkers and it beneficial just knowing that.

The people I consider influential:

James Randi

Michael Shermer

Richard Dawkins

Sam Harris

Peter Boghossian

Margaret Downey

Ellen Johnson

There are many more, but these are the ones that come to mind immediately.

James Randi and Michael Shermer, as I mentioned, are influential in the popularization of Skepticism.

Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris brought the idea of questioning the universal appeal of religion through their writings. The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins and Letters to a Christian Nation by Sam Harris.

Peter Boghossian in his book, A Manual for Creating Atheists, shows how people are best convinced through Socratic questions about personal beliefs.

Margaret Downey were pivotal in bringing together their Atheist organizations while they were in charge ending years of needless competition in the community.

Jacobsen: What about literature and film, and other artistic and humanities productions, of influence on personal philosophical worldview?

Lacey: I rarely read, and I enjoy films for mainly entertainment. I do however listen to many podcasts on religion, science and technology. I also enjoy podcasts with historical content and politics.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the wider borderless online world of non-religious people?

Lacey: Online I’m still presented with limitations such and language and customs. I’m met international members of the community during conferences and community themed cruises.

However, I’ve only met a few. I’m aware of the plight of people around the world facing difficulty due to being a member of the freethinking community, but my main concerns and activism revolve around the people in this country, the state of Arizona, and the city of Tucson.

Jacobsen: How did this lead to American Atheist Arizona?

Lacey: When I made my commitment to retire from work, I decided to dedicate more time to the freethinking community. My first involvement was a cruise with the JREF (James Randi Education Foundation). They called the cruise “Escape from the Bermuda Triangle.”

After that cruise, I started attending conferences hosted by JREF and the American Atheists. Once the American Atheists and the AAI (Atheist Alliance International) stopped their competition, I started attending the AAI conferences.

The American Atheists State Director for Arizona expressed interest in stepping down and I applied to fill his position. That was in 2007.

Jacobsen: Within the current position as the State Director for American Atheist Arizona, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Lacey: Until very recently, the job of the state director was up the person in the position. Now, we have a National Field Organizer, Jim Helton, who is providing more guidance. He has a program he calls “ACES” which stands for “Activism, Community Service, Education, and Social.” Activism included direct political engagement.

Community Service works on the negative perception through charitable acts. Education aims at addressing the misconceptions held by many. Social provides the support that many people lose when leaving religious communities.

I also “answer the mail” and address the concerns of people in Arizona that could use my help and the help of the national organization. Sometimes the concerns are about discrimination.

Sometimes people object to a religious organization operating in the public schools to proselytize to the students. Each situation requires a different approach. In most cases, a letter on the organization’s stationery is all that is required.

Jacobsen: What are some of the provisions for the community there? How does this manifest in the online sphere as well?

Lacey: I’m associated with American Atheists. I’m also the coordinator for the Tucson Atheists Meetup.com Group and helped create the (SC4AZ) Secular Coalition for Arizona. The SC4AZ has its own secular lobbyist and works with 17 other freethought organizations in the state.

It fights to maintain the separation of church and state. The Meetup.com group is primarily a social support organization, but it contains a sub-group called TACO (Tucson Atheists Community Outreach).

Its charter is to provide charitable community service for Tucson. We also work with the group FreeThought Arizona which hosts notable speakers monthly. Each of the mentioned groups has an online presence.

Jacobsen: What unique issues for secularism face Arizonan atheists? What specific inclusivity issues face atheists in Arizona? In particular, how do some of these reflect the larger national issues?

Lacey: Arizona has a severe challenge. Our legislature is cowed by an organization called The CAP (Center for Arizona Policy)—a deeply religious organization. CAP has lobbied for many legislative challenges to the separation of church and state.

Until the SC4AZ came on the scene, the organization was unopposed in its efforts. It often bragged about the number of CAP sponsored bills were passed each year. We are doing better now but it wasn't long ago that the gains made by CAP made national news.

Jacobsen: How can secular American citizens create an environment more conducive and welcoming to secular women, secular youth, secular people of color, secular poor people, and secular people with formal education less than or equal to – but not higher than – a high school education?

Lacey: Here in Arizona we have as many secular women involved as secular men, particularly in leadership positions. For example, in the Tucson Atheists 60% of the leadership team are women. In Phoenix over 50% of the leadership team are women.

The environment created by the community does not limit the participation by women, youth, people of color, secular poor people, and the less educated people. There are obstacles, but they exist outside the freethinking organizations.

For example, I recognize that families with kids are under represented in my Tucson Atheists community. Organizers have created events conducive and welcoming to families, but the events are not well attended.

It is reasonable to assume that families have other, more pressing priorities. Young people and retired people are over represented. Perhaps the young people and retired people have more time to devote to such causes.

Jacobsen: How can the secular community not only direct attention to ill-treatment of religious followers by fundamentalist religious leaders but also work to reduce and eventually eliminate the incidences of ill-treatment of some – in particular, the recent cases of women – within the secular community?

Lacey: The secular community is not in any position to change what happens inside religious institutions and I'm not personally aware of any women that have been ill treated within the secular community.

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

Interview with Tim Ward – Assistant State Director, American Atheists Oklahoma

January 12, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Tim Ward is the Assistant State Director of American Atheists Oklahoma. Here we talk about some early influence of religion, and his views and work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you? Did religion play a role in it?

Tim Ward: My early life was nothing spectacular. I came from a single parent home. My mother provided every opportunity that she could, and my father helped as much as he could as well.

Nothing was ever really handed to me and I learned from that whether I liked it at the time or not. My memories of my childhood fortunately are a lot of positive memories of places and people.

Religion was such a small part of my childhood. I did attend a Lutheran church and was an acolyte. Other than that short period of time, not including funerals or prayer at family functions during holidays, religion really didn't play much of a part in my life.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on pivotal people within the community relevant to personal philosophical development, who were they for you?

Ward: Over the years as I've developed with of course the usual people Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens, and Harris. David Mills and later David Silverman as well. I know these are all cliché so if you have any others that I should read by all means I'm open to recommendations.

In reality however the more influential people were religious. One of them being a Dominican priest now. I always had reservations about a god and during many conversations despite their best efforts I found myself arguing on the side of atheism.

I think one of the last conversations we had was what's the difference between the god of today and Zeus. This was really the major argument that brought me to this point.

I spent another 3 months of my life researching anything I could get my hands on trying to justify a god in any form. We can obviously see where that ended up.

Jacobsen: What about literature and film, and other artistic and humanities productions, of influence on personal philosophical worldview?

Ward: I've read the usual books like The God Delusion, God is Not Great, and Letter to a Christian Nation. I've watched Religulous. I actually try to avoid watching or reading things that confirm my beliefs though.

I believe only reading, chat rooms, and shows that only confirm what you believe is counter productive. I like to view the other side. Talk with people that have views that differ from my own no matter how painful it may be at times.

God is not Dead and God Friended Me for examples were to put it nicely painful to watch. Living in the bible belt gives me plenty of opportunities to challenge my views.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the wider borderless online world of non-religious people?

Ward: I was home one night and typed a question into google. That lead me to typing Atheist into Facebook. To my amazement I discovered that I wasn't alone.

I was suddenly talking to people that thought like I did. Having discussions about issues and arguments with people who's only defense was a book I could use against them.

It was like seeing the world with new eyes. I was making connections with people in my own city, state, and then around the world. I was given an opportunity to exchange ideas and expand on what I had learned. I still cherish that night to this day actually.

I was up till sunrise the next day. It wasn't bashing the religious people but being able to talk with others that had the same ideas along the lines of atheism and being inclusive of all people no matter what their beliefs were.

Those discussions really helped me refine my beliefs and attitudes. It changed me for the better I believe. There are a lot of people in the online world that I owe a debt of gratitude.

Jacobsen: How did this lead to American Atheist Oklahoma?

Ward: I had never really reached out to the Atheist community prior to moving to Oklahoma. I looked up Atheists on Google and found American Atheists and discovered the local group from there.

Long story short, I broke my leg and had some time on my hands. I went to a local board meeting. Then another. I had done some environmental work years ago and had some ideas that I thought the local group would like. Then another meeting to see Jim Helton speak.

He talked about ideas that I wanted to talk with the chapter president about. I went to the next chapter meeting where they voted me in as a member of the board and I voiced my ideas. They liked them for the most part.

The American Atheist convention happen to be in OKC that year and I think a month later Jim emailed saying he wanted to talk with me and later offered me the assistant state director position. I'm guessing the local chapter president recommended me for the position.

Jacobsen: Within the current position as the Assistant State Director for American Atheist Oklahoma, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Ward: The broad directive I was given was to build up the local community. This obviously gives me a lot of leeway which I believe to be a great benefit to anyone who takes this position.

It gives me the opportunity to make it my own. I always try to put a positive light on atheism to the general public incorporating ideas of fairness and equality. The reality is that the public really has no idea what an atheist is and what we believe.

I'm also the community service chair for the local Oklahoma Atheist group (AOK) so I like to incorporate that into the things I do as well. AOK does community service work for example with the local food bank and I include a charity drive for local groups.

For example, during national immunization awareness month in August we held an immunization drive. I try to focus a specific drive to the awareness month it is associated with for greater impact.

Along with that I also dedicate time to encourage members to be active. I don't want to just talk a lot I want to lead by example. I try to stay involved with issues that concern our members.

I have always asked members if they have issues that they feel are separation of church and state to tell me about it and I will take it on and do what I can for them. There have been several issues with schools that I have been able to take care of such as churches sending flyers home.

11 school districts have changed their policies thanks to members speaking out. Because of those issues, 270 letters were sent out to school advising them of legal issues involving holiday displays and offering American Atheist as a resource to make sure they stayed within the law as well as being fair and equal to all of their students.

With that came teachers asking for help on issues they had so I have had the privilege of being a voice for atheists that have to fear for their jobs if they speak out.

Aside from those things I watch legislation on the state level that cross the line of church and state. I have been able to talk with groups and state legislators about opposing abortion laws and an education bill that would allow teachers to teach creationism because they don't agree with evolution.

Issues that affect the LGBTQ community or women's health are always on my radar. I'm working with a couple local cities to get proclamations for the day of reason and the local election board to move the polling locations from churches to more secular locations.

My number one duty is always to our local atheist community. The issues that they feel are important are the things I will tackle.

Jacobsen: What are some of the provisions for the community there? How does this manifest in the online sphere as well?

Ward: We had a solid social community prior to my arrival. In a state like Oklahoma where there is a stigma associated with atheism the community and support network are second to none.

There are Facebook groups and we utilize the Meetup app as well. While there are of course the online spats that are settled in a kind fashion. When there are issues the community pulls together in a great way.

Jacobsen: What unique issues for secularism face the Oklahoman atheists? What specific inclusivity issues face atheists in Oklahoma? In particular, how do some of these reflect the larger national issues?

Ward: I don't believe we face any issues that are unique. Some are more intense than other places. I'm reminded of a meme that shows 2 closets I found during Pride. One closet is labeled gay and the other atheist.

The gay closet is empty while the atheist closet shows a pair of eyes with a scared look staring out. We have members in the local group that can't be seen in pics during events because they could lose their jobs simply because they would be associated with atheists.

It makes me sick because these are some wonderful people. This reflects on issues of equality. Reducing people to a second-class citizen based solely because of disbelief in a deity should not be tolerated.

Jacobsen: How can secular American citizens create an environment more conducive and welcoming to secular women, secular youth, secular people of color, secular poor people, and secular people with formal education less than or equal to – but not higher than – a high school education, as well as work to reduce and eventually eliminate the incidences of ill-treatment of some – in particular, the recent cases of women – within the community?

Ward: This is probably the easiest question to answer with a single word, support. Support these people. Be there for these people.

Don't assume that someone else is doing it because the other person may be thinking the same thing and suddenly there's no support and that's where the problem starts. Be the person who is there and if there are two people there already be there as well.

This drives me insane. Our community is better than the ideals of the past century. Bias based on sex, color of a person's skin, education, should be a relic of a best forgotten age. Reach out to these people.

They may not want to be out to the world but show them they are not alone. If they need a voice, then be that voice. If you don't want to be that voice then contact me, I'll be that voice for them. Silence is our worst enemy.

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

Interview with Ryan Boone – Assistant State Director, American Atheists Southwest Virginia

January 13, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Ryan Boone is the Assistant State Director of American Atheists Southwest Virginia. Here we talk about his early life, work, and views in moderate depth.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you? Did religion play a role in it?

Ryan Boone: I grew up with divorced parents and five siblings. Sometimes it was difficult due to the custody arrangements. At my dad's, we went to church regularly, though not always at the same church.

Some weeks we were Presbyterian, others we were Baptist or Methodist. For the most part, I went to a United Methodist Church with my grandma. At my mom's, we went to Vacation Bible School at the local Baptist church.

In fact, I still have the gray bible that I received as an award at the end of one summer. After VBS that summer, I talked to the pastor about getting baptized; it was a big deal.

I sat down and actually read the Bible, Old and New Testament, in an effort to better understand what I was getting myself into. It was this attempt at becoming a better Christian that caused me to give up on Christianity and start questioning religions and God's existence.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on pivotal people within the community relevant to personal philosophical development, who were they for you?

Boone: I started my journey into atheism in early 2001 and became completely convinced that no benevolent god existed on September 11th of that year. It was another decade before I had any idea that there was a broader atheist community.

I mean, I grew up in rural southwestern Virginia and moved to Alabama for college, so it just wasn't something that was talked about. Many conversations with strangers turned to "What church do you go to?" relatively quickly.

Once I finally found my way to the larger community, I read extensively the works of Hitchens, Dawkins, and Harris, but at that point I was just reinforcing my current philosophies and understanding of the arguments. It was Reason Rally 2016 that gave me insight into people and ideas that would go on to shape my current philosophies.

Three speaker in particular from Reason Rally stick with me: David Silverman, Larry Decker, and Bill Nye. Outside of the person David Silverman seems by all accounts to be, the idea of labelling yourself as "atheist" as a form of firebrand atheism is core to my approach to activism.

I make a point to identify myself as "atheist" before I use terms like "secular" or "freethinker". My car is covered in atheist bumper stickers, my license plate reads "4TH3IST", and I introduce myself as an out and proud atheist because it will make that introduction a little easier for the person that does it after me.

Larry Decker really epitomizes the ideal that Secular Values are American Values. It's something we strive for every day in our activism, to equate American Values and Secular Values: Freedom, Inclusion, Equality, and Knowledge.

Secular Values are a strong basis to drive decision making in all situations. Bill Nye spoke eloquently on the importance of basing our decisions and approaches to solving problems in the facts, but he also implied that we need to take an "Everything All at Once" approach to solving our problems.

By employing all our tools and resources to solve the problems we face from all sides, we can, as he puts it, Change the World.

Jacobsen: What about literature and film, and other artistic and humanities productions, of influence on personal philosophical worldview?

Boone: In my free time, I do my best to absorb as much as I can from popular scientific works. Books like *The Greatest Show on Earth*, *A Universe from Nothing*, and *The Elegant Universe* have informed my understanding that the workings of the natural world are vastly more interesting and hold a greater explanatory value than any religious text.

The more we learn and understand about the world, the more two things happen: God shrinks and the mysteries of the universe grow.

In regards to my interactions with others, I take a lot from the debate style of Matt Dillahunty and the epistemological approach of Anthony Magnabosco detailed in the book *A Guide for Creating Atheists*. Public discourse is an art, and I'm still honing my skills.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the wider borderless online world of non-religious people?

Boone: My introduction to the broader online community really came from listening to popular atheist podcasts. It seems like every non-believer has a podcast or YouTube channel, you know?

I started out listening to "Cognitive Dissonance" and "The Scathing Atheist" because they tapped into the more primal feelings I had about religion. They took the anger we all bottle up about religion and the ill it does in the world and poured it out with the appropriate amount of ridicule.

Those shows introduced me to "The Thinking Atheist" and "The Atheist Experience". It was through the thriving online communities that both of these shows have created that I found my way to the broader online community.

I've met so many wonderful people through social media and the in person activism that I've participated.

Jacobsen: How did this lead to American Atheist Virginia?

Boone: I found out about Reason Rally 2016 through "The Thinking Atheist Fanpage" on Facebook.

Secular Coalition for America hosted two days of lobbying before the rally where I got a chance to first taste the thrill of setting up a meeting with my congressional representative and lobby for issues I believed in. After this initial experience, I signed up to volunteer and lobby during SCA's Lobby Day in 2017.

I worked closely with Sarah Levin and Casey Brescia as a social media volunteer and made a number of connections. One connection was with Samantha McGuire, a Regional Director for American Atheists.

Over the next year, through volunteering and activism, I got to work with some truly amazing people. I came on as an Assistant State Director in the autumn of 2018 after Samantha reached out to me on behalf of Virginia American Atheists.

Jacobsen: Within the current position as the Assistant State Director for American Atheist Virginia, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Boone: The position of Assistant State Director is a volunteer position with Virginia American Atheists that is designed to serve local regions within individual states.

The area I currently serve is rural Smyth County, Virginia, and surrounding areas. My responsibilities center around supporting local groups and monitoring church-state separations issues in local government.

Assistant State Directors act as liaisons between local secular groups and American Atheists, providing support, training, and guidance as well as access to American Atheist's resources such as toolkits for activism, training materials, and the speakers bureau.

The mission of all this is to grow local groups into fully functioning entities who implement the ACES program developed by Jim Helton, founder of Tri-State Freethinkers and National Field Organizer for American Atheists.

The ACES program will help these groups to participate in grassroots activism, provide service to their local communities, educate their membership, and provide a safe social space for them to interact. The goal of the position is to help local groups be successful communities.

Jacobsen: What are some of the provisions for the community there? How does this manifest in the online sphere as well?

Boone: You can really boil the community philosophy down to one overarching goal of equality. You can tie most, if not all, of our activism to equality.

Work on the Johnson Amendment (a provision banning non-profits in the United States from participating in partisan politics) is to maintain equality for religious and non-religious non-profit organizations.

Activism around LGBTQ+ and reproductive rights for women are essentially to maintain equality for everyone regardless of their gender or sexual orientation.

Within our communities we strive to champion equality because it ensures everyone is treated fairly and given the same opportunities for success as anyone else.

Everyone has an equal right to a community free from harassment of any kind, free from discrimination based on age, gender, orientation or other protected status that differentiates us, and free from the arbitrary obstacles and stigma that are placed on communities by and for religious organizations and dogmas.

In the online sphere, this goal of equality lends itself to the diverse and robust voices that participate in our conversations. It also gives a fair basis for which to police our communities for

harassment and discrimination. Those infractions that impede on the equal rights of others are the easiest to identify.

Jacobsen: What unique issues for secularism face the Virginian atheists? In particular, how do some of these reflect the larger national issues?

Boone: The two big things that come to mind right off are sex education in public schools and access to medical aid-in-dying (MAID) in Virginia. at the end of last year, after a lengthy process of study and public comment, the Virginia Joint Commission on Health Care (JCHC) voted no on putting forward legislation that would support MAID.

Individuals from secular groups, including State Director for Virginia American Atheists Larry Mendoza, were a part of the committee tasked with preparing the report on this issue for the first time in 2018.

Because of this participation, a coalition of secular voices were included in the final report that was presented to the JCHC.

During the public comment period, secular groups around the state encouraged their members to submit public comments in favor of the legislation.

Unfortunately, the religious right was able to rally huge numbers to voice their opposition, and in the end, no legislation was put forward in support of MAID.

Work on this issue is continuing in Virginia in conjunction with the efforts of Compassion and Choices, a national non-profit that lobbies on behalf of this issue.

In 2019, one of our main focuses as Assistant State Directors is to gather information and to develop plans for activism surrounding comprehensive, medically accurate sex education in our public schools across the state.

Law requires input from the community in the structuring of family life curricula in Virginia. In particular, committees are required to have members of the faith community involved.

Our goal is to get concerned secular parents and activists involved in the conversations surrounding sex education and on those committees. If we can start to move the needle on these issues locally, then the work to affect real change statewide and nationwide will be much easier.

Jacobsen: How can secular American citizens create an environment more conducive and welcoming to secular women, secular youth, secular people of color, and work to reduce the incidences of ill-treatment of some – in particular, the recent cases of women – within the community?

Boone: This is a big problem within any community that has no simple solution. Even with our commitment to equality and reason, the secular community is far from immune to transgressions against already at risk segments of our community.

I can start by saying that the most effective tool the secular community has in solving the problem is our incredibly diverse chorus of voices. It is a part of why I am sometimes hesitant, as a white male, to propose my solutions to these problems.

While it is imperative that white men participate in solving these issues, we have to be willing to step back from our privileged positions and share our platforms with others with differing perspectives.

We have to recognize two key things in order to reduce the incidences of abuse in our communities: anyone can be a perpetrator no matter how important their philosophies may be and we have an obligation to report and hold these people accountable when they do wrong.

I believe we are making some progress on these issues, but we have a long way to go. The social consequences suffered by people of note like David Silverman and Lawrence Krauss are a start, but we can't find ourselves protecting anyone just because their ideas mean a lot to the community.

We have to prove to those who are harmed that they are the ones we truly care about. That said, we are poised to be the most welcoming community for women, youth, and people of color because the secular community exists without judgmental and oppressive dogmas or hierarchical structures. We strive for secular values, the primary of which is equality.

A primary problem with welcoming women, people of color, and people of differing backgrounds into the broader community is the lack of representation among leadership for so many who are seeking a community to call home.

There are a variety of options in the secular community like Black Non-Believers and Ex-Muslims of North America for people to find community, but we need to ensure that we are welcoming everyone into all our spaces. There was an opportunity recently to make a radical shift in leadership at American Atheists with the replacement of the former President.

I don't question the appointment of Nick Fish on merit, but I feel the organization could have made a bold move in a new direction had they considered and chosen Mandisa Thomas, founder of Black Non-Believers, instead.

I don't know the reasoning behind the choices that were made, and I'm sure that American Atheists will move in a positive direction. I just feel this may have been a missed opportunity to bring in someone with a voice and ideas that are unlike those that have traditionally been at the helm.

It is so important when trying to build a community that the faces who are joining see themselves mirrored in those who represent the community day in and day out.

Along with making our community leadership increasingly diverse and representative, we have to figure out the WIIFM (What's In It For Me) for the next generation. Properly packaging the benefits of a strong community and demonstrating the real change we are making will help us to survive.

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

Interview with Raghen Lucy – Assistant State Director, Minnesota Atheists & National Leadership Council and Campus President, Secular Student Alliance (Minnesota State University, Mankato)

February 9, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Raghen Lucy is the Assistant State Director of the Minnesota Atheists & National Leadership Council and Campus President, Secular Student Alliance (Minnesota State University, Mankato). Here we talk about her background, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you? Did religion play a role in it?

Raghen Lucy: I was raised in small-town Williston, North Dakota, which is only a little over an hour from the Canadian border. Religion did play a role in my early life, but in a pretty unconventional way.

My mother is Methodist, and my father is a devout Catholic. While I attended the Methodist church for most of my early years, I did attend mass with my father here and there. However, through all these years of attendance, I never truly ‘bought’ what religious authority was telling me, and I was skeptical from an early age.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on pivotal people within the community relevant to personal philosophical development, who were they for you?

Lucy: Apathetic toward religion and spirituality for all of my early life, I was not exposed to ideas of atheism and non-religious philosophy until high school. When atheism clicked with me, I dove in head first. I had barely anyone to discuss atheism with in my hometown, so I turned to other means of developing my values — namely, the Internet. I watched lectures and read books by the Four Horsemen of atheism (Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and, my personal favorite, Hitchens), and talked with my secular sister about science and religion. I was immediately viewed as an outcast by peers and family in my religious, conservative community for the unpopular views I was beginning to develop.

Jacobsen: What about literature and film, and other artistic and humanities productions, of influence on personal philosophical worldview?

Lucy: Ricky Gervais is hands-down my favorite atheist actor and comedian. I also regard the Bill Nye vs. Ken Ham debate, *Religulous*, and *Jesus Camp* (which was actually filmed a couple hours away from my hometown) as a few staples of influence for my atheistic worldview. In addition, I love listening to podcasts such as *The Thinking Atheist*, *The Atheist Experience*, and *God Awful Movies*.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the wider borderless online world of non-religious people?

Lucy: When I started college in Mankato, Minnesota, I was pretty developed and settled as an outspoken atheist. However, I did not have an adequate platform to express my views or meet

others who were like-minded. Surprised to find that there were 20+ religious student organizations, and *no* secular student organizations, I wanted to make a change on my campus.

After getting in touch with Seth Andrews, who told me about the Secular Student Alliance, I started an SSA chapter at MSU Mankato. This decision opened me up to an entire community of secularists from around the United States, many of whom I consider dear friends.

Jacobsen: How did this lead to American Atheists Minnesota?

Lucy: Less than a year after starting the SSA chapter, Jim Helton from American Atheists gave a lecture to my student group, and invited me to be a leader for the organization.

Jacobsen: Within the current position as the Assistant State Director for American Atheists Minnesota, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Lucy: American Atheists protects the absolute separation of religion from government, raises the profile of atheists and atheism in our nation's public and political discourse, and educates Americans about atheism. In addition, they work on social justice and secular issues across the country. Each director is encouraged to "pick an issue" to address, and I chose sexual education in public schools.

My tasks and responsibilities regarding this include, meeting with the school board, researching the current curriculum in place, and working to update the curriculum and change the school board's policy on said curriculum. More generally, I educate my community about atheism and recruit members for both American Atheists and my Secular Student Alliance chapter.

Jacobsen: What are some of the provisions for the community there? How does this manifest in the online sphere as well?

Lucy: American Atheists provides plenty of resources for tackling social justice and secular issues in the United States. They provide money, support, and physical resources such as American Atheists merchandise and social activist supplies. I view the online community of members and leaders as an additional resource. The online community offers additional advice, support, and a much-needed sense of community for secular individuals.

Jacobsen: What unique issues for secularism face Minnesotan atheists? What specific inclusivity issues face atheists in Minnesota? In particular, how do some of these reflect the larger national issues?

Lucy: I can't think of any issues in Minnesota that other states aren't also dealing with. We all face an assault by Christian nationalist groups that wish to establish Christian theocracy or "dominion" in America. One of their latest attempts in Minnesota and elsewhere was to try to mandate that "In God We Trust" posters be placed in all public schools.

Other examples of issues we all face are attempts to put restrictions on, or eliminate, abortion rights, and attempts to legalize discrimination against the LGBT community.

It has been at least 28 years since Republicans have controlled the Minnesota state House, the Minnesota state Senate, and the governorship. Thus the Democrats have been able to block most bad religion-based legislation from Republicans.

Jacobsen: How can secular American citizens create an environment more conducive and welcoming to secular women, secular youth, secular people of color, secular poor people,

and secular people with formal education less than or equal to – but not higher than – a high school education?

Lucy: I firmly believe that the secular community can embrace marginalized groups of people by employing the honorable principle of humanism. As such, secular individuals, and all other individuals who involve themselves with religion have the opportunity to be more welcoming and accepting to other members of the human race, regardless of their circumstances. When gender, color, and socioeconomic status are removed from the equation of inclusion, people are able to celebrate each other and the basic humanity they share.

Jacobsen: How can the secular community not only direct attention to ill-treatment of religious followers by fundamentalist religious leaders but also work to reduce and eventually eliminate the incidences of ill-treatment of some – in particular, the recent cases of women – within the secular community?

Lucy: Demanding honesty and transparency from fundamentalist religious leaders is paramount in the project of holding them accountable. Often times, religious institutions and leaders assume an undeservedly ‘convenient’ position that is insulated from the law, as they expect to hold some sort of ‘special’ place in society. Eradicating this illusion, ensuring that said institutions, leaders, and the general public are aware that this is not the case, will introduce justice to the wrongdoings we have seen recently. Being relentless in a pursuit of such justice is a passion of many secular individuals in the States, namely within the American Atheists community.

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

Ask Mandisa 13 – Secular People in Politics

January 13, 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 secular people in politics.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The new year is in; we're looking at new media, new exposure, and new interest. What have been some notable stories of secular people in office? What is important in terms of civil and social rights?

Mandisa Thomas: I will start with the second question first. The importance of secular individuals in politics is knowing that they will put the rights of the people, regardless of their religious beliefs or background, over their own personal views.

People who are secular will be inclusive of those who are LGTBQ and marginalized. There will be, usually, reproductive rights of everyone respected. It won't focus on one particular group.

Secular doesn't mean explicitly non-religious. But having a secular background or perspective, it means that you are not putting your dogma into that; that you're not abiding by any set of rules or policies that will favor one over the rest of your constituency. There is one notable story out of Athens, Georgia.

One black woman was sworn into public office. She turned down the oath on the Bible. But she opted to swear on the copy of the biography of Malcolm X. While he identified as a Muslim, he is one of my heroes. Near the end of his life, he fought for the rights of blacks and individuals regardless of their religious background.

I think that is a very appropriate book to have taken an oath on.

Jacobsen: Why did Malcolm X have a change of heart towards the secular?

Thomas: Malcolm X had a change of attitude towards the Nation of Islam once he had a separation from the Honorable Elijah Mohammed. His parents were the followers of Marcus Garvey. He was notable for the Back-to-Africa liberation movement. It was so eclectic with his background.

He engaged people of so many different backgrounds. To me, that is a person who championed people first. He began to understand. He was not an educated man but an informed man; he was an informed individual.

He made sure to keep his ear to the ground – to so speak. He had a shift in position when he realized that he had a really powerful voice and was really powerful when he found out he was able to connect with leaders and the black community.

It was something that he was doing with the Nation of Islam, but was better able to do this when he stepped away.

Jacobsen: Are there any other notable cases of those who have entered political office who are secular, or even trends of the same?

Thomas: Yes, you have Senator Ernie Chambers. He is in Arizona. You have Juan Mendez and Anita Colon, who are people of color. There was also an atheist elected to office in the Nebraska area. I do not recall the name.

Those are some notable people. I think former representative Barnie Frank was or is an atheist. I do not think he disclosed this while in office. But he did an openly secular campaign interview, once he was out of office. He then let his secular background or perspective be known.

These are some on the books in the states in the US where it is illegal to be an atheist and in office. It is dangerous and detrimental. Hopefully, in the future, these laws can be overturned.

I think that religious privilege needs to go away in public office and in politics, particularly in the United States.

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

Thomas: Thank you very much.

Ask Gretta 2 – Expect the Unexpected, and the Expected

January 14, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Reverend Gretta Vosper is a unique individual in the history of Canadian freethought insofar as I know the prior contexts of freethinking in Canada's past in general, and in the nation for secular oriented women in particular.

Vosper is a Member of The Clergy Project and a Minister in The United Church of Canada (The UCC) at West Hill United Church, and the Founder of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity (2004-2016), and Best-Selling Author.

I reached out about the start of an educational series in early pages of a new chapter in one of the non-religious texts in the library comprising the country's narratives. Vosper agreed.

Here we talk about what to expect with this series.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The nature of the modern online media creates electronic dependency for information while, at the same time, producing a certain visual-over-literate culture – or a tilt in the ratio of news and opinion disseminated to the public more from print towards the audiovisual. This series will incorporate print and audiovisual to bridge the gap. Regarding the content, why this series? What will be the topics covered, in general, through it?

Rev. Gretta Vosper: For many, many years, the caricature of the secular humanist has been of someone who rages against religion, and is so tied to their hatred of it, that when they get together with other secular humanists, that's all they have to talk about. With glee, they remind themselves of every heinous insult religion has perpetrated against the human race (all life on the planet, actually), and leave feeling reaffirmed and bolstered in their secular worldview. The caricature of atheists is even worse, fueled over the last several years by atheism's Four Horsemen – the late Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett – all of whose writing is particularly vitriolic toward religion or belief in anything that bears resemblance to a theistic, supernatural god, and the god called God in particular.

I get it. I have little mind to protect the theistic father-god (please use lower case for that) who resides somewhere in the heavens or a parallel supernatural universe, and has the power to capriciously interfere in our lives. Or, of course, any other god believed able to do so. But I'm tired of those stuck-in-their-hatred-of-religion caricatures being the only way many ever encounter secular humanists and atheists. And I'm tired of those who live up to that stereotype and continue to stew in their anger at religion without engaging in reasonable dialogue with anyone who might change their minds. Sikivu Hutchinson, in an address to the American Humanist Association a few years ago, challenged those in the audience to get over their "mono-maniacal obsession with religion." She's right. That needs to happen.

I'm also tired – really tired – of theologians who have an extremely (perhaps I should be kind and use the word "highly") nuanced understanding of god that in no way resembles the classic, theistic, interventionist god most people think the word "god" describes but which allows them to dismiss atheists and secular humanists as having created a "straw man" god. By stretching the

word “god” over something it was never intended to mean, and does not mean to the average person on the street, clergy let those sitting in the pews before them reassure themselves that “the minister still believes in God.” Clergy continue to refuse to bear responsibility to their people for having themselves dissected and dismissed, decades ago, the theistic, interventionist god they now label a straw man. They swagger with the superiority of their educated understanding of “god” and scoff at the simplistic arguments atheists and secular humanists provide them. It’s the vicious refrain heard in the kindergarten playground, “You’re stupid!” “No! You’re stupid!” “No! You’re stupid!” And on and on it goes.

Over the past five years, because I began to use the term “atheist” to describe my beliefs, I’ve been dismissed and maligned by many of my colleagues for openly condemning the god called “God”, that supernatural, capriciously interventionist god of the Abrahamic religions. On social media, one colleague stated that he would be fine if I was an “a-theist” but that I wasn’t; I was an “atheist” and so should be stripped of my credentials. In my opinion, the only difference between “a-theist” and “atheist” is bigotry, the former an enlightened theological position, the latter suffering the accretions of caricature after caricature, all of them worthy of hatred. Since my colleague had never had a conversation with me about what I do believe, his was an intransigent, ignorant bigotry, the worst kind.

The new Moderator of The United Church of Canada, Richard Bott, prior to his becoming moderator, conducted a highly skewed “survey”^[i] in order to determine if the claim (purported to be mine) – that over half of UCC clergy were nontheists – was accurate. The *Vancouver Sun* was eager to report that I was wrong by 35-40 percentage points. Bott’s survey supposedly proved that 95% of clergy believed in God. Which looks like a sound finding until you remind yourself that there was no definition of god provided; every one of those 95 percentage points potentially represented a totally unique understanding of what the word “god” meant. In fact, two-thirds of respondents, who were mostly Bott’s Facebook followers, eschewed one or the other or both of a traditional god’s attributes – being supernatural or interventionist – either of which could be used to identify one as a nontheist. Less than 1% went out of their way to say that god was trinitarian, the doctrine against which I was being tested for orthodoxy at the time. The 95% result, hailed as proof that I was wrong, meant only that 95% of respondents could comfortably come up with a definition of god that personally suits them, but that may not have any of the characteristics or attributes of what most people on the planet think someone means when they use the word “god”. Even I can do that.

The United Church of Canada, the church I grew up in and which trained me, has been the most progressive Christian church in the world, in my opinion. Over the past sixty or more years, it has applied the tools of critical inquiry to the stuff of religion and much of that stuff has fallen away as a result. It has, to its detriment, however, continued to converse in language that is archaic, arguing, as most mainline Protestant denominations do, that all we need to do is teach our people that we no longer mean what those words meant in the past. Doing that, however, led to a serious falling away of members and an inexorable decline in church membership. And no, those who left did not flee to more conservative churches; those churches have declined right alongside the UCC. They left because the UCC invited them to think deeply about the Christian story. In doing so, they thought or read or talked their way beyond the doctrines of the past. Still, the church seemed wedded to the past, demanding that all, regardless of their belief or lack of it, continue to “worship” in the traditional language of Christianity. Many simply got sick of the dissembling and left. With nowhere else to go. They simply left.

So now we get to my concerns and why I stay in the church and do the work I do. Because, unfortunately, socially conscious civic engagement is positively correlated with church participation. Those who go to church and grow strong social bonds there have a higher subjective well-being; they are more likely to volunteer in the wider community, to donate philanthropically, and to vote than those who do not. The last generation to remain in the pews, the last “Christian” generation in Canada, is now in the last decade or so of life. As it draws closer and closer to death’s portal, our communities and country will suffer significantly from the loss of a level of civic engagement we have taken for granted. We have not recognized the importance of church engagement to the social values we share. Already, CanadaHelps, an online portal for charitable donations, reports a significant loss of support and predicts that small charities being adversely affected may not survive. Our largest repository of social capital has been the church. The Canada that will continue on beyond the demise of its largest and most socially active denomination, The United Church of Canada, will be a much different country than we now know.

It isn’t the doctrinal beliefs or the personal piety that drives the subjective well-being of those who attend church regularly. It is the power realized when people fall in love with being together, as previous generations of church-goers did. We need to find ways to create communities that exist without the traditional beliefs and language of Christianity and other theistic religions. And we need to recreate the conditions that allowed people to experience the joy of being together in rich, values focused communities. That is the enduring gift that religious participation provided. We need to distill that gift and provide it without the trappings of religious belief.

So that’s why we’re having this conversation. I love the selflessness of my country and I want to see it strengthened, not watch it disappear. Finding ways to engage those beyond belief in communities of resilience is my passion. I haven’t figured it all out, but I know that making that little bit of difference now, before the UCC and other progressive religious communities dwindle and die, we may be able to stave off the dragons of sheer corporatism and social isolation that trends suggest may be our future. I believe that those of us skilled in creating and sustaining values-based communities – many of us nurtured in the church – have much to offer. We will welcome a future beyond the beliefs that divide but we must work to ensure that future is rich in social capital and so, too, in compassion and the social responsibility that engenders it.

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

[i] Bott’s survey was initially introduced exclusively to his own Facebook fans; my name was used in its introduction and very likely prejudiced the responses provided; in an attempt to get a less-skewed result, Bott subsequently sent it to presbyteries across the country, many of which refused to forward it to clergy without permission to do so; the end result of the survey’s process meant that it had almost no statistical validity.

Interview with Kristine Klopp – Assistant State Director, American Atheists Alabama

January 14, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Kristine Klopp is the Assistant State Director of American Atheists Alabama. Here we talk about her work, life, and view.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you?

Kristine Klopp: I was born in Canada and raised secular. We did not go to church, we did not pray, and religion was not a part of our lives.

I suppose at an early age there was an underlying assumption that we all believed in God, and may have made casual references about ‘him’, but that was the extent of religion in my early life.

Well, that, and ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ every morning in my public school. I chose to attend a Catholic high school, as it was a new school with a good academic reputation. That decision changed my life and my identity forever.

Jacobsen: How were religion and faith influential on you if at all?

Klopp: It was while I attended that Catholic school that I realized I did not buy into any of it, and that was the first time I realized I was an atheist.

The more I learned about and experienced religion, the more distaste I felt about it. I was still living in Canada at this point, so religion did not affect my life. Then I moved to Huntsville, Alabama, and the culture shock set in.

Jacobsen: How does religion around the world, and in your locale in Alabama, appear to receive special privileges in the upbringing the young?

Klopp: Religion demands and receives special privileges in everything it touches. It starts with newborns; religious daycare centers do not have to follow the same state regulations and licensing requirements the public daycare facilities must follow, despite receiving federal and state subsidies.

A five-year-old boy died in August 2017 in the care of a religious daycare in my city; his body found within a mile from my home due to negligent screening and no background check of a worker with a criminal record.

I wonder just how many children have been hurt by the lack of regulations and licensing in these facilities. As of this past summer, Christianity is working to wiggle their way into Alabama schools with “In God We Trust” displays.

What was once considered a violation of separation of church and state is now acceptable after the US determined “In God We Trust” to be our ‘national motto’.

Jacobsen: How did you find and become more deeply involved in American Atheists Alabama?

Klopp: I became aware of American Atheists when I became a member of the North Alabama Freethought Association (NAFA) while living in Huntsville. Through that group, I began to attend American Atheists conventions and connected with the message AA delivered.

I moved to Mobile and worked with others to develop Mobile Atheist Community. I was recommended as an Assistant State Director, and have held this position for a little over a year.

Jacobsen: Does an open voicing of non-religious opinions impact social and familial relationships for the individual in Alabama?

Klopp: Greatly. Unfortunately, Alabama is one of the most conservative and religious states in the US. Mobile Atheist Community has a public facebook page, but we also have a private group.

Many of our members have not and cannot ‘come out’ as an atheist to their employer or their family for fear of backlash. We encourage people to ‘come out’ when they can (the more known atheists, the more ‘normal’ atheism is), but we also understand people’s concern and fear.

Some of our members have lost relationships with family, and I have known some atheists that have lost their jobs by ‘coming out’.

Our group serves as an outlet for our members to tell stories, ask advice, post humorous memes, and find support from each other. My goal is that we will make the world a little better in the process.

Religion is so entrenched in the deep south ‘Bible Belt’, that it surrounds us when we are at work, with family, with friends, driving down the road (billboards), listening to the local radio stations, watching the local news, in our mail, and churches are everywhere we look.

The good news is that the statistics are on our side! Our numbers are growing, and the younger generation is comprised of a higher number of atheists than any other generation. This gives us hope that we will see positive changes in our lifetime.

Jacobsen: What books have been influential in personal philosophical life for you? What about films or documentaries?

Klopp: My major in my undergrad studies was Psychology, and those books were highly influential for me. One of my classes was ‘Motivation’ and it focused on how humans behave based on evolution and primitive drives.

That class may have started my love of evolution. As a typical atheist, I am working through my library of Dawkins and Hitchens (among others) books. Religulous was the first documentary about religion that I watched, and it may have influenced me to embrace my atheism and see the ridiculousness that is religion.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on some of the concerning developments in fundamentalist religions in the US, what trouble you? Who troubles you?

Klopp: Most troubling for me might be public school systems educating our children about creationism rather than actual science and evolution. Another major concern is politicians using religion to influence their decisions about policies and laws affecting everybody in this country.

There are too many individuals to list, but the Republican party has proudly put religion before the constitution time after time. And, of course, our current president encourages such violations of church and state.

Jacobsen: How has religion been a force for good in history? How has it been a force for evil in history?

Klopp: I don't feel that religion has been a force for good in history in any way, and I believe it has been the root cause for hate, divisiveness, destruction, and war. My father (a non-practicing Christian), argues that religion is vital for some people to do the right things.

My argument is that a person will or will not do 'good' or 'bad' things regardless of their religion, especially when their religion tells them if they pray and ask for forgiveness for their sins, they will get a pass and go to heaven.

I also point out the mass numbers of priest (and other church leader) pedophiles that the church covers up. My argument is that without religion, people would face the reality that this is the only life we have; that we need to enjoy it, and not take it for granted.

Jacobsen: What are some of the provisions for the community through American Atheists Alabama? How can folks become involved with the wider non-religious community, e.g., donations, volunteering time and skills, providing professional networks, and so on?

Klopp: American Atheists has created a list of affiliate groups in each city so that people can find local groups near them by going to the www.americanatheists.org website. They welcome any donations!

AA has also created a program for us Assistant Directors and Directors to implement in our local areas. We offer activism, community service, education and social events. There is enough variety to provide something for everybody to get involved!

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

Klopp: Thank you, Scott!

Interview with Rick O’Keefe – Branch Manager, Center for Inquiry Tampa Bay & Chair, Tampa Bay Skeptics

January 15, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Rick O’Keefe is the Branch Manager of Center for Inquiry Tampa Bay, Chair of the Tampa Bay Skeptics, and works with Tampa Bay Post Carbon Council. Here we talk about skepticism and the electronic era, and Florida.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Looking at the landscape of bad science and junk science within Tampa Bay, what have been the main concerns of the skeptic community in Florida?

Rick O’Keefe: Your question seems vague. You ask about Tampa Bay as well as concerns about skeptic communities outside the bay region. I’m defining skeptics as those interested in the paranormal and pseudoscience.

The dedicated skeptic community in Florida seems to be almost non-existent, fragmented, and very local, mostly social. Many groups included “skeptic” as part of their humanist or atheist identities, but don’t appear to be notable for any concentration on skepticism outside their locales.

Because of the history of Tampa Bay Skeptics (TBS) in publicly testing people who claimed paranormal powers but failed to prove them, the number of testees has dried up.

Jacobsen: How is skepticism important in the electronic era?

O’Keefe: I think it is clear that skeptical thinking skills are sorely lacking. That leads to the rapid widespread embrace of spreading real fake news. Sadly, most who claim to be skeptics aren’t. (Yes, I confess to having fallen prey to some fake news on Facebook or Twitter!)

Jacobsen: Have there been any wins in the fight against pseudoscience and alternative medicine practices, recently?

O’Keefe: Tampa Bay Skeptics is an affiliate of Center for Inquiry Tampa Bay, a branch of the worldwide CFI and Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science.

While the local scene is moribund other than about Global Warming and its possible effects on coastal inundation, and teaching religious propaganda in schools rather than science (evolution, for example), TBS does support larger efforts such as the statewide Florida Citizens for Science, Quackwatch, CFI’s lawsuit against CVS (selling worthless homeopathic nostrums), Letters to the Editor, occasional puff pieces when called by reporters around Halloween or about crazy claims.

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?

O’Keefe: The Internet is enemy #1 – both social media and fake-news/propaganda/hoax sites. Religious anti-science groups might be #2. They are well organized, fanatical, and hugely financed. (Look at the federal government current crop of appointees.)

Not to ignore primarily right-wing anti-science propaganda, leftie propagandists, antivaxxers, flat earth, ancient aliens, Atlantis True Believers.

Americans are so undereducated in both thinking skills and facts, thus gullible, that our diminishing competence to compete with other more vigorous and rigorous nations has become dangerous.

I see nothing humorous about seemingly laughable examples because they illustrate our incapacities.

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

O’Keefe: It has been said that if one presents the truth often enough, the misled will come around to realizing their error.

I tend to doubt that. Brain science seems to have soundly demonstrated that instinct and the subconscious mind govern our behavior, and that the “rational” mind almost always rationalizes decisions implementing the incessant demands of the subconscious.

Bluntly, if young children aren’t taught the fundamentals of skeptical thinking and the truth about our world, then there will be no solution. I haven’t seen any of our programs/lectures sway doubters or even attract people wanting to cast off ignorance. We mostly “preach to the choir.”

Jacobsen: How can folks become involved in Tampa Bay Skeptics and its efforts to reduce the level of junk thinking in Tampa Bay?

O’Keefe: Contact us, volunteer, pay the paltry membership fee, and show some leadership!

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

O’Keefe: Same old, same old. Increasing ignorance worries me.

A bit of history: Founded in 1988 by Gary P. Posner, M.D., Tampa Bay Skeptics is a nonprofit educational and scientific organization devoted to the critical examination of paranormal and fringe-science claims, and the dissemination of factual information about such claims. TBS’s \$1,000 Challenge — Whenever possible, TBS attempts to put claims to the test.

A Compendium of Fact-finding Sites

A resource compiled by [Center for Inquiry Tampa Bay](#) and [Tampa Bay Skeptics](#).

Thanks for assistance from “Doc” Dockery, [Tampa Bay Technology Center](#).

Critical Thinkers Evaluation Tools

Learning how to evaluate what you read, view, and hear is an essential skill set for your academic and personal life

[CRAAP Test](#)

Use it to evaluate all kinds of information and to determine if a source is appropriate and credible.

[BEAM Method](#)

How to use different types of sources in your writing.

Ten Questions for Fake News Detection — from The News Literacy Project

Answering these questions can help you evaluate the credibility of all types of sources.

Evaluating a News Article: an Eight Point Checklist — from EasyBib

Simple checklist to help you identify “fake” news. The same principles can also be used to evaluate websites and social media.

“Fact or Fiction?” Checklist — from CQ Researcher

News Quality Graphic with Bias Notes

Categorized news sources by degrees of conservative and liberal bias. (Take with a grain of salt.)

Website Evaluator

Interactive tool produced by EasyBib. Just paste the website address into the search bar and wait for the evaluation screen to appear. Answer the questions in the right column.

Verification Tools for Social Media

Websites to help you verify identities, places, images, and other factors.

Thanks to Middle Tennessee State University, James E. Walker Library

<http://bit.ly/2GxrhqZ>

Fact Check Resources

<https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/> and <https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/fact-check-resources/>— “The purpose of these is not only to deliver news, but to also be a resource on media bias and fact checking. When checking facts these are the 10 sites we find to be most valuable. In most cases, one of these sites has already covered the fact check we are seeking, making the job easy. Listed below you will find our favorite (most trusted) fact checking websites. Bookmark them or just visit [MBFC News](#) and we will filter them for you.”

PolitiFact– PolitiFact is a fact-checking website that rates the accuracy of claims by elected officials and others who speak up in American politics. PolitiFact is run by editors and reporters from the Tampa Bay Times, an independent newspaper in Florida. PolitiFact is simply the best source for political fact checking. Won the Pulitzer Prize.

Fact Check– FactCheck.org is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. They are a nonpartisan, nonprofit “consumer advocate” for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics. They monitor the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews and news releases. Fact Check is similar to PolitiFact in their coverage and they provide excellent details. The only drawback is they lack the simplicity of PolitiFact.

Open Secrets– Open Secrets is a nonpartisan, independent and nonprofit, run by the Center for Responsive Politics, which is the nation’s premier research group tracking money in U.S. politics and its effect on elections and public policy. Open Secrets are by far the best source for discovering how much and where candidates get their money. They also track lobbying groups and whom they are funding.

Snopes— Snopes has been the definitive Internet reference source for urban legends, folklore, myths, rumors, and misinformation for a long time. Snopes is also usually the first to report the facts.

The Sunlight Foundation— The Sunlight Foundation is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that uses the tools of civic tech, open data, policy analysis and journalism to make our government and politics more accountable and transparent to all. Sunlight primarily focuses on money's role in politics.

Poynter Institute— The Poynter Institute is not a true fact checking service. They are however a leader in distinguished journalism and produce nothing but credible and evidence based content. If Poynter reports it, you can count on it being true.

Flack Check— Headquartered at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, FlackCheck.org is the political literacy companion site to the award-winning FactCheck.org. The site provides resources designed to help viewers recognize flaws in arguments in general and political ads in particular.

Truth or Fiction— Very similar to Snopes. They tend to focus more on political rumors and hoaxes.

Hoax Slayer— Another service that debunks or validates internet rumors and hoaxes.

Fact Checker by the Washington Post— The Washington Post has a very clear left-center bias and this is reflected in their fact checks. Their fact checks are excellent and sourced; however, their bias is reflected in the fact that they fact check right wing claims more than left. Otherwise the Washington Post is a good resource.

Vote Smart and Vote Easy— which are the best and most thorough non-partisan analyses of politicians and their actual positions. While Vote Smart isn't a factcheck org, it does get to the facts that politicians can't hide from. Truly, "Vote smart, or vote stupid".

Quackwatch—Quackwatch is now an international network of people who are concerned about health-related frauds, myths, fads, fallacies, and misconduct. Its primary focus is on quackery-related information that is difficult or impossible to get elsewhere. This site maintains a large compendium of information. (Quackwatch is an affiliate of Center for Inquiry)

health fraud and quackery	http://www.quackwatch.org
guide to questionable theories and practices	http://www.allergywatch.org
skeptical guide to acupuncture history, theories, and practices	http://www.acuwatch.org
guide to autism	http://www.autism-watch.org
guide to intelligent treatment	http://www.cancertreatmentwatch.org
legal archive	http://www.casewatch.org
chelation therapy	http://www.chelationwatch.org

skeptical guide to chiropractic history, theories, and practices	http://www.chirobase.org
guide to health-related education and training	http://www.credentialwatch.org
guide to dental care	http://www.dentalwatch.org
guide to questionable medical devices	http://www.devicewatch.org
guide to weight-control schemes and rip-offs	http://www.dietscam.org
guide to the fibromyalgia marketplace	http://www.fibrowatch.org
guide to homeopathy	http://www.homeowatch.org
guide to trustworthy health information	http://www.ihealthpilot.org
guide to an equitable health-care system	http://www.insurancereformwatch.org
guide to infomercials	http://www.infomercialwatch.org
guide to the mental help marketplace	http://www.mentalhealthwatch.org
multi-level marketing	http://www.mlmwatch.org
skeptical guide to naturopathic history, theories, and practices	http://www.naturowatch.org
activities of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM)	http://www.nccamwatch.org
nutrition facts and fallacies	http://www.nutriwatch.org
guide to the drug marketplace and lower prices	http://www.pharmwatch.org
National Council Against Health Fraud archive	http://www.ncahf.org
guide to telemarketing scams	http://www.stop-robocalls.org
consumer health sourcebook	http://www.chsourcebook.com

Editor, Consumer Health Digest <http://www.quackwatch.org/00AboutQuackwatch/chd.html>

Conclusion– A good fact checking service will write with neutral wording and will provide unbiased sources to support their claims. Look for these two simple criteria when hunting for the facts. Happy hunting!

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

Interview with David Kelley – Board Member At Large, Sunday Assembly Seacoast

January 16, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

David Kelley is a Board Member At Large for Sunday Assembly Seacoast. Here we talk about godless assembling.

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

David Kelley: I grew up in a middle class neighborhood near Dayton, Ohio. My mother is an atheist and my father is a Christian. I consider myself fortunate that my father never tried to indoctrinate me. As a result, I grew up in a house without religion. Most of my extended family are Christian but they had no influence on me because I did not live near them.

Jacobsen: What were some of the pivotal moments or educational lessons in being guided to a more godless worldview?

Kelley: I have always been an atheist since religion was not present in my household and I was never interested in religion growing up. My current concerns about religion are based on the realization that religion and other forms of magical thinking cause suffering for many. In particular, I began listening to podcasts in which ex-Christians and ex-Muslims tell their stories. From hearing their struggles, I've come to believe that basing our beliefs on rationality gives us our best chance to prosper.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the godless congregations and community?

Kelley: I first heard about Sunday Assembly from a podcast. I then found the local chapter by searching for Sunday Assembly online.

Jacobsen: When did the Sunday Assembly become an integrated part of communal life for you? How did this simply click more than others, e.g., traditional religious ones or the secular online sphere, for you?

Kelley: After moving to the Seacoast area I became interested in making some social connections. Among other things, I looked into a Unitarian Church since they accept atheists. While I found the Unitarian Church welcoming, it was clear that they embraced magical thinking. I also didn't find the services to be very engaging since much of the time was spent sitting in the pews listening to people talk at me. By contrast, Sunday Assembly Seacoast is thoroughly reason-based and the services are interactive with a chance to express my opinion on the topic of the month.

Jacobsen: What can regular attendees of Sunday Assembly Seacoast expect on their delightfully godless Sunday congregation time?

Kelley: Sunday Assembly Seacoast shares much in common with church services in that we have a mixture of sing-along music and speakers. Speakers are typically chosen to give insights into what it means to live life well. What makes us a bit special is that our services are designed

to be interactive so attendees have a chance to share. We also recognize that not everyone will want to share so we never pressure people to do so.

Jacobsen: What are the approximate demographics of Sunday Assembly Seacoast?

Kelley: Racially our demographics reflect the predominantly Caucasian makeup of our area. By gender we are about 50/50. For religious background, most members were Christian at some point in their lives.

Jacobsen: Who are some allies in building a successful secular and godless community?

Kelley: We are a non-profit organization run by volunteers, so our biggest allies are those volunteers. Without them we would not exist. The owner of Sanctuary Arts, where we have our meetings, is also a great ally for allowing us to use her space.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in the Sunday Assembly Seacoast community?

Kelley: Sunday Assembly Seacoast has services every second Sunday of the month at Sanctuary Arts in Eliot, Maine. A great way to get involved is to show up and check out what we are doing. We can also be found online on Facebook and Meetup.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more recent updates happening for 2019 for Sunday Assembly Seacoast? What are some real threats to the safety and communal wellness of Sunday Assembly Seacoast if any?

Kelley: We have started to look into ways to grow our community. I've found that there are plenty of secular people in the area that haven't heard of us. If we can correct that, we'll be in a position to make great contributions to the community. As far as threats are concerned, I don't believe we have anything to worry about. Our area is reasonably accepting of atheism.

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

Kelley: I thank you for your interest in Sunday Assembly Seacoast. I hope more groups like ours form in the near future.

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

Interview with Chris – Administrator, “Humans for Science, Reason and Humanism”

January 17, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Chris is the Administrator of “Humans for Science, Reason and Humanism.” Here we talk about the page.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: “Humans for Science, Reason and Humanism,” why found it/administrate for it?

Chris: It is mostly a hobby and interest actually. As a kid, I’ve always been into books. I love learning about the discoveries and tales in the sciences and history.

By college, I learned how to properly vet valid and reliable news which, recently, has been increasingly blurred and mixed, online, with a lot of fake news and misinformation.

At first, I started sharing a lot of articles on my facebook wall. But this annoyed my followers (friends, relatives and acquaintances). I even learned that some of my cousins unfollowed me because they considered my posts to be an act of spamming. There was just so much to be shared. So I took a long hiatus from sharing stuff online.

However, as time passed, I kept seeing more and more people peddling all sorts of rubbish online and I thought to myself, “How much harm do fake news and misinformation actually cause the world?”

As an educator and someone who values what is true, I couldn’t just sit idly by as people spread around a whole lot of nonsense. So I instead created this page, Humans for Science, Reason and Humanism.

The goal was always to counter the wide variety of misinformation by actually providing people with legitimate and credible information on the most recent issues and topics in the frontiers of science and matters related to human welfare.

My page has been slowly growing since I first started. As much as I would like to commit myself full-time to the page, there are responsibilities in my personal life though, so it still largely remains a hobby project for me. Hearing from followers who welcome my efforts have always been a motivation to keep it up, though.

Jacobsen: What is its scope of operation?

Chris: Updates on the latest news in the various scientific fields are the usual articles I share in the page. The articles have to be from legitimate scientific sources like museums, universities and colleges, reliable science pages and sites online and the like.

Humanist pages are also part of that. I wish to write more about my thoughts on the articles, and indeed, that was how it used to be, but it was time consuming and I usually lacked the time.

So I started posting the articles with hashtags. It was all well, but I received messages that they couldn’t open the articles using only their phone data. A friend of mine, Ana Swift, recommended that I include the contents of the article itself so that people who can’t open the articles can at least read the contents.

This has been the scope of operations so far. Though I have several other ideas which I hope I could give time to. I am currently eager to have people help me grow the page and its mission to spread awareness – like a science and humanism online newspaper platform.

Jacobsen: What tend to be the demographics of the audience?

Chris: So far, the demographics show a majority of Filipinos following the page along with others from outside the country. The primary language used by the majority of followers are from the English speaking community. But I've seen non-English countries too like Russia and Germany and such.

Jacobsen: How is this important in terms of gearing the material for the audience?

Chris: English is the current lingual medium of Science. As such, the articles are all in English. The material has always been my set of interests; like physics, astrophysics, cosmology, space exploration and technological development, archaeology, and more, plus humanism.

Hopefully, if more team-members can be gathered, the scope of material would diversify. But the main thing is that the articles have to be scientifically valid and reliable.

Other than articles, the page is also a good source of informative videos like documentaries, lectures, discussions and debates relevant to the main topics.

Jacobsen: Why science? Why reason? Why humanism?

Chris: Science is the entire scope of human knowledge – to date. It's what keeps our civilization moving forward. Reason is the human capacity to think and use the knowledge we've gathered to improve our survivability and sophistication as a society.

Humanism is the emphasis on the value and agency of human beings. If we are to live together in mutual benefit to each other and grant ourselves the right to spread out across the stars as a species, we first need to live in harmony with ourselves and our environment.

Together, these three major ideas and systems constitute the progressive mission of humanity as a whole. Knowledge guides our understanding, wisdom guides our reasoning and empathy guides our humanity.

Jacobsen: How are these important for a secular and fulfilling life? How do these inform the content of the Facebook page?

Chris: Secularism is the idea that protects the rights, freedoms and liberties of individuals everywhere. It prevents the overarching power of religions from becoming too powerful.

The main problem is the common folk in society nowadays is the inability of the masses to properly vet their news sources. Established mass media has long been infested with propaganda and drama to the point that, established academics as well has been under fire with claims of "hoaxes", "illuminati", "fakes", "propaganda", etc.

One need only look at the anti-vax, climate change denial and flat-earth movements to see what I mean. Some have even claimed that "education" is unnecessary while, at the same time, uneducated opinions gain more traction due to its ridiculously grandiose claims that catch the imaginations and emotions of the unweary individual.

I find this alarmingly appalling. For me, the attacks on secularism globally can be attributed to these increasingly inept kinds of mentality. I still believe that a proper scientific education can solve the major problems and issues plaguing humanity.

If social media can spread and propagate bad news, it can also be used to spread the truth, and that is what the page is focused on.

Jacobsen: How can people maybe become involved with it? Can they offer any skills to help you out?

Chris: I am open to people volunteering actually. The workload isn't too difficult, just passion and interest and a preponderance for truth and accuracy. This is all volunteer work though, so if anybody is interested, just send the page a message. It is most appreciated!

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings and conclusion?

Chris: I'm glad the page has garnered attention. I wish more people would follow or like my page, it really means a lot. Let's help spread real news about the great achievements and questions that the best of huumanity has to offer.

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

Interview with Bakari Chavanu – Administrator, “Black Humanists and Non-Believers of Sacramento”

January 18, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Bakari Chavanu is the Administrator of “Black Humanists and Non-Believers of Sacramento. Here we talk about Chavanu’s life, views on humanism, and administrative work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did religion and secular thinking come into early life for you? How did this continue throughout development, in brief?

Bakari Chavanu: I was raised in a Baptist church, and I attended services on a regular basis until about age 16.

Jacobsen: What differences manifest in African-American Humanism compared to much of the European-American Humanism, including the over-representation of higher SES, higher education, and Caucasian males in the community? How can we bridge those divides more for better community integration?

Chavanu: I think African-American humanism puts a focus more on issues of social justice, and a respect culture. But because religion and God-belief are so deeply ingrained in American culture it is very difficult to have much-needed discussions about the role that religion plays in African-American communities.

However, I do get a sense that young African-American people are willing to more critically examine the religious claims and their impact on society. Personally, however, I think in many communities White atheists and humanists might have a difficult time connecting with the African American community around these issues, and that’s why BHNBS was formed.

Jacobsen: How can we include more women and people of color into the broader secular community?

Chavanu: I think you can include more women and people of color by inviting them to your events and asking them to share their thoughts and experiences in platforms like this one.

But it is important that White atheists and humanists not take a paternalistic role with comes to women and people of color. There is nothing wrong with building solidarity around certain issues, but we do not need “guidance” from the White secular community.

Jacobsen: What fears and hopes seem relevant to consider for the secular community moving into 2019?

Chavanu: I am not sure about the fears, but I do feel hopeful that more people are speaking out about their atheism, and some of us in the secular community understand that humanism and social justice are even more important as society moves away from religious claims and dogma.

Humanism and social justice should be the moral framework for how we develop a more just society and respect for one another.

Jacobsen: How is religion a positive? How is religion a negative?

Chavanu: In terms of how religion is positive, we have historically seen that, especially in the Black community, the positive role that religion has played in bringing the community together, and sometimes has been a force against racial injustice and an advocate of civil rights.

Religion used to provide a sort of moral grounding for society, but I think that is no longer the case. I view religion as very negative and dangerous for modern society because it distorts reality and promotes false claims.

I am especially concerned about its impact on young African-American children and youth.

I do not think young people should be taught mystical claims about the evolution of the universe, the planet, and the human race.

Young people should be taught to think rationally and critically with a serious respect for humanity, other animals, and the environment in general.

Jacobsen: You are an administrator for Black Humanists and Non-Believers of Sacramento. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position? What are the organizations ongoing activities and objectives?

Chavanu: Our group mainly exists via Meetup.com, and given our small capacity, we mainly focus on setting up the literature tables at local events where a significant number of African-American people will attend, such as the Martin Luther King Expo and the Black Book Fair in Sacramento.

Our group was formed to let others know that Black atheists, nonbelievers, and humanists do exist. And we want to be a space for non-believers to come and find friendship and support.

Jacobsen: How can folks become involved with you?

Chavanu: By registering on Meetup.com and following our group: <https://www.meetup.com/bhnb-sacramento/>.

Jacobsen: What are some activities online and in-person for the secular Sacramento community?

Chavanu: Though we are present on Facebook, we have not yet built a website for our group. But we do hold a monthly breakfast, a quarterly book club discussion, and we set up the literature tables at African-American events.

We also support other groups and events, such as the annual Free Thought Day in Sacramento.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Chavanu: Thank you for this interview. I think is very important that we keep shaping the narrative about atheism and humanism, and that we seriously call into question religious claims and dogma

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

Interview with Frances Coombe – President, South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society

January 19, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Frances Coombes is the President of the South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society. Here we talk about euthanasia with some personal background.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you, e.g., geography, culture, language, religion or lack thereof, education, and family structure and dynamics?

Frances Coombe: I was very fortunate to have a stable and happy early life – an only child born post war 1953, father (born in Australia) served in the navy during the war on a small minesweeper ship, mother migrated from England 1951 as a 10 pound Pom & she had lived through the Blitz in London during the war repairing fire hoses.

Our family lived a financially comfortable life but my father did work overtime to secure this – my mother stopped work when she married. Only the English language spoken at home. My father was a gentle and learned man, my mother more outgoing.

They both had a respectful & loving family relationship, also pursuing their own interests – my father as a boilermaker at the local railway workshops, had a welding machine at home & he made about 13 trailers & 3 boat trailers over his lifetime, many crabbing tubs + many other bits & pieces.

My mother did voluntary work within the community. I taught 5-7 years old for 10 years b4 having my own 3 children. I am, when feeling cynical an Atheist:] & otherwise agnostic – I couldn't care less about religion but I am very concerned at its predominant interest in oppressing & suppressing people; in its worst form a true weapon of mass destruction!

Jacobsen: What levels of formal education have been part of life for you? How have you informally self-educated, been an autodidact?

Coombe: I completed a Diploma of primary education after completing year 12. I have read widely, attended conferences & learned many skills from people I was fortunate to have as mentors.

Jacobsen: I see a few different terms and phrases floating around now: euthanasia, right to die, and dying with dignity. How do these differ from one another? How do these relate to one another?

Coombe: They are all related – the word euthanasia has been sullied through the WW2 Nazi so called euthanasia programme so mostly it has been dropped in favour of softer & less confrontational, marketable terms.

SAVES retains the words as we have supported about 14 VE Bills in Parl't since 1995 & the term is well known & accepted here.

Jacobsen: What makes for a proper context and consideration of the human right to bodily autonomy at the time of death, its context and moment?

Coombe: The prime factor is that VE is a person's decision in face of unrelievable suffering from a hopeless illness.

It is not for anyone to make this choice but the suffering person themselves. Consideration must acknowledge that there is a minority of people who cannot be helped by even optimal medical & palliative care (PC) – here in Aust the Austn Medical Assocn & Palliative Care Aust do acknowledge this but then effectively abandon these people by opposing VE.

The latter body is reconsidering this stance, mainly due to the fact that the Victorian State law is to be active this June 2019. It has said that they are considering a recent report showing that PC continues to thrive in Belgium, Netherlands & Oregon but there has been such evidence for some years now, which they have ignored, so I am of the opinion that the Victorian legn is causing some urgency in their rethink!

Context & consideration is also enshrined in Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.'

Jacobsen: How did you come to be interested or intrigued and then active in the euthanasia movement?

Coombe: When I realised that death is not as depicted in movies but can be in realty hard, cruel & protracted.

I was also intrigued in that my parents had joined SAVES & they were not really joiners – my mother being only a member of an animal welfare group & my father being a member of the local football club.

Jacobsen: How did you find the South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society?

Coombe: Through my parents.

Jacobsen: What tasks and responsibilities come with the leadership position, as the President of SAVES?

Coombe: Public speaking, fostering a team spirit of trust, co-operation & appreciation, setting an example of these qualities & being diligent in my own work. I think it is important as a leader to be respectful & considerate.

This of course extends to relations with Members of Parliament (MPs). SAVES works very closely with our MPs. It is also vital that a leader is not be threatened by new ideas.

Jacobsen: What are the main concerns, legally and socially, of the euthanasia movement and SAVES within South Australia now?

Coombe: SAVES is a law reform movement & as such does not get involved in helping people end their own lives. This would be illegal & counterproductive. To get a Bill passed in Parliament we need to be very separate from Dr. Nitschke who does provide such assistance.

This is not to say we are against him – he provides the help people need now while we work to change the law. When we are staffing our information displays in public it is important that we are seen to be knowledgeable & respectful.

Jacobsen: How are euthanasia activists and organizations misrepresented? Who are they misrepresented by, typically? What truths dispel those myths?

Coombe: Misrepresentation mainly occurs from institutions & individuals that have an extremist religious outlook. This occurs through lies & deception, emotional wording such as “killing”, deliberate fear mongering.

SAVES is an evidence based body – we base our information on research & both government & academic reports – see the newsletters we give to all SA MPs each Parlt sitting week – 71 to date <https://www.saves.asn.au/newsletters>.

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

Coombe: It is important to acknowledge that a majority of Christians have long supported legalising VE, see <https://christiansforve.org.au>

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

Coombe: You’re welcome Scott – thank you for your work in helping secure a secular, rational world.

Ask Mandisa 14 – Writing Grants for Non-Profits

January 20, 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 grants for non-profits.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You went about filling some forms for grants, for financial assistance. How does this relate to the work of Black Nonbelievers, Inc.?

Mandisa Thomas: Yes, the grant is through the Soros Foundation. The name of the grant is the Soros Equality Fellowship, which is focused on racial justice. One of the members of Black Nonbelievers, Inc. forwarded the grant to me. She saw relevance to the organization, especially with racial justice and what we are fighting for within our demographic.

I previously considered applying for grants through the organization. It is possible, still, to do, but it has helped me with writing grants for the future. I will have some experience. Another member is a grant writer. She also helped with the project for me.

I am very appreciative for it.

Jacobsen: What are the difficulties that come along with completing a grant oriented either racial justice or secular activism?

Thomas: The writing tends to be one of the most daunting tasks. You must, first, look at the specifications on the application. You must make sure that you follow them to the letter. Also, it is important to look at the organization or foundation offering the grant.

It is making sure that what you are proposing is also what they are looking to fund. It is to make sure the language through the application fits the specifications and the directions. Even one small misstep could cause you to be rejected, it can be very time consuming and writing can be very daunting.

I think those are some of the challenges with it. It is the time commitment. It is also filling out the form and following the process properly.

Jacobsen: How does this detract from resources or other efforts of an organization such as yours?

Thomas: Of course, I would have to put some tasks to the side for the time being to focus on the grant. It is important to bear in mind. I have family and other responsibilities outside of the organization. I am completing this project at the same time.

It is trying to maximize my time to manage it correctly does play an important part. I tend to be a decent writer. Also, because I have had practice, it has helped with the grant writing process. I am having to multi-task, a bit better. I am having to prioritize what I do while I work on this project.

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

Thomas: Thank you!

Interview with Dr. Tung LAM, CBE – Medical Law Consultant & Honorary Inaugural Obama Foundation Fellow

January 21, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Mr. Tung LAM, CBE, is a Medical Law Consultant (end of life issues) of the Eternity Living Life Company Limited in Hong Kong, Chief Executive-Select of HKSAR, and an Inaugural Obama Foundation Fellow. He was a Foundation Ambassador in Hong Kong at Sentebale Charity Foundation by HRH The Duke of Sussex Prince Harry of England. He earned the award of Organizing for Action Community Engagement Fellowship (September 2018). Here we talk about end of life issues.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you, e.g. geography, culture, language, religion or lack thereof, education, and family structure and dynamics?

Tung LAM: I was born in China but my parents are actually Malaysian Born Chinese who returned to China during their early childhood. I was under strong influence of western culture since a lot of my family members are Christians and I became a Christian during early life of my study but the religious background I used to be is not going to affect my medical law practice because, as I mentioned many times in my social media, many religious groups including Lutheranism, Evangelism, and Presbyterianism endorsed end of life issue which includes euthanasia. Not to mention I emigrated from China to Hong Kong in 1987 and I am always under the strong influence of western culture in Hong Kong afterwards. I master three languages including spoken and written English, spoken and written Chinese that are Cantonese and Mandarin. I received my mainstream education in Hong Kong from primary school to medical school education and they are all instructed in English during the lessons. After my divorce, I am very close to my family members (father, mother and elder brother) because they are the only relatives I had in Hong Kong right now.

Jacobsen: What levels of formal education have been part of life for you? How have you informally self-educated?

LAM: All of my qualifications including my fellowships (Honorary Inaugural Obama Foundation Fellowship, Honorary Organizing for Action Fellowship and Organizing for Action Community Engagement Fellowship) are formal education with formal endorsement from the relevant authorities but most of these fellowships are political education instead of education of knowledge. As you know, medical law in end of life issue on Advance Directive and Voluntary Active Euthanasia involves drafting a lot legal and political policies and, from my perspective, they are the main considerations to execute the medical law practice. After obtaining my political fellowships and becoming the Medical Law Consultant in end of life issue of my company, I received continued medical education (CME) from some internationally renowned journals that are Global Bioethics and Springer Ethics. My blogs and promotional materials were quoted by a number of third party organizations due to their recognition of my position as the only Medical Law Consultant in end of life issue in Asia.

Jacobsen: For those with more in-depth information on your story, they can look into the references provided at the end of the interview. As you were a very bright student and entered into Medical Law, and as you experience several angering and difficult setbacks in professional posts, how was the focus of former American President Barack Obama on end of life issues critical to personal interest and professional involvement in Medical Law?

LAM: I do obtain an outstanding performance during my undergraduate medical school years and that includes the Scholarship for exchange to National University of Singapore and it is a very prominent university in Asia. I believe every event in your life, no matter it is good or bad, will bring positive energy into your life and those negative events are the triggering point for me to enter the field of Medical Law in end of life issue. These issues are originated from the West and they are really very fresh ideas in Asian culture and I can say, before me, no one touches on it in Greater China or probably even among many other Asian countries. This is a very important point why I get in touch with President Barack Obama who is the first African American US President. He is renowned for his acceptance to cultures from different ethnic backgrounds and he is the first American President who openly established his own Advance Directive. Everything starts with my contact with his campaign committee and everything starts with his first reply letter to me. With his continued support and endorsement of my work in Medical Law of end of life issue, I became endorsed Medical Law Consultant in end of life issue and fellows of his organizations. Together with the support of His Royal Highness The Duke of Sussex Prince Harry of England, I received the Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for my contribution in this field. President Barack Obama even made the suggestion for me to become the Chief Executive of Hong Kong and this suggestion was made to President Xi of China in 2017. Prince Harry and I had a mutual understanding to select me as the first Foundation Ambassador in Hong Kong at his Sentebale Charity Foundation. We had private communication during those days.

Jacobsen: How does Medical Law, typically, view end of life issues?

LAM: End of life issue is an inseparable part of Medical Law. Advance Directive and Voluntary Active Euthanasia are integral to the development of end of life issue.

Jacobsen: What are the options available for those with little in the way of personal savings in terms of choices at the end of life?

LAM: This is a tricky question. Since I am practicing Medical Law in the jurisdiction of Hong Kong, I can only answer you based on the current legal framework of Hong Kong's legal system. Voluntary Active Euthanasia is currently illegal in Hong Kong by the virtue of the provisions in the Offences Against the Person Ordinance (Cap 212) but its public education is protected by the freedom of speech under Article 27 of Basic Law. We do not provide person-to-person consultation on this issue.

Jacobsen: What is Advance Directive?

LAM: The Advance Directive is classified into instructional directive (a living will) which usually comprises of instructions about what kind of life-sustaining treatments that a patient wishes to endorse when he/she becomes mentally incapacitated under specified circumstances. It is legally bound in Hong Kong. A proxy directive expresses the patient's wish to appoint another person (proxy, surrogate, or representative), usually a family member, to make health care

decisions on his/her behalf when he/she becomes mentally incapacitated under specified circumstances.

Jacobsen: What is Voluntary Active Euthanasia?

LAM: It is defined as the direct act (such as feeding of lethal medication through gastrostomy tube) and intentional killing of a person as part of the medical care being offered at the voluntary request of the patient.

Jacobsen: As the Honorary Inaugural Obama Foundation Fellow, Honorary Organizing for Action Fellow, and a Medical Law Consultant, what do you see as the important ethical and political questions to take into consideration for the right to die, euthanasia, dying with dignity, or medical assistance in dying?

LAM: The only question is we need to implement them in real but I had tried to influence the Hong Kong government to get involved in the legislation of relevant policies and I had made personal contact with several previous Chief Executives of Hong Kong that are TUNG Chee Hwa, Donald Tsang, CY Leung, and Carrie Lam. They all dare not to step into the relevant formal legislation. First Former Chief Executive TUNG Chee Hwa is the only one agreed to support me in person. With the suggestion and endorsement from President Barack Obama and with the support from President Donald Trump, I shall take part in the Chief Executive election and I am fully eligible. This is currently the only way to initiate everything in the formal endorsement of Medical Law practice in end of life issue in Hong Kong. As I announced on the Chief Executive election statement, I will incorporate the new medical law system into the current legal framework after successfully assuming my position and it was already drafted by me.

Jacobsen: What are Awakening Research Foundation Hong Kong Limited in 2012 and Eternity Living Life Company Limited, and World Federations of Right to Die Societies? How are these important for the activism in the right to die, especially in terms of the legal changes and sociopolitical acknowledgment, even acceptance, of it?

LAM: Awakening Research Foundation Hong Kong Limited was established by me in 2012 and it was renamed Eternity Living Life Company Limited in 2017 and they are all member societies of the World Federation. All of these are with a common goal that is to promote the legislation of relevant law locally and globally. The only difference is that we adopt a different approach in pursuing our dreams. Most of them around the world choose to fight for legislation through winning the court cases. But it is different in Asia, we are culturally more withdrawn and conservative, the only way to create the impact is through a more authoritative way that is exactly what I am trying to do here in Hong Kong – to join the Chief Executive election.

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

LAM: I hope you don't think that I am too confident in myself but all these come from the support and endorsement from the politicians around the world. I believe their support is due to the rarity for someone who is willing to step out and get involved in the Medical Law practice of end of life issue in Asia and they obviously appreciate it a lot.

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

LAM: The honor is mine. I really hope that more people in Hong Kong and Asia are willing to understand more about the Medical Law practice in end of life issue. Thank you very much.

Further resources

<https://www.drlamtung.com/single-post/2017/12/29/The-Story-of-My-Life>

<https://www.drlamtung.com/single-post/2017/11/24/The-Development-of-End-of-Life-issue-in-HKSAR-2009-now>

<https://www.drlamtung.com/single-post/2018/05/23/Letter-to-Editor>

Interview with Patrick Morrow – (New) President, Humanists Atheists and Agnostics of Manitoba

January 22, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Pat Morrow is the President of the Humanists Atheists and Agnostics of Manitoba. Here we talk about religion's, or rather non-religion's, existence in life for him, and his work and views, and how to become involved, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was religion in youth to you? What was its presentation in life?

Pat Morrow: Nonexistent, I can't say if I was ignorant or oblivious, probably both. My first memories of religion were from elementary school. way back when public school still had daily bible readings as a part of morning exercises.

Sometimes confusing stories but for most of my early youth, I honestly didn't realize people were supposed to believe them. In my later youth, I tried to do the whole church thing at the time I dated a church girl from pretty mainstream religion. I couldn't do it.

There was just know way I could believe what they were selling. I did check out her Facebook page some time ago, apparently, she's a fan of evangelist and prophet-wingnut Joyce Meyer. So, maybe, I dodged a bullet on that one.

Religion itself, I didn't think about much. Births, deaths, weddings, religion for me was something people did, not something you believed.

Jacobsen: What was your perspective of you?

Morrow: I suppose I was an atheist with Humanist values long before I knew with the terms meant. A skeptic as well, but not a very good one.

If someone asked me about god's existence/ where it all came from, I would usually give a very noncommittal "this all must have been started by someone right?"

It would be years before I would realize I was asking the wrong question. The universe, if it had a beginning at all would've been started by a what not a who.

Jacobsen: In a manner of speaking, who influenced you, in the community of younger life – either religious or non-religious?

Morrow: I have to say my mum. She was a Christian, attended church intermittently, but her personal faith was one without any dogma. Her only comment on the Bible was "true or not, it's an interesting collection of stories."

Evening TV with her would be watching PBS nature documentaries, Jacques Cousteau and *National Geographic*. My mum was not one for using religious platitudes like "well, I suppose that's the way God made it."

If you had a question she couldn't answer she'd tell you to go to the library look it up. I would probably also have to add my seventh and eighth grade science teacher Mr. Mac.

The man had a way of teaching science that was easy to understand. His experiments in class we're entertaining and taught me a lot. He also introduced me through books, Gerald Durrell, David Attenborough and Carl Sagan long before *Contact* and *Cosmos*.

Jacobsen: What is the Humanists, Atheists & Agnostics of Manitoba?

Morrow: We're an all volunteer organization based in Winnipeg, we have in any given year about 100 +/- paid members, a small executive, and a shoestring budget. With that we run a monthly meeting with topics of interest to our community and other, smaller social get togethers such as BBQs and what's become known as "bad Christian movie night."

Many of our members are former believers some coming from the Anglican or weaker tea type religions as well as some of religions' more fundamentalist forms.

Mostly ex Christian we also have ex-Muslims, ex-Mormons and one ex-Hindu. Our meetings, a closed fb page offer support and a safe space for them to talk about anything... and sometimes just to vent.

HAAM also supports the Kasese Humanist Primary School in Uganda where we sponsor a little fella by the name of Bogere John.

We also have an active outreach and "ask an atheist" program and a good core volunteers that venture into school classrooms, staff our outreach booths at various festivals and are happy to talk to anyone about Humanism, atheism and rational thought.

Outreach has worked out well. Through these efforts we have been able to establish three other groups within the province. The Pembina Valley Secular Community (PVSC) and Brandon Humanists are pretty casual, a social network where likeminded folks can get to together for coffee without someone praying over the cream.

The Eastman Humanist Community (EHC) is a growing organization in Steinbach MB, the heart of Manitoba's Bible Belt. For the first time they will be running their own community outreach this summer.

Jacobsen: Why was it (HAAM) founded in Manitoba?

Morrow: Manitoba has always had a large religious population and with that there's always been rationalists or non-believers/atheists trying to navigate it.

The modern organization was founded in 1995; it was a loose group of likeminded thinkers, mainly academic minded folks sharing ideas socially. At that time, it was not engaged in actively promoting Humanism, Atheism.

But Humanism in goes back along way in Manitoba. Coming out of was called the rationalist movement of the 1920s the first humanist organization. The Winnipeg Humanist Society was established in 1934.

Unfortunately, there are huge gaps in the history of our early organizations. In 1994 or 95 long-time humanist and Unitarian Cec Muldrew called a meeting of those he believed might be interested in revitalizing a humanist group.

The Humanist Association of Manitoba (HAM) was born. At that time HAM existed as a mainly educational and social group, just atheists and freethinkers getting together, listening to a guest speaker over Dinner and talking about issues and ideas that matter to them.

That part of HAM continues. Seven years ago we changed our name to its present form, Humanists, Atheists, Agnostics of Manitoba. And with that new name we developed a clear mission statement:

–Our mission is to build a secular community where non-believers can feel safe and supported.

-We support critical thinking and evidence-based understanding of the natural world.

-We support building secular communities using democratic principles and the active pursuit of the separation of religion and government.

-We seek to give a voice to humanists, atheists and agnostics through discussion, constructive activism, education and philanthropy.

-We seek to use our human capacities of empathy, compassion and rational thinking as the foundation for ethical behaviour.

The main reasons we changed was to be more inclusive and frankly it sells better. Many people haven't heard of Humanism but most understand or misunderstand what an atheist or agnostic is:

Atheist, because that's what we are we might as well own it. Agnostic because some people don't like calling themselves atheists, and others don't know the difference.

Humanist of course because it's a life philosophy worth promoting. The name change has worked well as many conversations have been started with the question: "So, what's the difference between an atheist, agnostic, and a humanist?"

Jacobsen: How does incorporating more than one grouping help build the super-minority communities into a collective within the province?

Morrow: Because when you are herding cats is best to be as broad based and inclusive as possible. It's a big province, our members and supporters in the secular world come in all kinds.

Firebrand atheists, social justice warriors, and those who are recovering from religion. Everybody has issues and goals that are important to them and they all overlap.

What's important is we harness these passions and all work together. Not just inside our local organizations but all across the country. It was also important to HAAM local groups after starting up must have autonomy right down to picking their own name.

Local people know best at what will work in their communities. In the end, no matter what your label you have something to contribute.

Jacobsen: What is involved in the Bible Study?

Morrow: The bible study as an effort of one of our exec members Dorothy Stephens. She hadn't read the bible since she was in the church many years ago and she felt she wanted to read it again as an atheist and using actual scholars, textual critics and historians to understand it.

It was a one-time project that's finished but exists as an archive so that if someone comes across it now, they can still follow it.

The purpose was just to read the bible as a nonbeliever – mostly aimed at those who had never read it before and had no idea what was really in there, and also for people who had left fundamentalist religion and wanted to see it fresh through the eyes of an outsider.

She made it clear in the description that she never pretended to be any kind of expert and that i was undertaking the project for interest only.

We had about a 100 people following it along at the time we did it but only two got through the whole thing without missing a page. Because hey, it's the Bible. They can't even get Christians to read them and probably why they give so many away for free.

Jacobsen: How important is a get-to-know a humanist component when in communication and involvement with religious communities within the larger community of Manitoba?

Morrow: When we engage in our outreach efforts the first priority is finding those likeminded thinkers in religious communities sometime just letting them know there are others out there like them is enough. If you're in a super minority the best way to build community is getting to know those members of your community.

In one case two atheists living in a Bible Belt town next door to each other had no clue they were both atheists till HAAM had an outreach in their town. They had never had the conversation; I suppose both thought it was just too risky. These are the connections that are so important to make.

Of course if you put up a booth in a bible belt community and slap the word "ATHEIST" on it, the effect for many Christians is akin to flies on flypaper. We have great conversations with believers who are genuinely interested.

Others religious tell us they have never met an atheist, or more likely have but didn't know it. Still more think it's the best place to try to win a soul for Jesus or just let us know what's in store for us after we're dead.

One of our Christian visitors to our booth after a somewhat long conversation about how important Jesus was to him exclaimed to one of our staff "hey you're a beautiful women and the only thing stopping me from raping you is Jesus."

Now, some might think this would be cause for a quick knee to the groin but without missing a beat our staff member said "if the only thing stopping you from raping me is Jesus you just keep on believing you hold that Jesus tight."

Yes, this fella was a creep, but what's important is how we are perceived by the folks listening in, it can and does break down barriers. For many of the more fungelical types all they know about atheists and Humanists is what they've been told from the pulpit, so getting to know an atheist and learn what Humanism really is the utmost importance. We're not going to eat their children.

Jacobsen: What are some of the common things to expect in the newsletters and events? What tends to be the more prominent events of Humanists, Atheists & Agnostics Of Manitoba?

Morrow: For the newsletter content upcoming events, and news that would be of interest to our community.

The charity of the month is a big feature and it to encourages our members to "put the H on Humanism," then any calls to action on issues that our members would support – frequently these are petitions or letter-writing campaigns by individuals or other groups we network with

such as B.C. Humanists, Kelowna Atheists Skeptics and Humanists (KASH), Society of Edmonton Atheists (SEA), Humanist Canada, and the like.

Recent ones have been ban gay conversion therapy, support advance requests for MAID, sign up to be an organ donor, end the ban on LGBT people donating blood, end faith-based healthcare... Articles about holidays or social issues, reports of events that we have attended or been involved in, like outreach or debates.

Our Book of the month feature helps to promote our library. Advice to our members about stuff like religion in schools, workplaces, health care facilities, children's camps and activities. Opinion pieces if they're short; longer ones go on the Perspectives page.

Jacobsen: What have been the most read articles within the perspectives portion of the website? Why those ones?

Morrow: That's a tough one I can say our website hits have slowly climbed we get about 4,000 hits a month we don't actually have the ability to track individual entries.

The two I've personally gotten the most direct feedback from were "HAAM takes on Apologetics" and "Christianity tries to remain Relevant." Apologists don't like these opinion pieces for some reason. Our outreach recaps are always popular with our members as well.

Jacobsen: What other provisions are available to the community, within the community?

Morrow: We have a lending library of over 250 books covering just about every interest. It's helpful for those coming out of religious belief or just unfamiliar with secular writings. Many of us who have been activist atheists for a very long time forget what it's like to read something with a brand new eye opening perspective.

We carry everything from counter apologetics, secular parenting, evolution, psychology, women and gay rights, biblical history and textual criticism. Including, some of the great humanist and atheistic works. I think we have a few children's books in there as well.

We also have a private secular counselling referral service. These professionals are not vetted by HAAM but come recommended by our members. It's actually tuff especially for those in Bible Belt communities to find mental health services that are not faith based.

We're also willing to help out folks as best we can. Time to time we'll get letters from the public on religion in public schools, faith based healthcare or any issue regarding separation of Church and state. Often we can't help them directly but we can help them understand the issues and what their rights are and put them in touch with people who have the resources to help.

Jacobsen: How can individuals become involved with the Humanists, Atheists & Agnostics of Manitoba, e.g., donations writing, researching, newsletter help, becoming a member, provision of professional networks, and so on?

Morrow: Ask, show an interest and get involved, attend a meeting or event. Offer suggestions then offer your labour to help bring those suggestions reality. At HAAM over the years, we've had some great ideas and suggestions but lack the people power to put them in place.

Jacobsen: What are some ways in which the secular community can form a national network to petition and become activists for secular equality throughout all levels of democratic Canadian society?

Morrow: This question ties into the previous one. Get involved!

I would also say in addition to supporting your local group, support our national organizations as well. Secular Connexion Séculière, Humanist Canada, Center for Inquiry.

If you don't have the time maybe you have some cash to throw their way. Even just buying a membership means so much.

We have the numbers in Canada we just have to show it. Just ask yourself, if Humanist Canada is going to bat for Humanist and secular issues, the ones you care about, is it better to approach the powers that be representing 2,000 members or 200,000?

Every organization, big or small even if it's someone running a private atheist 20-member Facebook group in a religious community should have someone with the job of networking with other groups.

This can be as little subscribing to their newsletters and social media just to monitor what's going on. Or it could be developing contacts and personal relationships. This has paid off many times for HAAM.

One time we were developing a new banner for one of our outreaches. We couldn't make it work and badly needed a graphic designer and we didn't have one. Luckily, because of our contacts with the SEA we knew they had one that was ready to help.

We had professional quality banners designed and ready on time. That's the power of working together. This network would be helpful in getting the word out when it came to petitions and speaking with a national voice.

Jacobsen: What are your fears and hopes as we're moving through 2019 for the secular Canadian community?

Morrow: I have, and will always be of the belief that over the long haul reason will win out. I can't look at a short term as one year. But I still worry. In Manitoba, Young Earth Creationism and it's accompanying anti-science has crept into the local religious population.

The openly dishonest nature of apologetics seems to be entering the moderate parts of the Christian religion teaching many how not to think. Nationally we've seen how the "carny handed melon man" down south has empowered the worst of Canadian ignorance and bigotry.

Reason will win out what's not known is the damage the unreasonable will do before we get there.

My hope is the many Canadians who have empathy for others, value reason and evidence-based decision making can come together and make a difference.

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

Asylum Alaikum: Freedom Finders and Keepers, Ex-Muslim Doha Mooh

January 11, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Melissa Krawczyk

Her Arabic script is at the bottom.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you?

Doha Mooh: There is meant to be a real life, whether early on, or later, but in Saudi, there is no life for a woman. Frequently she has no say in it.

Jacobsen: How was religion important in early life for you?

Mooh: Religion was not important to me in my life, but society, though its customs, traditions and the government, forced it on me and made it important.

Jacobsen: When did you question Islam?

Mooh: I was questioning really early!! I was young and after Kindergarten I entered school and discovered that at the age of six, the girls were separated from the boys to prepare them for religious instruction.

Jacobsen: What arguments make Islam false to you?

Mooh: I don't call them arguments. I see it logically. Why would the God of mercy create me as a deficient girl, as they claim? Why is it permitted for a man to marry another wife without considering his first wife's feelings? And a lot more.

Jacobsen: What is the general status of women in Islam?

Mooh: The general status! Well, in Islam you can own a girl and treat them as you treat a piece of furniture, or a car, or anything you own, and she can't act on her own.

Jacobsen: When did you find ex-Muslims? How is this community important for you?

Mooh: I have seen an Ex-Muslim in everyone who questioned religion for the sake of justice and equality. I found an Ex-Muslim in myself when I rejected the commandments of religion. Society nurtures the generations of tomorrow.

Jacobsen: How did you get asylum? What is the story there? What is your current status now?

Mooh: I left the religion of Islam and this puts me in danger of being killed. I have the right to be in a country that protects me and protects my family. Now I live in an apartment here temporarily, until my necessary legal application procedures are finished.

Jacobsen: What is the proper way to get ex-Muslims asylum?

Mooh: The correct way is the legal way, of course, not cheating.

Jacobsen: How can people reach out ex-Muslims who are in a difficult time of life respectfully?

Mooh: It is easy to access them on social media pages. There are those who are forced to claim that they are Muslims, and Arab feminists and homosexuals and others who are suffering and afraid of the volume of threats and intimidation and insults and cursing, and these things are frustrating and painful.

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

Mooh: I think there is so much to be said, but I just want to say that every human being has the right to live in dignity.

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

الأول : من المفترض أن تكون هناك حياة بعد موءاء مكررة أو متأخرة لكن في السعودية لا حياة للمرأة - عفاً لأقارب لها هيبا .
 الثاني: أن الذين ليس مهم لي في حياتي المجتمع بمبادئه وتقاليده والحكومة فرضته علي وجهته مهم .
 الثالث : هنا كنت انتقل بوقت مبكر جداً !! كنت صغيراً وبعد الروضة دخلت المدرسة لاكتشف في عمر السادسة بأنهم يفسلون الفئات عن الأولاد لتجنيبهم لتعاليم الدين .
 الرابع : لا أستطيع حجب إذا أراها منطوية ، من مناطق الرحمة التي عند الله لمذا حلقي ككثرة النعسة كما يدعون ؟ لماذا يحق للرجل الزواج على زوجته بدون أن يقدّر مشاعرها ؟ ولتأثيره
 الخامس : الوضع العام !! حسداً في الأندلس يمكننا أن نملكه الفداء ونملكها كما نملك هبة الفات في موءاء أو أي شيء أوت لنملكه ولا يمكنه التصرف بنفسه
 السادس : وجدت مسلمين سافلين في كل أمدان شكك في الدين لأجل العدل والمساواة وبحثه في نفسه عندما رفضت أحكام الدين ، المجتمع هو المعصن الذي سبني أحوال العد
 السابع : أنا خرجت من الدين الإسلامي وهذا يعطيني في خطر ومعرضة للقتل ومن حقني أن أكون في بلاد تسميني وتحمي عائلتي - وأنا الآن أعيش في شقة هنا بشكل مؤقت حتى تنتهي إجراءات طلبي القانونية للحرمة
 الثامن : الطريقة الصحيحة هي الطريقة القانونية بالمطوع أن لا تلتصق
 التاسع : الرسول لهم سهل انظر الى صفحات التواصل الأملأهي هناك المعجزون على ادعاء اطلاق الأسماء و الدسوات والمليون الحروب واقرهم أنهم يتكلمون ويخالفون من كعبة القديس والكرهوب والندب والتمم وهذا شيء محبط ومؤام
 العاشر : أعفك ذلك الكثير من عالم يقاتل ، فقط أريد أن أقول لكل أمدان الحق بأن يحسن حياة كريمة .

Doha Mooh Responses in Arabic.

Interview with Megan Denman – Assistant State Director, American Atheists Ohio

January 23, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Megan Denman is the Assistant State Director of the American Atheists Ohio. Here we talk about her work, life, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you? Did religion play a role in it?

Megan Denman: My childhood was generally comfortable and informed. My parents allowed my two siblings and me to have ample free play time, and taught us to value reading, keeping up with current events, and taught us important life skills.

We were middle class and sometimes just hovering above the poverty line, but my parents created an environment for us so that we were rarely aware of that proximity.

I was raised in a fairly liberal congregation of protestant Christianity, the United Methodist church, from toddler age until high school graduation.

The congregation was large and mostly positive and welcoming, and they did a good job providing various youth activities, outreach to the community, arts enrichment and more, so at first glance, it seemed difficult for me to leave such an environment.

Plus, the people I respected at church emphasized that God resides within humans, and I met some wonderful humans in my church community. The church in particular provided a huge social network that certainly shaped my upbringing, although the worship services always made me very anxious.

I was a late bloomer in terms of uncovering my atheist identity, but I always felt something was a bit “off” while at church, especially starting around age 10.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on pivotal people within the community relevant to personal philosophical development, who were they for you?

Denman: Attending school at Baldwin-Wallace University, I started to see what other beliefs were out there, and to further define what I really value.

My piano teacher Dr. Robert Mayerovitch (a Canadian!) had brought up in a few lessons that he was an atheist, and many conversations about that have stayed with me today.

He told me he believed in core values such as love, curiosity and humility instead of God. I was impressed that he was open about his atheism, and began to see that I had been raised to see nonbelief as something to be ashamed of.

Another thing I remember Bob saying that has stuck with me is (paraphrased): “You can take what you like from religion, and leave what you don’t. There really are no ‘shoulds’ when it comes to how you define your personal philosophy.”

There was also a group on my campus called SCOPE which helped me see a clearer pathway to who I am today as an atheist. SCOPE stands for space for Christian-oriented progressive engagement.

Though they used the word Christian, we had members in the small group who were self-defined as Atheist, Atheist- Buddhist, Christians who were barely so because they were embarrassed by their religion's actions, Agnostics (myself at the time), secular Jews, and others as well.

I loved the discussions we had, which were mainly based on values and morality in action. Even though we all had slightly different beliefs or nonbelief, our views on political and human rights issues were all progressive, and within that we built lasting relationships.

Jacobsen: What about literature and film, and other artistic and humanities productions, of influence on personal philosophical worldview?

Denman: Greg Epstein's book "Good Without God" was very influential as I formed my personal philosophy.

Some of my fellow atheist comrades think he's too nice, but I appreciated his focus on what Humanism represents such as deliberate living based on values like passion, purpose and community more than focusing on bashing religion (except in situations where that is helpful and necessary.)

I also felt that the book was a good stepping stone for someone already disillusioned with religion but not quite sure how to define themselves or to take a complete step towards virtuous atheism.

I also was inspired by Michael Werner's book "What Can You Believe if You Don't Believe in God?"

He went beyond clarifying that humanists (and atheists) are able to live sensible, moral lives outside of religion, but also defined some current hurdles which atheist groups face.

These include avoiding employing a cold, solely rationalistic view of humanity and atheism, and also avoiding an elitism which turns away nonbelievers who may be struggling to meet basic needs, or are otherwise uninterested in only intellectual talks.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the wider borderless online world of non-religious people?

Denman: Meetup.com, and Facebook were instrumental in revealing me to the immense community of nonbelievers. In the fall of 2016, I discovered the Sunday Assembly Cleveland Chapter and Cleveland Freethinkers on Meetup just before I had decided to start the Cleveland Humanist Alliance.

I originally Googled "Cleveland Humanist group" or something like that, and these groups came to my attention.

I also found and listened to some podcasts from Oasis meetings, "The Thinking Atheist" by Seth Andrews, and "Humanize Me" by Bart Campolo.

Throughout 2017, I quickly came to know other resources such as American Atheists, American Humanist Association, International Humanist and Ethical Union, Freedom From Religion Foundation, Foundation Beyond Belief, Northern Ohio Freethought Society, Center For Inquiry and more.

Admittedly, I haven't been able to keep up and participate with every group as I'd like to, since I've been focused on getting my local group off the ground.

Creating the Cleveland Humanist Alliance divulged to me how many secular people are on the internet seeking a community. Every day, our Meetup continues to average two to three new members since its start two years ago.

Even though some new members might not know what humanism or atheism is, it's still heartening to know there is a need for this type of community. The power of technology has allowed me as a serious introvert to start a movement that is gaining attention.

Jacobsen: How did this lead to American Atheist Ohio?

Denman: Jim Helton with American Atheists reached out to me after their staff attorney Geoff Blackwell was in town for a case, and their goals lined up with Cleveland Humanist Alliance's goals.

The way they do everything possible to assist in growing local groups like ours, particularly with activism, is appealing, and their accomplishments on a national level are clearly laudable.

Since collaborating with American Atheists, I've been inspired personally to make positive change in our government and world. Perhaps more importantly, I was given pragmatic tools to connect our group members with other like-minded groups such as PFLAG and Planned Parenthood so that we can build connections with progressive-minded people while also normalizing atheism.

By doing this, all our efforts for change collectively have a more powerful impact.

Jacobsen: Within the current position as the Assistant State Director for American Atheist Ohio, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Denman: My task was to choose one of American Atheists' designated programs, and implement it within my local group. The program we chose is ACES, which stands for Activism, Community, Education and Social.

Within each category, there are actions to build up your local group. My group the Cleveland Humanist Alliance already does a number of these activities, but there are some gaps which the ACES program compels us to fill.

After we complete the ACES program, we will choose another program from AA's list, and tackle it.

I'm essentially a liaison between AA and my local group, so we can use AA's expertise to help our group be more effective and collaborative within the community, and in return promote American Atheists and atheism in general.

Jacobsen: What are some of the provisions for the community there? How does this manifest in the online sphere as well?

Denman: American Atheists has a law team at the ready should our city encounter a breach of church/state separation, or nonreligious discrimination issue.

They have great resources for activism and tabling, which we can certainly benefit from. So far, I've had help every step of the way in exactly how to implement tasks, and make full use of American Atheists' experienced leaders.

Online, we can use their logos and name to help promote our group, as well as their larger entity. Our collaboration with AA is fairly new, but once we have big projects on the table, I'm told AA has significant financial resources for local groups as well.

Jacobsen: What unique issues for secularism face Ohioan atheists? What specific inclusivity issues face atheists in Ohio? In particular, how do some of these reflect the larger national issues?

Denman: We had a member of Cleveland Humanist Alliance try to present a secular invocation at our Ohio Statehouse prior to a legislative session, along with the legislative prayers that are the tradition.

He was not allowed, because currently the Supreme Court's choice in *Greece vs Galloway* states that individuals of any faith are welcome to give a prayer to a higher power, with respect given to all other beliefs. Even though citizens of all faiths could participate in prayer, secular nonbelievers were excluded.

This reveals our government puts on an egalitarian face, but, in reality, is still steeped in religious bias. If the American government claims to be by the people and for the people, it should include ALL the people that it serves.

Secular communities in Ohio have trouble binding together like churches do, in order to enact necessary change. I don't know of any Ohio atheist groups who have their own building, and very few nationally do.

This is probably due partly to the nature of freethinkers being hard to lump into one category, and therefore we struggle to cultivate attention and funding for projects.

Still, there are pressing issues like keeping Planned Parenthood alive, LGBTQIA rights, climate change and so many more, one would think we could become motivated and come together. I think we need to make people uncomfortable about these issues in order to gain momentum.

Jacobsen: How can secular American citizens create an environment more conducive and welcoming to secular women, secular youth, secular people of color, secular poor people, and secular people with formal education less than or equal to – but not higher than – a high school education?

Denman: Good question. Secular Americans such as myself need to be prominently out of the closet as Atheists so that we can know the real number of like-minded people out there.

We also could stand to educate people more about the direct connection between issues such as the Heartbeat Abortion Bill which got very close to passing in Ohio and fundamentalist religious dogma.

Many millennial Americans today are apathetic churchgoers or quietly secular, but if proudly secular Americans band together and broadcast our mission, we can bring these fence-sitters with us to form an impressive community.

It appears that many secular groups tend to focus on the predictable structures of science and reason in their meetings, instead of tackling messier social issues such as racism, sexism, income inequality and poverty.

Also, since humanists and atheists are usually progressive in nature, many might feel they don't need to be activists since they don't personally stoke the fires of social injustice.

However, activism such as what American Atheists executes helps both to alleviate social injustice while simultaneously normalizing atheism and increasing its breadth.

A key attitude to including diverse secular communities is to follow the lead of minorities and women for example, rather than trying to lead in a social group with which one doesn't have personal experience.

By holding a variety of types of activities, we can increase the diversity of our secular communities. For instance, currently in the US there are not many established activities for secular youth specifically, aside from Camp Quest.

Many of our group members who have children might not come to meetups because of a lack of childcare. I think when we strengthen our social connections and empower more individual members, there will be a clearer path toward providing more youth-oriented programming.

Volunteering for events such as the Homeless Stand Down this past weekend which provided meals, haircuts, job assistance and more to the homeless population in Cleveland helps to bring secularist values to those most in need, in a public way, alongside many caring religious people.

American secular groups would be served to think more inclusively about how visitors perceive them, having welcoming pictures of previous social and community outreach activities, for instance.

We already seem to have a reputation for being intellectually rigorous to the point of estrangement from many social sectors, for valid reasons.

Still, this doesn't accurately represent nonbelievers as a whole, and having diverse activities such as crafting, dog walking or potentially other members' suggestions opens doors to many people, including those with limited formal education, who might otherwise be intimidated by an atheist group.

In summation, atheists can't get too comfortable in any one activist, educational or social/community arena, and we need to continually reach out horizontally to like-minded groups, rather than focusing on vertically building up individual secular silos in a vacuum.

Jacobsen: How can the secular community not only direct attention to ill-treatment of religious followers by fundamentalist religious leaders but also work to reduce and eventually eliminate the incidences of ill-treatment of some – in particular, the recent cases of women – within the secular community?

Denman: A potent way to reveal the harm of extremist religious leaders upon their constituents is to magnify the aftermath of their unhealthy directives.

The recent news of predatory nuns sexually abusing young women at vulnerable times is eye-opening, especially when hearing the personal challenges such as PTSD and substance abuse that plagued the victims for years after the incidences.

The secular community can highlight that this is a pattern rather than just isolated cases amongst religious leaders who use obedience to a higher power to their advantage.

As atheists, we can offer support in a proactive manner to those women, children and men who have suffered abuse at the hands of religious leaders, and if they are being ignored, direct them to legal services such as American Atheists' legal team.

Comprehensive sex education in elementary and middle school years is one of the most effective ways to preclude sexual abuse, and American Atheists leads the way on keeping sex ed curriculum up-to-date in public schools in America.

Unfortunately, until parents gain awareness and take action, it is a much bigger hurdle to teach appropriate sex ed in private schools, especially religious ones. The best tactic is to keep focused on what we can change, and to keep shedding light on what works.

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

Interview with Mark Newton – Host, Sunday Assembly Seacoast

January 24, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Mark Newton is a Host of the Sunday Assembly Seacoast. Here we talk about his background, work, and views.

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

Mark Newton: My father was an officer and a pilot in the Air Force. We moved often but were always around other Air Force Families. He was stationed in the States except for 3 years at Harmon AFB in Stephenville NFLD in the early 60's.

English was always the native language. My Grandfather on my Dad's side was a Congregational Minister but Dad was Agnostic. My Mother did not believe in religion.

I would classify her as a Pantheist. She thought, if there is a God, it would be some force of nature beyond our understanding. She did not take any religious teaching seriously although she accepted it culturally.

Dad had a kind of sentimental attachment to Christianity but would readily admit that he didn't think was True. He accepted it as symbolism and thought of himself as a Christian. We would sometimes go to church services on special occasions but not regularly.

We had no religious indoctrination. My parents allowed my sister and I to be free thinkers. We often had wide ranging philosophical discussions.

Jacobsen: What were some of the pivotal moments or educational lessons in being guided to a more godless worldview?

Newton: I went to college at L.S.U. Baton Rouge, La. I had Philosophy courses there which helped me shape my world view. L.S.U. is definitely in the Bible Belt so I was observing Christian Fundamentalism but any such beliefs are a non-starter for me.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the godless congregations and community?

Newton: My wife was raised occasionally attending Methodist church. However, she never really accepted the beliefs. Her parents just thought they should go to church because that's what people do but they never really pressured the kid's to believe.

She did enjoy singing in the choir and the social connections with her Church community. As we got to know each other, we realized we felt the same about religious belief.

We are non-believers. We were talking one day and she said she kind of missed those social connections but couldn't handle sitting through all the religious stuff.

Jacobsen: When did the Sunday Assembly become an integrated part of communal life for you? How did this simply click more than others, e.g., traditional religious ones or the secular online sphere, for you?

Newton: We knew the Unitarian church was too traditional for us. The Secular Humanists are fine for me but my wife gets bored of lectures and discussions quickly.

I had read about the Sunday Assembly movement spreading across Europe and the U.S. I found a local group on Meetup.com called Sunday Assembly Seacoast who get together once a month in Eliot, Maine about a half hour drive for us. It really works for us. We're musicians so we joined the band.

Jacobsen: What can regular attendees of Sunday Assembly Seacoast expect on their delightfully godless Sunday congregation time?

Newton: We start the Assembly with a song. For example, we started recently with the Beatles song Drive My Car which is actually about female empowerment. The theme was the changing nature of power in society.

We do Rock and Pop songs that fit the theme of our guest speakers. There will usually be three or four songs throughout the meeting. The speaker's presentations are fairly short so my wife doesn't get bored.

We may break up into smaller groups to discuss what ever the theme might be. No one rails against religion. It's just understood that we're beyond that. It is similar to the Secular Humanists but more fun.

We do a segment called Cheers and Tears when we share with each other something to celebrate or some bad news or event that we may need some support to get through.

Some of the elements can be a little church like but of course there's no talk of any Gods or religion. We finish with a song and then share a Potluck lunch and just get caught up on what may be going on in each other's lives.

Jacobsen: What are the approximate demographics of Sunday Assembly Seacoast?

Newton: It's an even mix of men and women, families, a few children usually attend. Many of us never had any real religious beliefs but some are former believers who had to leave religious communities and were even estranged from their families when they lost their faith.

There's not enough racial diversity here in New Hampshire. We only have one African American who attends. We had a Chinese family join us last month. The Mom and Dad emigrated to the States to work and teach.

The kids were born here. I hope they come back. I'm more comfortable in a more diverse community.

Jacobsen: Who are some allies in building a successful secular and godless community?

Newton: Folks from The Maine Atheists and Humanists come to our meetings from time to time and some from our group attend their events. It's early days for the Sunday Assembly project.

There have been growing pains and differing opinions on how to proceed. We're kind of open to suggestions and trying to find our way. We've made a lot of good friends and that's the most important thing, our primary goal really.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in the Sunday Assembly Seacoast community?

Newton: Come to our monthly meeting. Some of us call it a Service. It's funny how that just sounds foreign to me. Sunday Assembly Seacoast has a website seacoast.sundayassembly.com . We have a presence on Meetup.com and Facebook.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more recent updates happening for 2019 for Sunday Assembly Seacoast? What are some real threats to the safety and communal wellness of Sunday Assembly Seacoast if any?

Newton: We have other events called Smoups which stands for small groups. I host one which is a discussion group on Positive Secularism. Each month we choose a new question to be discussed following specific guidelines.

For example, the next question to be discussed will be, "How do you identify or categorize your secular views; atheist, non-believer, non-religious, spiritual, just secular or something else?"

We go around and allow each person a few minutes to express their thoughts on the question. Once everyone has had a turn we open the discussion to a more free form exchange. It works well. It has always been a warm and friendly exchange of ideas rather than a debate.

We hope to organize more Smoups for things like game nights, movie watch parties or a book club. We also have an interest in doing some thing charitable for the greater community.

We've hashed out ideas but we've had a little trouble getting things out of the discussion stage. I feel a little guilty about that. We're still figuring things out.

As far as threats, there are things we worry about. We know how some feel about atheists. There have never been any specific threats but one can't help but think about it a little. It's so unlikely though.

The whole world lives under the threat of terrorism but the odds of any one of us experiencing an attack are so minute. A more real threat is just apathy. People come and go in our group.

Some loose interest for whatever reason. For some, who were traumatized by religion earlier in their lives, the church like model is a total turnoff. Other with similar experiences come specifically looking for a church like community without the dogma.

With churches, there is always the threat of punishment by eternal damnation or the reward of eternal paradise that compels people to attend. For us there's only the promise of face to face human connection.

It's something that most agree is sorely needed in this super-technological cyber world we've developed. That's the experiment.

How do we recreate the kind of community built on real human connections without the mythologies that so many of just never bought into and others have lost their faith in?

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

Newton: Good questions. It was fun organizing my thoughts to come up with responses. It would be interesting to hear how someone who was a true believer and lost their faith might see things.

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

Interview with Marquita Tucker, M.B.A. – Co-Organizer, Black Nonbelievers of Detroit

January 25, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Marquita Tucker, M.B.A. is the Co-Organizer of Black Nonbelievers of Detroit. Here we talk about her background, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you, e.g., geography, culture, language, religion or lack thereof, education, and family structure and dynamics?

Marquita Tucker: I was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. I was born to a lower middle class African American single mother whose family is Christian; more specifically, Baptist.

English was the only family spoken in the home. My mother got her GED. My father was in prison from the time I was five until I was seventeen for abusing another woman severely. My mother was very... overprotective. She didn't really let me out of the house; unless, it was for school.

But just because we were in the house together doesn't mean that she liked to spend a lot of time with me. We didn't really do things together. She just wanted to make sure that I was in the house and not out in the streets.

Jacobsen: What levels of formal education have been part of life for you? How have you informally self-educated?

Tucker: I completed my M.B.A. in 2017. I am currently pursuing my Ph.D. in Information Systems. Now, self-education is a different story. I subscribe to Eastern philosophies, Buddhism and Taoism. Not the religious aspect of these philosophies... just their views on life.

Jacobsen: How was the MBA important in the founding of a business and, especially, for economic independence?

Tucker: Well, I haven't started my business yet. Obtaining my M.B.A. was important because after 12 years in an abusive marriage, I left with my four children and now I have to raise them by myself. I was able to secure high paying employment with my M.B.A. Now, my children and I live comfortably.

Jacobsen: When did secularism and non-belief in religion become more accurate as a worldview to you?

Tucker: I would have to say in 2009 after my daughter was born. I had been studying with Jehovah's Witnesses for about three years at that point. I saw on the news about a one year old baby who was raped by her mother's boyfriend and was in critical condition.

I really started questioning how a "loving" God could let something like that happen. I took my concern to the JW's who gave me a bunch of bullshit answers and scriptures and I was like, yeah, no. So, I stopped going to Kingdom Hall (their place of worship).

After about two weeks, the couple that I was studying with came to my house wondering where I had been. I told them that I had done research on the JW's, their racist founders, their money laundering and covering up of sexual abuse within their congregations.

And the woman said to me, “If you don’t get baptized, when it’s the end of days, Jehovah will kill you and your children.” I told her, “If your god can let a baby be raped and kill my children because I didn’t get dunked in water, then that’s not a god I want to worship.”

And I have been a non-believer ever since. I’ve done more research and asked more questions and went through the “angry new atheist” stage where you challenge every believer on everything and I’m so thankful that I’ve calmed down and accepted that, people are going to want to believe what they want to believe.

Jacobsen: What are some of the unique experiences of secular women of color compared to other populations within the freethought community in North America?

Tucker: Well, as a black woman, Jesus is supposed to be our “boyfriend”. I mean, in the black community, we are supposed to believe in Jesus and lean on Jesus for everything. If you don’t have a man, Jesus is your man. If you have a man, he’s supposed to live up to Jesus’ example.

Like, as a black woman, you HAVE to believe in God. Black women love inviting other black women to their “church home”. So as a non believer, I have to skirt those invites. I feel like I have to keep my secularism secret as to not be outcasted from the rest of the black women at my job.

Jacobsen: What can the community do to create more inclusive spaces for the wider range, experiences, and dialogues of secular women of color in North America?

Tucker: Maybe, they can just listen more. When we say that things are a certain way, i.e., there’s still racism in the secular community, or our experiences are different than a majority of the secular community, just take our word for it and meditate on it. We’re not lying. There’s no reason to lie.

Jacobsen: What is your role, and set of responsibilities, in Black Nonbelievers of Detroit? What is the community demographic there, e.g., age, education, sex and gender, and so on?

Tucker: I am the co-organizer for BNOD. I set up our meet up and some of our charity events. Our demographic is mostly black. We used to have a couple of white members, but I haven’t seen them lately. It’s a fairly even group, men and women. Many are college educated or entrepreneurs.

Jacobsen: Who have been the main opposition within the community and outside of the community – the secular community – for the inclusion and acceptance and normalization of secular women of color?

Tucker: I personally have not been confronted with too many opposers, but, I have heard from my secular sisters about white men who like to challenge them or disparage their place in the nonbeliever community.

Jacobsen: What is the strongest argument against a god and for the existence of a natural world without one?

Tucker: The strongest argument? I like this one saying that I saw on Facebook, it pretty much sums it up. “If you saw a child about to get raped and murdered, would you stop it?” “Yes.” “Just like that, you’re more moral than a god.” The natural world exists because it does. No one was there when this all started so it’s not for human to give it’s due to some judgmental, jealous, homicidal, sexist god.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts based on the conversation today? How can people become involved, donate time, assist with activism efforts, and increase the overall membership and capacity of Black Nonbelievers Detroit?

Tucker: Just come hang out with us. We don't ask for too much more than an open mind. We like to help in our community any way that we can and that doesn't mean that you have to break your back about it. For December, we did an event for the Ruth Ellis Center which assists the LGBT youth of Detroit.

We donated hygiene products and clothing. Nothing too hard. Just know, black nonbelievers, that you are not alone. There are others out there like you who don't believe in God, whose families would freak out if they knew, and we are out here living. We are ok. You can come and vent with us. We are here.

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

Tucker: Thank you so much!

Interview with Dr. Philip Nitschke – Director, Exit International

January 26, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Philip Nitschke is the Director of Exit International. Here we talk about his background, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: If you reflect on early life, how were discussions around death and dying amongst the adults for you?

Dr. Philip Nitschke: Like many growing up in the 50's and 60's I was surrounded by a death denying culture. We didn't want to think about death, and it was rarely discussed. Faith (much of it misplaced) was placed in the medical profession which we hoped would eliminate all known causes of suffering and disease.

I saw my first dead body when in my teens and I note now that our society is so good at removing this spectacle that the age the average person sees their first body rises every year. We might see a 1000 bodies a night on television, but the real thing is quickly and cleanly removed from sight, especially from the children.

It wasn't till I started working in other cultures that I realised that the western strategy of denial and removal was questionable and quite possibly pathological. In the Aboriginal societies where I worked in my 20's, the dying were part of the community, involved as best they could, dying, while the children played around them. I was impressed. This restored some balance.

At medical school in my 30's I was once again plunged into Western death denial. The word *euthanasia* wasn't mentioned, all death was considered a failure.

So, it was a very great relief to be in the Northern Territory when, in my 50's I found the opportunity to work on establishing and enacting the world's first euthanasia legislation.

Jacobsen: What is the proper definition of medically assisted dying or euthanasia? Also, what are the most up to date terminology?

Nitschke: *Voluntary euthanasia* as I use it means broadly, a self-elected peaceful death at a time of one's choosing. I use it as a catch-all phrase although it has also been defined as the occasion when another person acts to ends the life of a person at their request.

Sensitivity over the use of the term *euthanasia*, and more recently *suicide* has seen the growing use of other terms to describe assisted dying.

Semantics rule supreme, with terms such as *medical assisted dying*, *assisted suicide*, *physician assisted suicide*, and so on.

I should add that *medically assisted dying* MAD or MAiD is the new term of *physician assisted suicide* or *PAS* as it's also known.

This is when a doctor helps a patient to die by prescribing them a lethal drug.

The shift to *MAD* from *PAS* has come about as an awkward attempt to remove the word *suicide* and to differentiate *rational suicide* for the sick and elderly from *irrational suicide* for the depressed teenager.

At Exit we're quite keen to call this sophistry for what it is: Suicide is when a person takes their own life. Own it.

If the act needs clarification try *rational suicide* to show that it is an informed and considered, long-held decision.

Rational suicide also takes the medical professional out of the picture.

Dying is not a medical event. It is forever frustrating that the professional has colonised the good death, just like they did child birth.

As Professor Susan Stefan said in her 2016 book *Rational Suicide Irrational Laws*, the trouble with doctors is that once you let them into the dying experience you'll never get them out again. How right she is.

Jacobsen: What is the purpose and scope of Exit International? Why is it important for those who think about the end of life for loved ones and themselves in a more secular context, typically?

Nitschke: Exit is an organisation that aims to ensure that every rational person over 50 years, can have access to accurate and reliable information and the means so they can achieve a peaceful death at a time of their choosing, should the need ever arise.

The 50 year age restriction is something of a compromise. We try to restrict access to 'troubled teens' with little life experience, but do not exclude those younger than 50 with valid reasons for accessing such information.

Exit is a bit like an insurance company. We offer insurance for the future. You hope you will never need it, but are comforted from knowing that you have a choice, should the need ever arise.

The average age of Exit members is 75 years. This has not changed in the past 20 years.

While Exit has folk from all walks of life in our community, it may be accurate to say that we have an overwhelming number of non-believers.

This is not surprising since if you are a member of Exit you are likely to want to choose over when and how you might die.

You have little interest in leaving your death to God, or any other religious or spiritual figure.

You are a person who wants autonomy and wants control. Of the '*my life, my death*' persuasion.

Lots of women from second wave feminism are members of Exit, having fought for the right to control their reproduction, many have turned their attention to this next hurdle, control over the time and means of one's death.

As populations' age and growing numbers move into their eighties and nineties many have first-hand experience of what dying badly and with zero choice looks like.

This experience motivates many. And provides the impetus for putting a plan in place.

Jacobsen: What is The Peaceful Pill Handbook? Where does this phrase “Peaceful Pill” originate?

Nitschke: *The Peaceful Pill Handbook* is our practical guide, now published in 5 languages, to explain how an older person or someone who is seriously ill might put plans in place and obtain the drugs or equipment needed to have a reliable and peaceful death at a time of their choosing.

If a person has access to the best, accurate and reliable information, based upon science, then you control the process. With no need to seek permission or involve doctors or other experts.

And, you don’t need the white coat beside the bedside, there is nothing inherently medical about dying.

Dying is a biological, social and cultural event we are all going to experience. It is not necessarily medical or religious in nature.

The book came into being as after Australia’s *Rights of the Terminally Ill Act* was overturned by the Federal Australian Parliament in 1997 (after I helped 4 patients to die in 1996 during the 9 months the law existed).

Just because the law had gone, did not mean that people ceased to want to know about their end of life options. Indeed the opposite was true, and demand grew for workshops where people could be given information and taught the best way they could end their own life should the need arise.

The subject material and the audience questions of these workshops were largely the same, no matter the city or country.

A book seemed a reasonable and logical way to provide the information to a much wider audience of interested folk.

The term *Peaceful Pill* is a metaphor for a means of death that is peaceful and reliable, be this a small drink or an actual pill: something that is accessible, easy and reliable.

The inspiration for the Peaceful Pill came from the Dutch Judge, Huib Drion who coined the term the ‘Drion Pill’, something he argued should be provided freely to any elderly person who requested it.

Judge Drion rationalised that every person over the age of 70 should have access to such a pill, just in case, and he thought it inappropriate that this option should be restricted to doctors or pharmacists, just by virtue of their training.

Indeed the idea that all over 70s should be issued with a peaceful pill – thereby having control over their life (and death), regardless of whether they are sick or not, is a topic of widespread current debate in the Netherlands.

This is what I like about living in this country, its openness and frankness about something as fundamental as dying. The ever-pragmatic Dutch. I do admire them.

Jacobsen: Why is respect for individual choice or personal autonomy about what to do with one’s life of utmost importance in free societies?

Nitschke: In modern society, the decisions we make throughout our lives go a long way to defining who we are, both in our own eyes and that of our communities.

We define ourselves by what we do for work, our marital status, whether we have kids, and so on. Look at anyone's Twitter profile and you'll see this writ large.

Obama says he's a dad, husband and former President. This is how he sees himself, and how the rest of us see him.

Ten years ago, Exit made a TV commercial called 'Exit Choices' which took the ability to make decisions about *vis a vis* *'this is who I am'* as a theme.

It had a guy sitting on the bed in his pyjamas saying *'I chose to go to university, I choose to drive a Ford'. 'I didn't choose to get cancer and I certainly don't want to choose my family watching me suffer'*.

He closed saying *'I've made my choices all my life about how I am and how I live. Why can't I choose how to die?'*

It seems a good question.

I strongly disagree with the counter argument that says a person choosing a time and place to die might injure the community that is left behind.

In the 2004 film *Mademoiselle and the Doctor* by Janine Hosking I explained this.

I have often noticed that there can be a deep resentment on the part of those left behind when someone chooses to leave early, to suicide. It's as though many of us feel deeply and personally insulted when someone leaves essentially telling those left they have no time for the game the rest of us are playing.

Jacobsen: How does voluntary euthanasia differ from rational suicide?

Nitschke: As in the definition, *voluntary euthanasia* has come to mean an act carried out on another person, ending their life at their request. *Suicide* needs no other person, and *rational suicide* is when a considered and informed decision is taken by that individual.

I strongly believe in the words of Thomas Szasz who said that suicide is a fundamental human right, one that society has no moral right to interfere with.

Jacobsen: What are some of the techniques available in for either option in the current moment?

Nitschke: Voluntary euthanasia is taken to mean a doctor-administered lethal injection, this can be legally carried out in the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg providing the legal prerequisites are met.

In Switzerland a lethal injection can be administered, but the person must activate the drug line as voluntary euthanasia is illegal.

Rational suicide is legal and possible anywhere if a person has access to the best information. This is the reason for publishing the *Peaceful Pill Handbook*. This is not only about drugs but can be about gases, poisons and other methods. The two most important criteria are that the method must be peaceful and it must be reliable.

Jacobsen: What tends to be the most preferred methods – by demographics if you have them? Who are the majority demographics of voluntary euthanasia and rational suicide cases?

Nitschke: Most people – the overwhelming majority of Exit members and the readers of our book – want a pill that they can take and which allows them to die peacefully in their sleep.

The best Peaceful Pill is Nembutal which is a barbiturate sleeping drug from the 50s. The chemical compound is pentobarbital which when taken in overdose either by mouth or injection, causes death by respiratory depression while one is in a deep sleep. This was the drug used by Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland and Jimi Hendrix to end their lives.

The popular book *Valley of the Dolls*, described these times when the use of Nembutal was at its peak in the 1950s.

The drug is no longer prescribed as a sleeping agent, and was replaced in the 1960s by the much safer benzo-diazepam family of drugs.

Exit members are people from all walks of life, some have seen family members die badly, others see having a plan in place for their own death as common sense. Many talk about an insurance policy for the future. Others dread the idea of having to leave their home in old age and move into an institution. Some others simply say that when they can no longer look after themselves, it is time to go.

Jacobsen: Where do you see the future of Exit International into the 2020s in terms of expansion and renewed interest via secularization of the advanced industrial economies?

Nitschke: The future of Exit? In 2019 we are having a serious look at how to use technology to speak to increasing numbers of interested people around the world. This includes live-streaming workshops, using hologram and virtual presentations and so on.

We are looking at how to future-proofing the organisation to withstand the relentless attacks on the organisations by those who strongly disagree with our philosophy and who argue that we should be forcibly closed. Our goal is to continue to disseminating accurate and easy-to-understand information about how to have a peaceful and reliable death at a time of your choosing, and to research and develop even better options.

My generation, the baby boomers, have rewritten history all our lives. Why should we not rewrite the rules on dying? This has been my life's work. The trip has been and remains an exciting and highly rewarding one to be working on.

I should add my current project is the Sarco euthanasia capsule.

I am working with a Dutch industrial designer on this. The idea is to create a capsule in which a person can die. The capsule is aesthetically beautiful. It is 3D printed which means that in time, and with the plans being made available, it will be widely accessible as the person will be able to take the plans to their local 3D print shop and get one made for them.

And, as the Sarco is powered by liquid nitrogen (causing death by hypoxia, low oxygen), this may also offer a euphoric death.

The Sarco is aimed at totally overturning how we view death; from gloomy and macabre to an event of celebration and even joy.

Sound far-fetched? We are testing the boundaries for sure. I was pleased last year to see Sarco referred in Newsweek to as the Tesla of the assisted dying movement.

I do believe there is a parallel there.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion? How can people become involved with Exit International and other organizations?

Nitschke: Exit runs workshops in many countries which members can attend either in person, or on-line. We also operate forums which provide a Q&A service. We also actively support a R&D program that encourages the use of new technologies to provide better and more accessible end of life strategies.

You can find more information about our non-profit Exit and the activities we are involved in at www.exitinternational.net

Or about our publishing activities (based in Amsterdam) at www.peacefulpillhandbook.com

Thanks for considering me for this interview.

Interview with Carmenza Ochoa Uribe – Executive Director, Fundación Pro Derecho a Morir Dignamente

January 27, 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Carmenza Ochoa Uribe is the Executive Director of the Fundación Pro Derecho a Morir Dignamente. Here we talk about personal background, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you, for example, geography, culture, language, religion or lack of it, education and family structure and dynamics?

Carmenza Ochoa Uribe: I am Colombian by birth, I was born and I have always lived in Bogota, of a large family, of middle class, we speak Spanish, Catholics, educated in a private school of Catholic nuns.

Jacobsen: What levels of formal education have been part of your life? How have you educated yourself informally?

Uribe: I am a dentist by profession, executing clinically for 25 years. Specialist in Bioethics. Diploma in Nonprofit Foundations Management. Numerous courses on palliative care, bereavement support, how to report bad news, communication.

Jacobsen: As Executive Director of Fundación Pro Right to Die Dignitarily (DMD Colombia), what tasks and responsibilities does the job entail?

Uribe: I am the Legal Representative of the Foundation and I must attend to the legal issues related to this title: reports to the Colombian State control and surveillance authorities.

Attend to the public, both those who wish to join our cause, and those who consult for specific situations, requests for dignified death, euthanasia, palliative care, and bereavement support.

Prepare the contents for the publications of the Foundation, quarterly newsletters for our members, disclosure in social networks, emails.

Promote and give conferences, talks and workshops to the community.

Interact with the entities related to the subject of dignified death, establish support networks.

Coordinate the volunteers who support us in administrative tasks.

Organize the events of the Foundation, conferences for our members or for medical personnel, lawyers, psychologists, etc.

Attend interviews for the media.

Attend to college students and univrsitarios, who come to consult their concerns about the issue of dignified death.

And all the others that appear on a day-to-day basis.

In this office, only the administrative assistant and I work.

Jacobsen: What have been the central problems to die with dignity in Colombia? What are the social, cultural and political barriers to the advancement of the right to die, the choice in euthanasia and medical assistance to die?

Uribe: The great problem to die with dignity in Colombia, is the religious problem, the Catholic Church has been a great influence against this cause, there has been progress in accepting the limitation of the therapeutic effort (previously called passive euthanasia) and palliative care. But it is very radical in rejecting euthanasia.

And the population in general follows with fear the dictamen of the church. Politicians are also afraid to confront the church, for fear of losing the votes of Catholics.

Doctors are trained with a very closed mentality, they do not instruct them in their career about the death of their patients, so they see death as an enemy, a failure, a frustration, not like the normal process of the life cycle of living beings.

The ignorance of the Law, the Sentences that decriminalize euthanasia, the regular legal conduit to apply euthanasia in Colombia.

Death is seen as something bad, undesirable, we do not accept that we are all mortal, we do not talk about death in family, doctors do not talk to their patients about the subject of death, they do not like to give bad news, they prefer trick the patient with false recovery alternatives.

Jacobsen: What have been the real victories and the honest failures in the activism and the work of the Right to Dignify Dignity Foundation (DMD Colombia)? How can other organizations that die with dignity learn from these victories and failures?

Uribe: Colombia is a pioneer country in America on the issue of dignified death, has decriminalized euthanasia since 1997, before Holland, inclusive.

We have opened the field to talk about death, we have evidenced the suffering of people at the end of life and the need for adequate attention with a dignified death mentality, not to fight so that they do not die. We have put palliative care in medical curricula.

We have educated health personnel and Colombians to think about the dignified way of death they want to have.

We need to reach many people, many doctors, many health personnel, we must be more aggressive in communicating this cause.

People consult us, because there is no other entity of this type in Colombia, there is no other space to speak clearly about the right to have a dignified death.

We can guide other organizations about our learning and our obstacles.

Jacobsen: Who are the main Colombian opposition to the Right to Dignify Dignity Foundation (DMD Colombia)? What has been the appropriate opposite response for them?

Uribe: If we assume that the Catholic Church is the main opponent of euthanasia, the answer is that Colombia is a secular State, which is based on the Right to Dignity of the person, whose fundamental rights are autonomy, solidarity, the person should not be treated with torture.

Jacobsen: Of the important activist and legal activities of the Right to Dignify Dignity Foundation (DMD Colombia) for 2019, what will they be? What will be the next steps in this area?

Uribe: Expand our communication to all sectors and regions of the country. Search for health personnel to understand that dignified death is a legal right in Colombia, either with euthanasia or with palliative care.

We are making a greater presence in social networks Facebook, Instagram, twitter. Strengthening our website We look for more spaces where to spread our message, in clinics, hospitals, universities, associations of pensioners, etc.

Jacobsen: What relevant books, and activists, artists, authors, philosophers, public intellectuals, scientists would you recommend to readers here?

Uribe: “Die with Dignity” and “A Happy Death” by Hans Kung

From Derek Humphry: “Jean died in his own way”, “The Last Resort” and “The Right to Die”

Atul Gawande: “Be mortal”

Sherwin B. Nuland “How death comes to us”

Elizabeth Kubler Ross all her books.

The books articles of Asunción Alvarez del Río and Arnaldo Kraus in Mexico.

In Colombia the books and articles by Carlos Gaviria Diaz, Juan Mendoza-Vega and Isa Fonnegra de Jaramillo.

Jacobsen: How can people get involved with the donation of time, the addition of members, links to professional and personal networks, monetary disclosure, exposure in interviews or the writing of articles, etc.?

Uribe: They simply express their desire to be donors, time, money, communications and according to the perfir of people and our capabilities, we interact in solidarity. We are very open to receive voluntary contributions.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or thoughts based on today’s conversation?

Uribe: It has been an interesting exercise to think about the work carried out by the Foundation, its obstacles, challenges and strengths.

It is interesting that a person from Canada wants to know our work.

Jacobsen: Thanks for the opportunity and your time, Carmenza.

Uribe: Thank you for your interest in our Foundation, our work and in me personally.

My best wishes for you.

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