



CANADIAN ATHEIST SET XI

SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

In-Sight Publishing

Canadian Atheist: Set XI

IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

Publisher since 2014

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

Copyright © 2020 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

© 2014-2020 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen. All rights reserved. Original appearance in Canadian Atheist.

Not a member or members of In-Sight Publishing, 2020

This first edition published in 2020

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

Independent Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

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

Names: Jacobsen, Scott Douglas, author

Title: Canadian Atheist: Set XI / Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Description: British Columbia: In-Sight Publishing, 2020.

Identifiers: None (epub).

Subjects: | BISAC: PHILOSOPHY / General (PHI000000)

Classification: LCC (None) | DDC (None)

p. cm.

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

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Designed and implemented by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Canadian Atheist: Set XI</i>	3
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	7
1 CANADIAN ATHEIST	9
• Ask Gretta 3: What Is The Stance of the United Church of Canada on the Resurrection?	10
• Interview with Ian Wood – National Co-ordinator, Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Assisted Dying	13
• Interview with Keith Pennington – Chair, Lancashire Humanists	18
• Interview for Kim Newton, M.Litt. – Executive Director, Camp Quest, Inc. (National Support Center)	21
• Ask Joyce 1 – Into the Dark Night, Finding Some Sunshine	26
• Interview with Carly Gardner – State Director, American Atheists Nevada.....	28
• Interview with Faye Girsh – An Activist for the Right to a Peaceful Death	31
• Interview with Karis Burkowski – President, Society of Ontario Freethinkers	35
• Interview with Jim Lyttle – Secretary, Lake Superior Freethinkers.....	38
• Interview with Robyn E. Blumner, J.D. – President & CEO, Center for Inquiry & Executive Director, Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science	42
• Interview with Silvia Park – State Director, American Atheists Virginia.....	46
• Interview with Derek Humphry – President, Euthanasia Research and Guidance Organization (ERGO)	50
• Interview with Judith Daley – Board Member, Dying with Dignity NSW	52
• Interview with Dr. Meredith Doig, OAM – President, Rationalist Society of Australia.....	56
• Interview with Raghen Lucy – Assistant State Director, Minnesota Atheists & National Leadership Council and Campus President, Secular Student Alliance (Minnesota State University, Mankato)	60
• Interview with Ruth von Fuchs – President, Right to Die Society of Canada.....	63
• Interview with Margaret Downey – Founder & President, Freethought Society	66
• In Memoriam, Deo Ssekitoleko – Representative of Center for Inquiry International – Uganda.....	69
• Interview with Matthew Krevat – Board Member, Triangle Freethought Society	73
• Interview with Merja Soisaari-Turriago – Secretary, EXITUS ry	76
• Ask Minister Poppei 1 – Morals as a Lifestyle, Ethics as a Life Stance	78
• Interview with William Flynn – Founder, Camden County Humanists	79
• Ask Justin 1 – From the Will to Humanpower.....	83
• Interview with Bryan Oates – Administrator, “Syracuse Atheists”	85
• Conversation with Lynn Perrin on More Pipeline Concerns.....	87

• Interview with Sandra Z. Zellick – Secretary, Humanists of Sarasota Bay.....	90
• Ask Mandisa 15 – Placing Blame Where It Belongs	92
• Interview with Asuncion Alvarez del Río – Advisory Council Member, DMD Mexico.....	94
• Interview with Bwambale Musubaho Robert – School Director, Kasese Humanist School (Rukoki/Muhokya/Kahendero)	98
• Interview with Soma – Administrator, “Secular Indian”	101
License and Copyright.....	106

Acknowledgements

I express gratitude to Mark Gibbs, Zachary R.W. Johnson, George Thindwa, Bwambale Robert Musubaho, Laurence A. Moran, Violine Namyalo, Kareem Muhssin, A.M., Takudzwa Mazwienduna, Sarah Mills, Terry Murray, Gary McLelland, Tina Block, Isaiah Akorita, Jen Takahashi, Caleb Lack, Nsajigwa I Mwasokwa (Nsajigwa Nsa'sam), Angelos Sofocleous, Christine M. Shellska, Suzie Mason, Avery Sapoznikow, Cheri Frazer, Ian Bushfield, Angel Sumka, Mohammed Charlie Khadra, Chiedozi Uwakwe, Bayo Opadeyi, Moninuola Komolafe, Terry Sanderson, David Orenstein, Mother of Trans Child, Mark A. Gibbs, Imam Syed Soharwardy, Renton Patterson, Jon King, Rome Bethea, Sophie Shulman, Reva Landau, Janet French, Monica Miller, Bamidele Adeneye, George Ongere, Diego Fontanive, Waleed Al Hussein, Jessica Schab, Angelos Sofocleous, Faisal Saeed Al Mutar, Anouar Majid, Houzan Mahmoud, Dr. Paul Munyenembe, Minister Gretta Vosper, Kathy Dawson, Lee Moore, Joseph Lagumbay, Allie Jackson, Michael Kruse, Uthman Khan, Mike Ivanov, John Brown, Rich Lyons, Dave McKee, Rick Heller, Kuya Manzano, Yasmine Mohammed, Lita Bablitz, Leslea Mair, Helen Austen, Peter Gajdics, Charlotte Frances Littlewood, Dr. Leo Igwe, Angie Johnson, Ellen Wiebe, Devon P. Hargreaves, Gil Leclair, Roger C., Greg Oliver, Bruce Gleason, Tammy Pham, Moses Kamya, Arifur Rahman, Andrew Seidel, Diego Fontanive, David Orenstein, Joyce Arthur, Steven Tomlins, Gordon Henry Guyatt, Colleen MacQuarrie, Catherine Dunphy, Pete, Stephen LeDrew, Ammar Anwer, Teemu Taira, Christopher Haggarty-Weir, Gauri Hopkins, Roger Dubar, Lucas Lynch, Frances Garner, John Carpay, EJ Hill, Damon Conlan, Scott, Anouar Majid, Melissa Krawczyk, Tim Klapproth, Diana Bucur, Kevin and Benedict, Dina Holford, Justine Nelson, Matt Sheedy, Abiodun Sanusi, Bishop George Kuhn, Suzanna Mason, Robert Jensen, Sarah WilkinsLaFlamme, Benjamin David, Clovis Munezero, Aloys Habonimana, Andrew Copson, Stephen Law, Amardeo Sarma, Will Lane, Tom McLeish, Gordon Guyatt, Rakshit Sharma, Mandisa Thomas, Scott (Skeptic Meditations), Waleed Al-Husseini, Vivek Sinha, Hari Parekh, Ghada Ibrahim, Stephen Skyvington, Paul VanderKlay, Amitabh Pal, Sodfa Daaji, Molly Hanson, Marieme Helie Lucas, Bwambale Robert Musubaho, Sara Al Iraqiya, Vidita Priyadarshini, Prof. Imam Soharwardy, Justin Trottier, Ian Bushfield, Karrar Al Asfoor, Nacer Amari, Ismail Mohamed, Anthony Pinn, Rev. Tim Bowman, Usama al-Binni, Carline Klijnman, Shif Gadamssetti, Mir Faizal, Obaid Omer, Karen Garst, Andy Steiger, Melanie Wilderman, Claire Klingenberg, Anonymous LGBTQ+ and An Atheist Community Member from Egypt, Arya Parsipur, Shanaaz Gokool, Anonymous Egyptian Author, Freethinker, and Translator, Jim Haught, Dominic Omenai, Ebenezer Odubule, Vahyala Kwaga, Claire Klingenberg, Diane Burkholder, Zachiam Bayei, Bentley Davis, Agnes Vishnevkin, Jummai Mohammed, Nacer Amari, Dave Solmes, Agness Bweye, Yazan, Zilan, Felicia Cravens, Lynn Perrin, Brad Strelau, Gleb Tsipursky, Howard Burman, Elisabeth Mathes, Sven van de Wetering, Vikram Parahoo, Leo Igwe, "Going to Hell for Laughing" Administrator, Terri Hope, Brian Dunning, Michel Virard, Tim Mendham, Barrie Webster, Perry Jacobs, Fredric L. Rice, Louis Dubé, Heather Pentler, Gayle Jordan, Jacob Mounts, Edward Seaborne, Ann Reid, Doug Thomas, Donald Lacey, Tim Ward, Ryan Boone, Raghen Lucy, Kristine Klopp, Rick O'Keefe, David Kelley, Chris – Administrator, "Humans for Science, Reason and Humanism", Bakari Chavanu, Frances Coombe, Dr. Tung LAM, CBE, Patrick Morrow, Doha Mooh, Megan Denman, Mark Newton, Marquita Tucker, Philip Nitschke, Carmenza Ochoa Uribe, Ian Wood, Keith Pennington, Kim Newton, Joyce Arthur, Carly Gardner, Faye Girsh, Karis Burkowski, Jim Lyttle, Robyn E. Blumner, Silvia Park, Derek Humphry, Judith Daley, Meredith Doig, Raghen

Lucy, Ruth von Fuchs, Margaret Downey, Deo Ssekitoleko, Matthew Krevat, Merja Soisaari-Turriago, Amanda Poppei, William Flynn, Bryan Oates, Lynn Perrin, Sandra Z. Zellick, Asuncion Alvarez del Río, Bwambale Musubaho Robert, and Soma – Administrator, “Secular Indian.” I feel honored to contribute to Canadian Atheist.

Scott

Canadian Atheist

Ask Gretta 3: What Is The Stance of the United Church of Canada on the Resurrection?

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 28, 2019

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 the Resurrection.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Many Christian believers in Canada, and elsewhere, adhere to an inarguable belief or faith claim in the literal death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as an atonement by God, in the form of a sacrifice on the Cross of His son, for the totality of humankind's sins. What is the standard position of the United Church of Canada on this? Does your position differ from it?

Rev. Gretta Vosper: First of all, despite the fact that I am a minister in The United Church of Canada (UCC), I am not a scholar. I am a practitioner. So, although I read the Bible regularly,^[i] I have not been reading much Christian *theology* since West Hill invited me to stop using biblical texts in the Sunday service and I no longer had an urgent need to do so on a weekly basis. Although clergy must engage with and understand theology in order to be ordained, what they can study while at seminary is a tiny, tiny wedge of the vibrant and contradictory arguments made over the last two thousand years. And when in ministry, the challenges of being a full-time practitioner are such that many don't get to read much beyond that throughout their ministries. Which is not an excuse, nor it is a defence. As congregations decline in numbers, clergy are very often pressed beyond their pastoral responsibilities and into the nuts and bolts of running a church, tasks for which they may not be specifically trained.

The challenge of inarguable beliefs and faith claims is that they *have* been argued much over the past many centuries, both in the church and outside of it, and sometimes to the death. So there is not a single, straightforward belief that every denomination holds. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, believes that Jesus is actually being crucified *during the eucharist*. A conflation of time and place occurs which allows the priest to place the of the people (previously confessed to the priest) upon Jesus while he is on the cross, which sins are thereby absolved alongside all the sins ever confessed since the original crucifixion. But no Protestant church, even those practicing communion, would agree with that position.

Still, the refrain regularly tripping off the lips of contemporary mainline or liberal clergy and their denominations, is often something akin to "no resurrection, no faith", a test grounded in a passage in I Corinthians. If Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, it would be argued, there is simply no basis for a Christian's hope. But a study recently done in the UK by the BBC finds that even

amongst those who identify as Christian, the ones who believe in Jesus resurrection as the Bible presents it – that is, bodily – represent only a fraction; less than a third believe in that biblical version.^[ii] That number is added to by Christians who believe in the resurrection, but *not* the way it is presented in the Bible. In other words, there may have been a resurrection, but it wasn't the walking dead.

When I was ordained, I would have identified as a member of that last group: the people who believe in the resurrection but not as the Bible says and not in a way that most people on the street would think you meant. I did not believe in a physical resurrection, not only because I was never taught about such a resurrection, but because another image had been instilled in me: the resurrection *of an idea*. That interpretation argues that the message Jesus had shared throughout his ministry had been so profound, and the power of his movement so significant, that the disciples, themselves, resurrected him as an idea. It was the story of Jesus – the liberal, not the literal interpretation of who he was – that was resurrected. In that interpretation, liberals rally around Jesus as a champion of the downtrodden and exiled, a storyteller and a visionary who called his followers to a radical, justice-seeking and compassionate love. And he was, liberals may say, crucified because that story was a confrontation with the Roman authorities who controlled Jerusalem at that time. The liberal interpretation is a powerful story with people who want and need to hear it in every generation. Indeed, it remains a powerful story for me that compels me to act in ways that would be considered just.

I've learned not to speculate on the number of clergy who do or don't believe something, but I would risk saying that many clergy in the UCC do not have a belief in a literal resurrection of Jesus. Some probably hold to a physical resurrection while others have found the idea so fantastic that it cannot be believed literally. Still, liberal clergy will often say "*Something* must have happened," even if they cannot say exactly what. A most interesting book on the topic is by a friend of mine, Thomas de Wesselow, who bases his argument on a close examination of the history of the Shroud of Turin. In the same way that Northrup Frye broke open the study of the Bible by applying his expertise in the study of literature, Thomas, too, in *The Sign*, brings his expertise as an art historian to the challenges presented by the stories of resurrection sightings.

Just as the church has struggled with the idea of Jesus' resurrection, so, too, has it struggled with the purpose behind the resurrection. Some argue that the god called God demanded that Jesus be sacrificed to pay for the sins of humanity in the same substitutionary way that animals were then sacrificed by the Jewish people. Some argue the god called God required that humanity acknowledge its sinfulness and had to satisfy a debt created by their transgressions; Jesus was provided and crucified to settle that debt. Arguments have raged over centuries.

Still others, and this is where I would expect to find most United Church clergy, parse the word "atonement" by syllable. Rather than uphold the unconscionably vindictive and gory desires of the god called God, many prefer to think of Jesus crucifixion as a sign of our "at-one-ment" with that god. The word's origin goes to the work of making something right but doesn't force people to get all covered with the blood and gore. Rather, it seems to skip over the nasty parts of the story and simply bring humanity back into the loving embrace of the god called God. Don't we always want to downplay the ugly stuff?

To answer the question, then, I'd have to say that the United Church doesn't have a single definition. Throughout the UCC's history, it has encouraged diverse theological perspectives by inviting the various committees across the denomination to test theological beliefs according to

their own understanding. That may have been literal or it may have been metaphorical. Deciding that I could remain in ministry at West Hill without restraint, is a bold example of that. But the truth is that even the denomination's most recent statement of faith, *A Song of Faith*, does not include the word "atonement" and has only two references to resurrection, neither with any reference to a body.

[i] The Revised Common Lectionary is a collection and collation of biblical texts from which many, if not most, Protestant mainline clergy choose their Sunday readings. It presents at least four texts: one from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament); one from the Psalms; an Epistle (the letters section of the New Testament); and the Gospels. I engage these texts each week and often lift a theme out of them around which I create my Sunday service. I do not read the texts in the service, nor do I preach on them, but I do create resources – poetry, words for classic hymn tunes, and "sermon" notes so that anyone who is interested in moving beyond preaching about exclusively biblical themes will have something to start with if their congregation expects to hear the Bible read.

[ii] BBC, "Resurrection did not happen, say quarter of Christians."
<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-39153121>, accessed January 23, 2019.

Interview with Ian Wood – National Co-ordinator, Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Assisted Dying

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 28, 2019

Ian Wood is the National Co-ordinator of the Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Assisted Dying. Here we talk about his 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?

Ian Wood: I grew up in what I think of as a typical middle class suburb of Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia. Our street had a number of children my age or younger. My parents both played the violin, having met as music students at Adelaide University. My father later qualified as an accountant, and that was his work until he died of a heart attack when I was not quite 14 years old. Although my father had played the organ at a nearby church, my sister and I did not attend any church but were brought up with Christian values.

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

Wood: I was educated in the public school system for 7 years, then Scotch

College (Presbyterian) for 4 years, then completed my Diploma in Pharmacy at Adelaide University in a 4-year course. In addition, I did some evening classes in woodwork and motor mechanics, because I restored a 1926 Willys Overland car, converting it into a timber framed delivery van, and wanted to do my own maintenance. Since my involvement with Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Assisted Dying I have done a lot of research into the arguments used against VAD to self educate myself, but I would not call myself an autodidact!

Jacobsen: How did you come to find Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Assisted Dying?

Wood: My interest in Voluntary Euthanasia, as we called it then, started in 2004, when my beautiful, formerly vibrant and articulate Mother was dying, essentially from starvation, after nearly 8 years with Alzheimer's. By this stage she was totally unaware of her surroundings, doubly incontinent, dead in mind and just alive in body. I thought there had to be a better way of dying, and there is.

Some years later I read a letter from Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI to some American Bishops saying that killing in a war, or capital punishment could be justified, but never an assisted death! I said to Rev Trevor Bensch, at the church I attended in North Adelaide, South Australia, that I had a problem with that theology. He agreed that it was illogical and inconsistent. Later again, in 2009, Rev Bensch, based on his experiences as a hospital chaplain, and I, co-founded Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Euthanasia to give the majority of Christians who do support VE and Voluntary Assisted Dying, a voice to counter the vocal but powerful minority who oppose choice on religious grounds. I am just now starting to implement a name change of our group to Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Assisted Dying, to

reflect the current terminology being used on the issue in discussion and in Australian legislation recently passed in our state of Victoria.

The final factor influencing my decision to become public was a photo of a woman, Chantal Sebire, pleading with the French President for access to an assisted death. Chantal suffered from a very rare nasal cancer.



Chantal before her illness.



Chantal after her illness.

She first lost her sense of smell and taste, and then as the tumour evolved it ate into her jaws, before attacking the eye socket. leaving her blind with one eye protruding from her head. Chantal described “atrocious bouts of pain that can last up to four hours at a time”. A reaction to morphine and its derivatives denied her normal pain relief. This photo continues to motivate me.

Jacobsen: As the National Co-ordinator, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Wood: My role is all encompassing, from lobbying MPs, writing letters and media releases, posting comments on Facebook, maintaining contact with our group members and our membership list. I have a small group of people I depend on for input and advice.

Jacobsen: From the Christian denomination in which you’re theologically situated, what is the theological argument, or are the arguments, for voluntary assisted dying?

Wood: We believe that the essential message of Jesus is one of love and compassion. We believe that no person should have to endure futile agonising suffering in an end of life situation,

and that a loving God would not want us to endure it either. As the data collated by Palliative Care itself indicates, there are some people for whom only death will relieve their suffering, and as Christians we believe they should have that choice of assistance.

Obviously some Catholics still believe that suffering can be what they call redemptive, and we have no problem at all with that. A problem only arises when some church hierarchy use their beliefs to deny others their choice.

It is quite interesting to note how the format of religious opposition has changed over my 10 years of involvement. Initially it seemed to be stressing the “Thou Shalt Not Kill” or more accurately, “Thou Shalt not Murder” aspect. This is quite easy to rebut, as to murder is to kill with malice, and that is not the case when a person is pleading for help to die. In addition, the Old Testament is awash with bloodshed, from the drowning of all but Noah and his family, to the genocide of the Midianites, as described in Numbers 31,7-9 & 17-18 to give just two examples.

The trend is now to omit any reference to the religious background behind this opposition, and instead to raise the ‘slippery slope’ argument. Those opposing assisted dying also often allege concerns about ‘vulnerable’ groups, the elderly and those with disabilities. These are valid concerns, and need to be asked, but all the evidence points to these concerns being unjustified and not supported by fact. It is simply scaremongering!

Yet they do not talk about a major group others consider truly vulnerable. I quote Dr Ken Hillman, Professor of intensive care at the University of NSW in Sydney, who says “Up to 70% of people now die in acute hospitals, surrounded by well meaning strangers, inflicting all that medicine has to offer; often resulting in a painful, distressing and degrading end to their life.” and “Clinicians themselves are often complicit in refusing to face the inevitability of dying and death.”.

Jacobsen: From a human rights and social health perspective, and personal autonomy view, what is the argument, or are the arguments, for voluntary assisted dying?

Wood: Scott, I could fill a whole book on the arguments for voluntary assisted dying from the aspects you list here!

Some dot points are –

- Human rights – The Canadian Supreme Court stated: “The prohibition on physician-assisted dying infringes the right to life, liberty and security of the person in a manner that is not in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice”
- Social health – Being accepted for an assisted death perhaps paradoxically seems to enable a person to live longer and have a better end quality of life. It is palliative in its own right in that it removes the fear a person has about how they might die badly.
- Personal autonomy – We make decisions all our lives that affect our health, well being, finances and all aspects of our lives, and to quote theologian Hans Kung: “ [men and women] have the responsibility for making a conscientious decision about the manner and time of their deaths. This is a responsibility which neither the state nor the church, neither a theologian nor a doctor, can take away.”

Jacobsen: What have been some of the successes and honest failure of Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Assisted Dying in its work advocating for voluntary assisted dying?

Wood: Some of the successes of our group would include being invited to make submissions to Government Inquiries into End of Life Care in Victoria and Western Australian with a follow-up request to be interviewed, so I would like to think we contributed in some small way to the passing of the Victorian VAD legislation. I have been invited to speak at WFRTDS Conferences in Victoria and in Chicago in 2014. We have been quoted as Christians in support of VAD on many occasions in various state parliaments.

As an example of a failure I would cite my recent attempt to rebut the position against VAD adopted by the nearby Anglican Synod for the Canberra Goulburn Diocese. Their lead person was exhorting the Anglicans to “Choose life”! Clearly “choosing life” is impossible for a person dying from a terminal illness with acute unbearable futile suffering! I sent out a paper to the 60 or so churches in the Diocese setting out rational Christian support for VAD. I did have one response, but not one person took the trouble to actually talk through the points I raised. They just do not want to know the facts! I feel sure not one Minister canvassed their congregations for their views. Regrettably many churches in similar fashion chose to ignore the fact that there were paedophile priests in their midst, and to deal with them. Church leaders have the effrontery to lecture us all on human dignity and the sanctity of life, when evidence recently given by countless victims of paedophile priests clearly shows the abyss and total lack of understanding by the Catholic and Anglican Church for the suffering endured by those victims. Many of these victims went on to take their own lives in dreadful circumstances in a cruel irony compared with the Church position against voluntary assisted dying.

Of course this unwillingness to adapt to change has been a feature of the patriarchal religions, particularly when it comes to recognising the rights of women – the right to vote, own property, control their reproduction, qualify and work as doctors and lawyers etc. Yet some religious leaders and progressive churches have been at the forefront of advocating such change. How many of us are aware that Right Rev W Inge, the former Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral London, UK, was a founding member of the British Voluntary Euthanasia Legalisation Society as far back as 1935?

Some of your readers may be surprised to learn that a substantial majority of Australians who designate themselves as Christian support VAD from the religious aspect, as well as the human rights and personal autonomy point of view. There is similar Christian support in Canada. It can be hard to get this Christian support more well known to the public when media tend to contact, in the first instance, outspoken church hierarchy who are against compassionate choice.

Jacobsen: Who have been important allies in the world for voluntary assisted dying becoming more legal in more contexts and more socially accepted in more environments within Australia?

Wood: Some allies in the religious area have been outstanding in their support and guidance. The late Rev. John Murray from New Zealand contacted me early in 2009. Rev Trevor Bensch, group co-founder, and our Patron Rev Dr Craig de Vos have been influential. Others recognised internationally have been Lord Carey, the former Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu of South Africa. <https://christiansforve.org.au/archbishop-desmond-tutu-gives-his-blessing-to-the-voluntary-assisted-dying-campaign-in-australia/#more-371>

Recently we have allies in support giving sermons on VAD, including Rev Scott McKenna in Scotland, Rev Craig Kilgour in NZ and Rev Glynn Cardy also in NZ. Canon Rosie Harper in UK is another – her uncle had an assisted death in Switzerland Rosie describes as ‘beautiful’.

I would cite Victorian Dr Rodney Syme as a person and a friend who has had enormous positive influence in the Australian debate leading to the Victorian legislation being passed. He challenged the law by publicly stating he had given patients who were dying the means to be in complete control of their suffering. Dr Roger Hunt, a palliative care expert in South Australia who has been advocating VAD legislation as a compassionate additional option of good palliative care is an outstanding example. Prof. Jan Bernheim, Belgium, has been very helpful with advice. Media personality Andrew Denton is another person, with his GoGentle Australia, as is Neil Francis with his website DyingforChoice. Another example of an ally is Margaret W from South Australia. Margaret has a friend in Canada who regularly posts her news clippings relating to the progress of MAID in Canada, and Margaret in turn posts them to me – often including a \$20 donation towards our group expenses. (Membership is free) So I have been kept up to date with movement towards legislation, first in Quebec, then in all Canada. Allies such as Margaret are truly inspirational! There are many others too numerous to list here.

Jacobsen: If individuals have an interest, how can they become involved with Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Assisted Dying?

Wood: While we are an Australian group, we do have members in support of our aims particularly from New Zealand and some other overseas countries. We would welcome folk from Canada who support our aims. The easiest way to become involved is to look at our website <https://christiansforve.org.au/> People can join the group through that site if they wish, and also read our News Posts.

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

Wood: I believe Christian support for VAD can be summed up in the two final paragraphs of a sermon by Rev Craig Kilgour of New Zealand. Craig describes the circumstances around the assisted death of his nephew in Canada and his own support for VAD/MAID. I found it very moving and I truly believe all readers of Canadian Atheist would feel the same.

To quote Craig: “Let me finish this with what my family members said and repeated often using these words about my nephew’s death: It was compassionate, it was humane, it was right and good. And the family are very proud and humbled with the courage he showed in his battle with cancer. And to me no one has the right to be critical and judgemental of the choice he made.

So for me and my family this is not a philosophical debate, it is not a theological debate, it is not a theoretical debate, it is a reality and it was right and my nephew was fortunate he lived in Canada.”

Read the full sermon here > <https://christiansforve.org.au/rev-craig-kilmour-new-zealand-sermon-my-nephew-had-an-assisted-death-in-canada-it-was-compassionate-it-was-humane-it-was-right-and-good/#more-498>

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

Wood: Thank you, Scott, for the opportunity to present my point of view.

Interview with Keith Pennington – Chair, Lancashire Humanists

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 29, 2019

Keith Pennington is the Chair of Lancashire Humanists. His daughter's interview was published here, recently, too. Here we talk about his background, views, and work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Your daughter, Heather Pentler, provided a wonderful interview earlier. How does secular parenting differ from religious parenting, typically?

As a secular parent, what do you try to keep in mind about the nature of evangelistic efforts aimed at the young and adolescents in most countries of the world?

Pennington: I was impressed with Heather's answers and it was interesting to see how much she has matured. I saw in her younger days much that was similar to my attitudes in my late teens and early twenties – I think many pass through a kind of aggressive atheism, but with experience this usually moderates.

In school years (especially with the very young) we know that in the UK they are usually presented with Christianity as a “fact” and everything is talked about in terms of absolutes.

I experienced this myself and found that back in the 60/70s I felt very isolated in my views and was given the impression that I was “not the norm”. I think these days, with the internet, it is easier to find like minds and support that you are not strange.

So, conscious of my own experiences, I was always aiming to create a safe environment at home where all topics could be discussed. My wife was Catholic and so between us we would give differing views, but never forced our opinions on the children.

We made time to talk about various issues as they arose but we were always of a view that the children would be free to make their own informed choices about faith.

Jacobsen: How can you best serve children through the provision of critical thinking tools to combat the darkness of ignorance, superstition, and unquestionable dogma?

Pennington: I think some of the most important things to focus on are, not to be judgmental of others and to look at the facts or history behind situations. I am still learning but am certainly of the opinion that dialogue with others is very useful.

When I have been presented with something that comes from a particular view, I always find that I question it and I suppose this has rubbed off on my own children.

It has not been a conscious decision on my part, but I suppose if you grow up around that then there is a reasonable chance that you will pick up some aspects of this way of thinking.

Jacobsen: What was the religious context, for you, while growing up?

Pennington: I was brought up in the Church of England and was even an alter-boy until the age of about 12. I remember that I was not happy with the idea of “Sunday School” and so did not attend, which led me down a different path than many of my school friends.

It was probably when I was about 9-10 that I started reading Science Fiction, which through the likes of Asimov and Clarke started me to question things and think about things in a new way.

My father died when I was 11 and perhaps this accelerated my thinking and questioning of everything. So by the time I was 12-13 I had developed to the point that I walked away from the Church and declared that I was an atheist.

As I have said before, at this point of time in the early 70s it was not possible to easily find others who shared my views. So I simply read what I could and often had to explain my viewpoint to others around me.

For many years I certainly felt like I was one of a very small minority, even if this was not the reality.

Jacobsen: When did you first come into contact with a formal secular community?

Pennington: I think the first time I discovered a formal secular community was only about 5 years ago. After a little internet research on a subject I came across the BHA (British Humanist Association, as it was known then).

Shortly after that I found links to a local group in Lancashire and made initial contact. For some time though I was too busy with other voluntary commitments and was only able to attend the odd one or two sessions.

Eventually, the situation changed and I made a conscious decision to part-take more in their meetings.

Jacobsen: How did you come into a leadership position, as you're the Chair of the Lancashire Humanists group now?

Pennington: Once I started attending the meetings regularly of our local Humanist group, I found myself increasingly contributing to the discussions.

Within our meetings it is clear that we cover a wide range of people, but we do have a core group who have the same ambitions about what our path forward might be.

When our last Chair stood down at the end of his term, I felt that the time was right to offer myself for the role and the attendees of the AGM were happy to elect me to the position.

Now I am trying to see how I can help us have a more prominent profile in the region and work with other groups. Our numbers are small and the region we cover is quite large, so we have many challenges ahead of us to enable us to be more accessible to future Humanists who are reaching out to find a group (as I did only a few years ago).

We have put out contact details to local media, which has initially given us a bit of publicity and given us the chance to let a wider audience have some understanding of what we are about. I hope that this can continue and that others find a home with us.

Jacobsen: How has this more than half-of-a-century atheist journey changed with the alterations in the culture and the distinguishing characteristics of mind at middle age and later age?

Pennington: It has been an interesting journey and one that is still developing. When I look back on who I was at certain times in my younger life, I find that I am not happy with that person.

As already indicated, in my late teens and early 20s I was probably quite aggressive and arrogant about my atheism – sometimes strongly challenging others who expressed a different view.

I suppose this was a reaction to the certainty with which many of faith put forward their position, which would imply it was stupid to have a different view.

Working in a science profession I was always working in a fact based environment but in my 30s I took an opportunity to start volunteering with an organisation that taught me a huge amount about people and helped me develop immensely as a person.

Looking back, I am sure that being a Samaritan volunteer was a very positive influence on me and taught me how to listen well to others. These skills are now part of who I am and I find they help me work better with others who do not share my beliefs.

Jacobsen: How can the atheists and the religious work together on common communal problems? What is an example from personal or professional life?

Pennington: Through my second wife (another Catholic) I have become involved with a Movement that has strong roots in its Catholic beginnings. I find that I am one of only a few in the UK involved with them, who is an atheist and consequently I am able to dialogue with them and we learn from each other over the years.

I aim to be a positive influence and hope that I can remove their fears that all atheists want to ban their beliefs.

Following on from the skills I have developed over the years, I had the opportunity in late 2017 to be part of a dialogue group with Humanists, Christians and Muslims.

This was a set of formal sessions that ran for 6 weeks and gave us some good opportunities to learn to understand each other better. It has taken some time for me to actively follow up on this, but I am in the process of trying to start a new dialogue group to meet informally on a monthly basis.

This will be open to all faiths and we already have commitments from Humanists, Christians and a Hindu. I will be working hard to see if we can encourage some Muslim involvement and then kick this off in the near future.

My hope is for this to be a positive group that may eventually gain some good publicity for all involved and may encourage others to follow the idea.

I will continue to look for opportunities to work with religious groups and show how we Humanists can contribute to our society. We are about being involved in a shared future, where all can be respected.

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

Pennington: Thank you for this opportunity and I will be reading more from your website going forward.

Interview for Kim Newton, M.Litt. – Executive Director, Camp Quest, Inc. (National Support Center)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 30, 2019

Kim Newton is the Executive Director of Camp Quest Inc. (National Support Center). Here we talk about her background, views, and work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was early life like for you? Did religion play a role in it? Were science and critical thinking ever a part of it?

Kim Newton, M.Litt.: Critical thinking and science were definitely important aspects of my childhood, but religion also played a major part, too. I grew up in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, which is a traditionally conservative and religious area.

My parents both studied science and electrical engineering, and they encouraged me to love science. We worked on science projects together, and I remember being in awe of my Dad's collection of science magazines, which took up quite a lot of space on our bookshelves.

Still, science and faith were not mutually exclusive for us. My family regularly attended a Presbyterian church. In high school, I joined a very active youth group at a local Baptist church and chose to be baptized when I was about 15. Even then, I didn't stop questioning the nature of god.

As a child, I remember thinking, "God doesn't talk back to me when I pray... should he?" And then later in my early teens, "If God is real, where is he in the universe? Is he outside of it? How does God fit into what I'm learning about physics, evolution, and the Big Bang?"

I think I really stumped the Baptist youth group leader with that last question!

My early years were also defined by a few significant events. When I was 3, my only baby sister was still-born. That was a terrible tragedy for our family. I then had a life-threatening illness at age 5, and spent a lot of time in the hospital.

My parents didn't want me to grow up as an only child, so we became a foster family. Many children lived with us over the next 16 years. My parents also adopted three children.

My experience growing up with other children who had such different life experiences from my own has definitely shaped my worldview.

As I grew older, I tried to maneuver around my growing cognitive dissonance with religion by reminding myself that I was committed to the humanistic principles of Christianity, not to the supernatural elements, or even the promise of an afterlife in heaven with my sister.

Eventually, I couldn't continue to believe that an omnipotent and loving god would have any sort of divine plan in which my sister would die, or that other children would be abused and abandoned.

My secular identity emerged over many years and is most definitely entwined with my hope that all children have opportunities to think critically about the world and about religion.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on pivotal people within the community relevant to personal philosophical development, who were they for you? Why is mentorship from elders important for the young?

Newton: Young people need mentors because mentorships help affirm that kids matter, that someone cares about them, and that they can trust and be trusted.

Young people also need to be around adults who are candid about their own doubts and limited knowledge, and who help them tap their innermost powers of self-confidence and reasoning.

I'm fortunate in that I had many adults in my life who encouraged my personal philosophical development. While I enjoyed science, I found myself drawn to the humanities, especially theatre.

I remain fascinated by the power of theatre to bring together communities, and exploring the diversity of humanity through dramatic literature and performance.

My most influential mentors are former theatre teachers and directors. I have Bob Wright, Keri Wormald, and Doreen Bechtol to thank especially for their mentorship over the years.

My parents and mentors empowered me to seek out answers for myself and to strive for the truth. When children lack these types of trust-based relationships with caring adults, they suffer. Mentorship is essential for all children, especially if we want them to grow into confident leaders.

Jacobsen: What about literature and film, and other artistic and humanities productions, of influence on personal philosophical worldview? What ones, in particular, stand out to you?

Newton: When I was 13, I had the chance to go to a Shakespeare camp at the theatre in my hometown, the Blackfriars Playhouse. That experience ignited my love of both Shakespeare and summer camp.

Shakespeare's plays are full of the complexities of human nature, so it was through studying and playing in them that I further developed my worldview as a humanist. My favorite of Shakespeare's plays is *Pericles*.

The books I read as a child also influenced my personal philosophical views. Some favorites include *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the wider borderless online world of non-religious people? How are these important parts of the overall secular community inasmuch as it exists?

Newton: I started seeking out the community of other humanists when I was in college (and Myspace had more followers than Facebook.) I remember taking an online belief quiz and getting a result of "Unitarian Universalist".

I had never heard of Unitarian Universalism before, but I was delighted to learn about its humanist principles and creedless congregations. It wasn't until after I finished graduate school that I started looking in earnest to connect with others online.

Online secular communities are necessary for people who are otherwise isolated, or living in rural communities, or who cannot be open about their secularism with family, friends, or co-workers. Still, having a local secular community is also important.

In response to talking with other secular people and families in our area, I helped found Staunton Secular Humanists. It's been wonderful to help other non-religious people connect, and to increase the visibility of secular worldviews in a community that is otherwise dominated by religion.

Jacobsen: How did you come into contact with the Camp Quest programs and initiatives? What were your initial impressions? What positions have you held within the organization?

Newton: I was working as a camp director for several years before I found Camp Quest. I had gotten involved with our local UU fellowship and decided to become a facilitator of *Our Whole Lives* (a comprehensive sex education curriculum.).

That led me to further explore my interest in youth programs based in humanist values.

I was at a UU leaders' training event when I started talking with a few others about the need for kids to have a summer camp experience where they could openly express their beliefs and be free to question ideas about faith and religion.

I didn't know that such a camp existed...I was planning to start my own! Not long after that, a Google search led me to Camp Quest's job posting for an Executive Director. I joined the organization in January 2017, and then got to work on relocating our national office to Virginia.

My initial impression of Camp Quest was that the people involved are among the most generous, open-minded, and dedicated folks I've ever had the privilege to work with.

I was also impressed by the diversity of the programs, and commitments that each camp has made to be welcoming of all children – from creating gender-inclusive cabin policies, to collaborating with leaders at other camps to make Camp Quest an enduring movement.

This level of commitment to excellence is what makes Camp Quest an exceptional organization to work for. And, being at camp is the best! Our campers are truly remarkable, loving and accepting young people who see beauty in science and nature, and most importantly, in each other.

Jacobsen: As the national Executive Director for Camp Quest, what are the associated tasks and responsibilities coming with the position? Why is this, in particular, a fulfilling and important form of work within the secular community?

What have been some of the more difficult, challenging experiences within it? What have been some of the more heartwarming and intriguing ones?

Newton: My primary responsibility is to facilitate our camp network relationships, supporting our volunteers, camps, and our Board of Directors. I direct the operations of our National Support Center, and oversee our licensing processes.

This includes helping to promote camps, fundraising, and researching and providing resources to help improve all areas of our operations, training, and program development.

Most other secular organizations focus on serving the needs of adult members, but Camp Quest is unique in that we serve kids and help them navigate complex life questions in their most formative years. Our camps continue to evolve to meet the needs of our campers.

A challenging aspect of this work has been learning to adapt to the rapidly changing tides in our economy and politics, as well as new dynamics of family life and what it means to be a child in today's society.

Kids today are under so much academic and social pressure that it seems harder for them to enjoy opportunities to be outside and to unplug. At camp, kids can relax and enjoy quality time making friendships and engaging in essential unstructured play. Another challenge has been connecting with enough volunteers.

One heartwarming moment from this summer was when a camper, about 10 years old, shared with me that he most appreciated that camp gave him a break from school, because he could be himself around his friends at camp in a way he couldn't be with his classmates.

Hearing that as an adult, and now as a mother too, was a touching reminder that kids, like grown-ups, also need breaks in their routines and to be around new people and new experiences, because this is how we grow and learn.

Jacobsen: How can individual secular people become involved with an contribute to Camp Quest, e.g., donations, provision of professional networks, sending their kids or recommending others, and so on?

What has been the general feedback of the community of the young who have taken part in Camp Quest?

Newton: Many of our campers talk about their week at Camp Quest as being among the most special times of their lives. They share about the new friends they make, how welcoming and accepting everyone is, and how it is a place where they can truly be themselves.

Sending your child to camp, or sharing about Camp Quest with other children in your life is a great way to get connected and involved. Camp Quest wouldn't be possible without the volunteers who run our programs.

Every summer, more than 400 talented and skilled adults take time off from work and away from their own families to help make camp happen. So, if you can, please consider volunteering.

Many volunteers are college students, parents with older children, or retirees who want to reconnect with youth and apply their professional experiences to our programs.

Others can support our work by donating, becoming program sponsors, and by making a gift to the Helen Kagin Campership Fund, which provides financial assistance to campers from low-income families. I invite your readers to visit campquest.org to sign up for our newsletter, donate, or just get in touch!

Jacobsen: How do you coordinate programs and initiatives with other the varieties of leadership within Camp Quest?

Newton: I work closely with our senior leaders to coordinate training and other network-wide initiatives. Each year, we plan an annual Leadership Summit, where volunteers from across the country gather for a weekend of networking and sharing ideas.

Our 2018 Summit was in Minneapolis. We held over 17 collaborative training sessions, plus offered a day-long workshop for volunteers to become certified in Youth Mental Health First Aid.

We also welcome guest speakers from other secular organizations and community groups. We recently developed an intranet and program database, which allows volunteers to collaborate year-round on projects, discussion boards, and to share resources in our knowledge base.

In time, this will be an invaluable resource, allowing new volunteers to draw on the experiences of others from across the country. Recently, we coordinated efforts to assist more of our camps seeking accreditation through the American Camp Association to receive discounts on fees and membership.

We also just launched a webinar series so that volunteers, parents, and other movement leaders can connect year-round about secular youth development.

As Camp Quest continues to grow, we hope that our scope will expand and include a broader range of youth development programs in addition to our core residential camps.

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

Ask Joyce 1 – Into the Dark Night, Finding Some Sunshine

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 31, 2019

Joyce Arthur is the Founder and Executive Director of the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. She has been an abortion rights and pro-choice activist since 1998. Arthur worked for 10 years running the Pro-Choice Action Network. In addition to these accomplishments, she founded FIRST or the first national feminist group advocating for the rights of sex workers and the decriminalization of prostitution in Canada. We decided to start an educational series on reproductive rights in its various facets. Here we talk about rising concerns.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: As we see a rise of, typically, rightwing authoritarianism in state-based secular and religious garb, we see the standard diversionary tactics: pointing the finger and directing vitriol at vulnerable targets or the normally vilified including feminists, activists, students, individuals with social programs and initiatives, progressive politicians and policies, and the non-religious. How is this rising tide impacting Canadian reproductive rights and its associated activists?

Joyce Arthur: We see the direct impacts here in Canada with the election of Doug Ford as Premier of Ontario, and the predicted election in May 2019 of Jason Kenney and his United Conservative Party in Alberta. In Ontario, Ford has repealed the progressive sex-ed curriculum passed by the previous Liberal government in 2015, which contained crucial references to sexual orientation, gender identity, and consent. Ford's decision was based mostly on inaccurate right-wing propaganda and scare-mongering by right-wing groups and conservative parents. To give two examples, they claim that parents weren't consulted, but in fact 4,000 were randomly selected along with dozens of child development professionals, mental health sexual health organizations, parent groups and police. The vast majority of Ontarians – students, parents, teachers, healthcare professionals – disagree with the repeal of the sex-ed curriculum. Second, right-wing groups claimed that kids would be taught graphic information about homosexuality and gender fluidity and forced to view them as normal, accepted practice. But in the 2015 curriculum, children were taught to respect people's differences, that's all.

Other threats include the possible repeal (or non-enforcement) of the safe access zone laws passed in both Ontario and Alberta recently, which help to protect women and providers from the harassment of anti-choice protesters; and attacks against LBGTQ rights, including the ability to join gay-straight alliances in Alberta schools without being outed to their parents.

We might have a tendency to feel complacent in Canada because of our liberal feminist government, but things go in cycles, and a future Conservative government is a question of when, not if. The previous Harper government inflicted a lot of damage on progressive groups and women's equality groups, while elevating opportunities and funding for religious and anti-human rights groups. We can expect the same during the next Conservative government, with resulting setbacks for women's rights, or at least no further forward movement.

Jacobsen: Why are women's rights the first to be attacked by these regimes, politicians, and groups?

Arthur: We still live in a patriarchal society where white men rule and have many advantages and privileges (at least the wealthy and powerful ones). So they will fight to maintain that power. It's often quite easy to roll back the rights of women and other disadvantaged groups – right-wing governments can pass laws, or just policies, that simply cancel or reduce their rights, and they count on the relative powerlessness of those groups, plus the fear of the general populace that inhibits them from speaking out in case of reprisals. For example, Turkey has a relatively liberal abortion law but it's now meaningless because President Erdogan is anti-abortion and wants to increase the birth rate. He's enforcing unwritten policies that make it extremely difficult for hospitals to provide abortions, plus information and access to contraception has disappeared. Meanwhile, Viagra is available over the counter in Turkey with zero controversy.

The right to abortion is a bedrock human right for women, because we can't enjoy equality or fully participate in society without the ability to control our reproductive capacity. But equality for women is a scary thing for right-wing and authoritarian forces, so abortion becomes a flashpoint in countries dominated by such forces, including the U.S. Of course, churches and religious groups also hold a lot of power in many countries, which is why abortion is still illegal in most Latin American countries, and often unavailable in Italy, Spain, and South Africa because large numbers of healthcare professionals exercise "conscientious objection" due to religious belief and abortion stigma.

But women are increasingly wielding real power too, as shown by the #MeToo movement, and by the successful campaigns to legalize abortion in Ireland and Chile. When women are taken seriously and their rights respected by a majority of people, they CAN win. But we're still fighting a deeply-entrenched patriarchy that continues to exert power in many countries around the world.

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

Interview with Carly Gardner – State Director, American Atheists Nevada

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 31, 2019

Carly Gardner is the State Director of American Atheists Nevada. Here we talk about her background, views, and work.

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

Carly Gardner: I was born and raised in Salt Lake City Utah also known as Mormonville. This presented a mountain of problems as a child and as a teenager.

It was pretty common for me to get home from school in tears because yet another family wouldn't allow their child to play with a non-Mormon. My Mormon cousins were especially awful around the holidays, fostering a sense of dread surrounding holidays that followed me into adulthood.

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

Gardner: I spent several weekends a year with my Grandma Yukie a Buddhist. Many of the things she said still resonate with me such as “Karma is a self-fulfilling prophecy”. When you intentionally hurt others you self punish by saying the wrong thing or hesitating and missing opportunities.

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

Gardner: When I was a teen, I would read my mother's Book Club Books.

Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arab by Jean Sasson. Sasson describes female genital mutilation and hanging the marital sheets in the foyer of homes.

In My Father's House: A Memoir of Polygamy (Voice in the American West) by Dorothy Allred Solomon (Author), Andy Wilkinson (Foreword)

This taught me all I need to know about fundamentalists using holy books to justify treating women as property. Learning about the religious background of circumcision let me know men sometimes suffer at the hands of holy books

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

Gardner: In 2012 a friend introduced me to Meetup.com. One of the meetup.com groups called Salt Lake City Post Mos (people who have left the Latter Day Saints) also had a facebook group.

Meetup.com was an EXCELLENT tool for helping me find community. One of the first events I created was “Flirtology – the Science of Flirting” Mishele Walker teaching SLC singles the art of communicating in a relationship. I actually met my husband Monte at the first Flirtology lesson, he likes to say he got an A.

Jacobsen: How did this lead to American Atheists Nevada?

Gardner: Monte and I moved to NV to be closer to the ocean and 10 of his 14 siblings. Once here we used Meetup.com to find our nonreligious folks in Las Vegas.

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

Gardner: Be the contact person for American Atheists.

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

Gardner: I am not sure I understand the question. Provisions? – Waffles at the event called Waffles Welcome Party? Do you mean what Atheist activities are available in Las Vegas?

If people want to meet other nonreligious individuals face to face the Center for Science and Wonder (CSAW) hosts 30+ events per month, including debates, lectures, community events, potlucks, plays, comedy nights, homeschooler events and dances.

CSAW strives to be the “We Welcome All Who Welcome All” venue. We are home to Agnostic and Atheist Alcohols Anonymous. We have had community partners such as Three Square and Caridad present at CSAW. The meetup.com group Las Vegas Atheists has a handful of events at other restaurants in town in addition to the CSAW events.

If people want to post memes and argue with people who join Facebook groups LV hosts several such groups. The LGBTQ community also has “The Center” in downtown Las Vegas.

My personal focus and the purpose of CSAW is to bring atheists out from behind their computer screens and into a physical space where they can interact with their fellow humans.

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

Gardner: The secular community has overcome many issues such as in the past in order to perform a wedding ceremony the officiant must be in good standing with a church or religious organization. <https://www.reviewjournal.com/business/humanists-president-offers-custom-las-vegas-weddings/> Raul Martinez mentioned in the article is a supporter of CSAW. <https://friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2008/12/14/an-atheist-isnt-allowed-to-marry-anyone-even-in-las-vegas/>

Michael Jacobsen also supported CSAW before he passed away in April 2018. Weddings are a big deal in Vegas “Clark County Clerk Lynn Goya said about 4 percent of Las Vegas’ annual visitor volume comes for weddings, and more than 10,000 jobs in Clark County depend on wedding tourism.” <https://www.reviewjournal.com/business/las-vegas-wedding-industry-wants-to-boost-marriage-rate/>.

Now that the Atheist wedding issue has been solved, Nevada is an atheist paradise compared to SLC.

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?

Gardner: Embrace “We Welcome All Who Welcome All” plan family-friendly events, have space, games, and toys for kiddos. Hold free events and purely entertaining events.

Welcoming and leaving room for people to believe and think in their own unique way, even includes some of our biggest supporters are actually theists. My best friend is quite active in the LDS church and she brings her kiddos to events at CSAW.

Strangely CSAW has more events for single moms to bring kiddos compared to her local LDS ward. I believe first and foremost secular Americans need to allow the people they interact with to keep their religious security blanket.

Only after proving through action and repetition can a secular individual show a theist that they won’t be left in the cold if they take off their religious security blanket.

Giving theists a place to run TOWARDS is MORE important than dragging them kicking and screaming out of the situation that brings them comfort.

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?

Gardner: Pointing out the faults of fundamentalist religious leaders, isn’t really the job of the secular community. Both atheist and theist journalists can report on the misdeeds of the fundamentalists.

When fundamentalist leaders break laws the justice system will punish them, the court of secular opinion won’t bring about change. How do we eliminate the ill-treatment of women and children – secular leaders shouldn’t have closed doors meetings with individuals of the opposite sex.

This should help avoid some of the problems the Catholic and LDS churches are experiencing. Thankfully secular community has built-in protections because we don’t believe our leaders are appointed by God. Since we don’t believe our leaders are divinely inspired we are more likely to prosecute criminals.

Also since the leaders of the secular community aren’t required to be celibate, they have healthy and legal avenues to deal with their sexual desires.

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

Interview with Faye Girsh – An Activist for the Right to a Peaceful Death

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 1, 2019

Faye Girsh is the Founder and the Past President of the Hemlock Society of San Diego. She was the President of the National Hemlock Society (Defunct) and the World Federation of RTD Societies (Extant). Currently, she is on the Advisory Board of the Final Exit Network and the Euthanasia Research and Guidance Organization. Here we talk about her life, 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?

Faye Girsh: I grew up, an only child, in a middle class, loving family in Philadelphia. Both parents had large extended families and I lived in a row house with lots of kids on our street.

My dad worked hard in his men's clothing store, despite his longing to be a surgeon. They retired to Florida after I left Phila to go to graduate school in Boston.

I have since lived around the country and the world. I am widowed with two great children and four grands and live in a wonderful retirement community in San Diego.

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

Girsh: My MA degree in Psychology is from Boston University but I glimpsed Harvard across the river and went there for a Doctor of Education degree in Human Development.

My vague plans included university teaching and raising a family which is just about how it turned out. The self-education part was big.

While teaching at Morehouse College, I did a research project on death penalty jurors which took me into forensic psychology since the study was used by the US Supreme Court and I was asked to testify in death penalty cases around the country.

I taught myself how to do psychological evaluations used by the courts to determine sentence and to select juries — both of which I continued to do.

I learned about the right to die movement and the passion about the injustice of not being able to make one's final decision propelled me to learn all about it.

I was in private practice as a clinical and forensic psychologist in San Diego for 18 years before giving it up to run the national Hemlock Society out of Denver in 1996.

Jacobsen: As the Past President of the Hemlock Society of San Diego, what were the more troubling and the more heartwarming stories from the time as the President?

Girsh: I founded the Hemlock Society of San Diego in 1987 and we immediately were asked by the national Hemlock Society to get signatures for a ballot initiative to have physician aid in dying in Calif.

That was an exhausting — and eventually frustrating — pursuit since there was no money to continue the effort in 1988. But we did it again in 2003, collected 28,00 signatures in San Diego, got the initiative on the ballot, had no money left, but still got 47% of the vote.

Of course, we now have a Calif law permitting aid in dying passed by the legislature in 2016.

Jacobsen: Now, with the tenure complete, what is the next step for you?

Girsh: My forte is not in administrative details but in risk-taking and moving the issue ahead. I did that with the Caring Friends Program, now the thriving Final Exit Network, and with the Hemlock Society of San Diego.

I am not sure how to accomplish this but it is absolutely necessary to expand the Oregon model of aid in dying, now 20+ years old to include non-terminal people.

I would like to see our law look more like the law in Canada which includes voluntary euthanasia, as well as self-administration of medication. And I would like to see doctors more involved and even have non-doctors trained to provide a peaceful death.

Jacobsen: What were the largest successes and honest failures from the time as the President?

Girsh: My two successes were the founding of Final Exit Network, a national organization using a model different from the Oregon law involving trained volunteers providing information and support to people in their homes at no charge.

And the Hemlock Society of San Diego, now in its 32nd year, informing people about their end of life choices at our monthly meetings and on line with these programs available to watch on our web site (hemlocksocietysandiego.org) Failures?

We tried to develop a San Diego, then a national, program for Patient Advocacy but the model we chose was not utilized by our members. It is still needed since so many things happen to patients at the end of life that could be prevented by trained advocates.

The major problem existing all over the world is Dementia in all its forms. Many of us would like to be able to die before or as the disease runs its horrible course.

So far a person must be mentally competent to get help, in most places. This must change so that a person could get help to die even if not competent but lapsing into the moderate or severe stages of this life-shattering illness.

Jacobsen: What is California's End of Life Option Law (Right to Die Law or Physician Aid in Dying)? Why was this important, and is this salient, for end of life planning and options for Californians?

Girsh: With 40 + million people in California, getting this law passed here was a major accomplishment. The law is more restrictive than most people would like, it is rare to find a doctor to do it, and it is too costly but it has been a godsend.

It enables people to determine their own way to a peaceful death, to have a celebration of life while alive, and to not endure the pain, dependence, and indignity which often accompany the last stages of dying. It works for those people who are eligible, can find a compassionate doctor, and can afford the medication.

Jacobsen: What are some of the terms and phrases floating around: the right to die, euthanasia, dying with dignity, and medical assistance in dying, and so on? What differentiates each of these, aside from, potentially, sociopolitical concerns?

Girsh: The plethora of terms is confusing. In the seven jurisdictions where aid in dying is legal, but medication is self-administered, it is referred to as Medical Aid in Dying, Physician Aid in Dying, and Death with Dignity.

Our opponents like to call it “assisted suicide” even though every statute specifically says it is NOT “suicide” for insurance purposes or on the death certificate. We strongly believe in suicide prevention when the reason for choosing death is not a rational one.

Where a direct injection by a doctor is permitted (Canada, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg) it is called Voluntary Euthanasia, also MAID (Medical Aid in Dying.) The word “euthanasia” must be preceded by “voluntary” to apply to what we want in our Right to Die movement.

The “right to die” is more generic and means that each individual should have the right to choose a peaceful, dignified death consistent with his or her own values, and with assistance.

Jacobsen: Who are some of the luminaries of the movement? What is some essential reading on these subjects pertinent to the mission and mandate of the more than 30-year-old organization?

Girsh: Derek Humphry is the founder of the Hemlock Society, now head of ERGO (Euthanasia Research and Guidance Organization) and about to retire. But still very productive and living in Oregon.

Dr. Michael Irwin, also in his late 80’s, is a leader in Europe and was the founder of SOARS (Society for Old Age Rational Suicide), an important concept that remains pressing today. My hero is Dr. Jack Kevorkian, who openly helped 130 people have a peaceful death.

Dr. Rob Jonquiere, Executive Director of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies is one of those early Dutch doctors who defied the law and now holds the world’s right to die organizations together as Executive Director of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies.

And Dr. Philip Nitschke, the first doctor in the world to legally provide voluntary euthanasia and a vocal advocate for choice, now in Holland. His web site:

The Peaceful Pill Handbook (on line and in print) is helpful as is Derek Humphry’s book, Final Exit, now in its 3rd edition and in 13 languages.

Jacobsen: Who tends to be the main opposition to the right to die, and so on? What human rights provide the basis for the personal choice in, arguably, one of the most important decisions individuals make in their lives?

Girsh: The Catholic Church has invested the most money, propaganda, resources into opposition and now includes other groups, including the Mormons and evangelicals.

Also some elements of the disability community, most obvious and vocal is Not Dead Yet. Opposition to choice at the end of life is highly correlated with frequency of church attendance.

The Canadian constitution has wording to protect human rights as does the UN Declaration of Human Rights. I have a concern about the teachings of Islam which seem to be opposed to end

of life choice. In Holland, as I understand it, the Islamic community disdains even Advance Directives.

South Africa, where this is a burning issue right now, also has a constitution protecting human dignity. In the US the Supreme Court in 1997 overruled two lower courts stating that there is not a constitutional right to assisted dying, but that it is a matter to be decided by the states. (That year the Oregon law went into effect.)

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

Girsh: It is comforting to look at the accomplishments of the last 30 years and feel that dying is much better than, say the 1970s, or in other countries without the laws we have.

But it is discouraging to realize how far we have to go before people get the choices they would need to die to retain their dignity and control.

The Catholic Church continues to wield enormous power and are taking over community hospitals where even advance directives are not honored. Hospices are good but resist including aid in dying as an option for their patients.

Dementia is an epidemic and warehousing for those patients is a growing industry. More people are defining life in terms of quality not quantity which is good, while medical science is inventing ways to prolong life, and prolong death, so that we have become an aging society with many in nursing homes.

We have a long way to go to educate the public about choices in dying, about defining “life”, and about making the end less agonizing for patients and their families.

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

Girsh: Thanks for these very thoughtful and provocative questions, Scott.

Interview with Karis Burkowski – President, Society of Ontario Freethinkers

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 2, 2019

Karis Burkowski is the President of the Society of Ontario Freethinkers. Here we talk about her life, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start from the top, was religion or freethought more prevalent growing up?

Karis Burkowski: Growing up I was a good, church-going, Evangelical Lutheran girl, a 'true believer' in a conservative, white bread community.

Jacobsen: Reflecting on the important factors leading to secular beliefs, a worldview apart from the religious, what were these important factors for the transition into a secular view of the world?

Burkowski: In a word: rationalism. I can pinpoint the moment when I first began to question my faith. I was 13, in Confirmation Class, and we were learning about transubstantiation and consubstantiation.

The idea that the wafer actually 'became' the body of Christ, and we were supposed to eat that, like cannibals, was just too much for me!

From then on, I started paying more rational, critical attention to *everything* we were being taught. Sometimes the minister could provide answers that made sense to me, but often I was told I simply had to 'take it on faith'.

On the surface, I tried to go along with what was expected of me, but the cognitive dissonance just would not let go.

This was back in the '60s and there were other influences such as the exiled Dalai Lama, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Hare Krishna movement to explore, and it became increasingly clear to me that *all* religions were the products of either wishful thinking or desire to control people.

Jacobsen: In the world of freethinkers, regardless of the region insofar as I can tell, why are there fewer prominent women than men?

Burkowski: I know far more freethinking women than men. This does not surprise me, since virtually all religions are less 'friendly' to women. The word 'prominent' is probably the key.

The women just don't seem to concern themselves as much with getting recognition from others. We self-publish our books (eg. "Why Men Made God") and network locally, but we tend not to strive for the spotlight.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the community of Ontario freethinkers?

Burkowski: It was a fluke, really. I had spent about 30 years socializing with non-believing women in various groups. One day one of those women was working at the LCBO when a customer came in wearing an atheist T-shirt.

She got into a conversation with him and learned that there was a freethinkers group in town. She wrote down the details, and later passed the information on to me. I followed up and that was that. Now SOFREE has a website and a Facebook page, so we are easier to find.

Jacobsen: How did this lead into a leadership role within Society of Ontario Freethinkers? What tasks and responsibilities come along with the position?

Burkowski: It's "Society of Freethinkers" – we have officially dropped the word 'Ontario'.

I had no intention of seeking a leadership role but I became actively involved in some of the projects such as organizing the NonCon 2015 (conference for non-believers) and getting the "Good without God? You're *not* alone!" bus sign on a local bus.

Being active and willing to take on some responsibilities for smaller projects gradually led to becoming President.

Jacobsen: What are some of the communal activities and opportunities provided by SOFREE? What are some activist efforts ongoing at the moment?

Burkowski: Our regular meeting is the monthly Sunday brunch at a local pub. That doesn't change. In addition, we are trying to help a group in Guelph get organized by meeting with them once a month.

We put up a SOFREE table at community events such as the K-W MultiCulture Festival, to let the community know that we exist and attract new members. We hold special events from time to time (eg. Darwin Day, Solstice) and we are experimenting with a movie night/discussion group.

My focus, personally, is on networking with other groups in the area. I attend humanist/atheist events in Hamilton and Toronto as well as Guelph with an eye to bringing the groups together to do some interesting activities.

I've been a member of Interfaith Grand River since 2001, which also leads to community involvement. Lately, SOFREE has been encouraging all of its members to become more politically active so that the local political leaders become aware that there are many local voters who are non-believers.

We are currently running a poster campaign, putting posters and flyers in libraries, recreation centres, and other public places to increase visibility in the community.

Jacobsen: Ideally, the mass of non-religious and freethinking organizations and people, which is growing, of Canada would come together within a general coalition to work for large changes within Canadian society for symbolic, legal, and social equality of the non-religious. How would you do this, in an idealistic context?

Burkowski: That is *exactly* what is needed – but organizing humanists/freethinkers is like the proverbial herding of cats. They are notoriously independent and tend not to join groups.

We are trying to reach out and build community at the local level and among nearby cities. Since non-believers are mostly 'recovering Christians', they have a built-in resistance to the kind of networked hierarchies that give churches political clout.

Most non-believers understand the importance of getting organized effectively, and some groups like Humanist Canada and CFI Canada are trying to do this, but I don't have an answer for how to make it happen.

Social media is a reasonably effective tool for motivating people to sign petitions, etc. but it is far from enough.

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

Burkowski: I appreciate the work that Canadian Atheist is doing to aid in coalescing the many non-believers here in Canada. Keep on being inspiring!

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

Burkowski: Thank you, Scott.

Interview with Jim Lyttle – Secretary, Lake Superior Freethinkers

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 3, 2019

Jim Lyttle is the Secretary of the Lake Superior Freethinkers. Here we talk about her life, 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?

Jim Lyttle: I grew up in Northern Canada (with geography almost identical to what I experience here in Duluth, Minnesota) among a family that respected, but did not have much, education.

My grandfather was a Presbyterian minister and true to his calling served on Boards and Commissions such as the Salvation Army in his home town. When he retired, he kept on serving as Superintendent of Home Missions for Northern Ontario & Quebec within the United Church of Canada.

He was kind and hard-working and he established several churches in northern mining towns. When he finally got approval for a university in his town (North Bay), he walked out onto the porch and collapsed with a heart attack.

Despite all that, my dad took religion as a harmless fantasy that made some people feel good. My mom had been raised Catholic but drifted away during family life among apathetic Protestants who ridiculed the ritual and opulence of the Roman Catholic Church.

Born in 1952, I was part of the (late) 1960s and “shopped” religions. I participated in a Unitarian LRY (Liberal Religious Youth) group in Toronto, meeting in a barn at Highways 5 and 10 to smoke (just cigarettes) and discuss the meaning of life.

I was disillusioned when the group decided to harass Christians who were having a conference near their own conference in Buffalo, with signs that said (among other things) “Fuck Jesus.”

I understood the irreverence and celebrated the whole idea of fucking (which we called “balling” at the time), but felt quite uncomfortable with that level of confrontation.

My family was fashionably hip and open-minded (I grew up almost totally without guidance or discipline) and we were perhaps at the high end of working class.

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

Lyttle: I did very well in public school up until Grade 8 when I was introduced to a fairly popular student named John Percival. The problem was that I had been in his home room for several weeks by then, and he had never noticed or heard of me.

We become best friends and he taught me what he learned each day after his guitar lessons. This was just after the Kennedy assassination shocked us half to death and then the coming of the Beatles saved us. I decided then to be noticed and not to worry much about school work.

(Also, I was smart enough to have bullshitted my way through so far, but the work was getting harder). Through high school, I barely passed courses but did get noticed.

After high school, I played in a band and traveled a lot. Then I settled down for a few years with a woman and worked in electronics. At 31, after my department was shut down, I went back to school – this time I meant it, though.

I got a BA in philosophy and economics at Wilfrid Laurier and went to Western for a Harvard style case-based MBA. After drifting a bit from job to job, I started teaching at the DeVry Institute of Technology and discovered a passion for understanding complex things and explaining them simply.

I went back to school again, this time for a doctorate at York University, and came to America to profess, a career from which I retired in 2016. I have done very little self-education.

Jacobsen: With the defunctness of the Iron Range Coalition of Reason but the continuance of the Lake Superior Freethinkers, what happened to the Iron Range Coalition of Reason?

How can other coalitions or groups based on rationalism learn from these mistakes and even its successes while it existed? What is the current status of the Lake Superior Freethinkers?

Lyttle: The Coalition of Reason is going strong, headquartered in Washington DC and organized as a “base” to support social justice.

Our efforts locally to establish an Iron Range Coalition of Reason were based on plans and values embodied in Fred Edwards who founded the Coalition of Reason idea.

Shortly after we started, he was asked to take over bigger responsibilities in the American Humanist Association and a fellow from England came in to coordinate the local groups.

His agenda was much more political than intellectual and we gradually grew apart. Groups based on rationalism (as an intellectual preference) will have to be fiercely on guard against the tendency of their allies to lean far to the left.

Although the affinity of socialism and religious skepticism is quite legitimate, it is difficult to change hearts and minds on the topic of religion while arming critics with the ammunition that we are “just more godless commies.”

Our focus now is on the Lake Superior Freethinkers group that was founded in 1997 by psychiatrist Bill van Druten and others. There was a proposal to sell his hospital to the Roman Catholic Church.

Since there were only two hospitals, and the other one already was part of the Church, he was concerned about this monopoly. His “last straw” came when he was asked to sign a pledge to treat his (psychiatric) clients according to the tenets of that Church, regardless of their religion or lack of religion.

Many of his clients were already grappling with guilt and shame (and sometimes financial ruin) brought on by this or other religions.

Jacobsen: As the Secretary of the Lake Superior Freethinkers, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Lyttle: My official role as Secretary is to record official meetings, keep records of by-laws, file annual reports with the State, and so forth.

However, I also often host meetings as MC, look after all e-mail communications with members, run its website and official facebook page, and co-run the discussion website along with other promotional efforts.

There are three or four meetings per month and I design advertisements with graphics and such. This is similar to my work with the Clan Little Society, Inc. and my local Mensa Area group, known as the “Northern Brights.”

Jacobsen: What are some of the community activities of the Lake Superior Freethinkers?

Lyttle: In the past, the group has tried to avoid any quasi-political involvement.

Most of us happen to be far to the left (the questioning attitude of liberals overlaps skepticism about religion) but this annoys people who are considerably less “looney left” than we are, but who should feel at home as long as they are non-religious.

Lately, we are indulging our political selves a little more. Earning respect for secularism is still the “hub” of our activities, but we have established a “spoke” known as People of Conscience that dabbles in marching on City Hall and such.

We have always collected donations for local food banks and staffed booths at Pride Festivals and such, but the new group will coordinate with other groups to take small-p political actions against rising Trumpism.

Jacobsen: What are the demographics of the community?

Lyttle: Our town is 18% African-American and predominantly of Scandinavian background (not counting university students, who are much more diverse).

Our group includes about 80 people who come to meetings often and about 360 others who receive and interact with our e-mails and website and over 500 people on our facebook page.

Of the hundred or so I have seen, perhaps 3 are African American. African-Americans are known to be more religious (and we intentionally meet on Sunday mornings), but we are also a group of predominantly white men who are 65 and over (retired, with time for this), about a fifth of whom bring their wives.

We host mainly intellectual talks about issues related to religion and thus generally appeal to those who grew up with, and fell out with, religion. We have a 17-year-old member and a few in their thirties, but this group is small.

They need childcare (and we are not about to try and sell atheist Sunday School!), often rely on the church for business and social contacts and moral instruction for children, and tend to be indifferent to religion.

Millennials in general (in the USA at least) seem to be more indifferent about religion than either enthusiastic or angry.

Jacobsen: What civic and political activism activities most interest the members of the Lake Superior Freethinkers?

Lyttle: We have many feminists, environmentalists, women’s rights advocates, and people who seek more government help for the poor.

However, we also have a significant minority of libertarians who are against religion mainly because it is a social entity trying to force itself on individuals.

Their resistance to church is part of their resistance to social engineering, “identity politics,” and government involvement in anything. So, it’s complicated.

Jacobsen: Who are the important secular and freethought forces in the United States now?

Lyttle: The main active group is the Freedom From Religion Foundation, started in nearby Madison Wisconsin by Anna Nicole Gaylor – a typical angry feminist from the 1950s.

It now has over 23,000 members, several chapters (including our group) and a head office with more than a dozen lawyers working to sue people for Nativity Scenes on city property and school prayer and such.

There are many other groups working in mostly un-unified ways to earn political power or intellectual respect or just to advance (what we see as) science rather than superstition.

Many of us are academics and generally hope to discourage “faith,” which we would define as believe *in spite of* the evidence.

All of these efforts are somewhat muted at the moment as we are in what I call the “Republican Decade.” We have made progress since the 1960s, but our Supreme Court is now stacked against us for the foreseeable future.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the donation of time, the addition of membership, links to professional and personal networks, giving monetarily, exposure in interviews or writing articles, and so on?

Lyttle: Generally, outside of personal contacts and the occasional publicity stunt to get press, we exist as a webpage at LSFreethinkers.org where people can get involved and as a corresponding facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/LSFreethinkers.org>.

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

Lyttle: Not really.

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

Lyttle: You’re welcome.

Interview with Robyn E. Blumner, J.D. – President & CEO, Center for Inquiry & Executive Director, Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 4, 2019

Robyn E. Blumner, J.D. is the President & CEO of the Center for Inquiry & the Executive Director for the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science. Here we talk about her life, 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?

Robyn E. Blumner: I grew up in Glen Cove, New York on Long Island. My parents were both Jewish and we were members of a conservative synagogue.

My paternal grandparents kept kosher in the home and both my grandmothers spoke Yiddish as well as English. My maternal grandmother was even president of the local Hadassah.

My parents were public school teachers, though my mother stayed at home during my formative years. I declared my atheism at 11 or 12 years of age, quit Hebrew school, and thereafter generally objected to participating in religious practices.

When at synagogue for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services with my family I would assist in the nursery taking care of young children, steering clear of the sanctuary and prayer services.

All things considered my parents took it pretty well. Eventually everyone in my nuclear family declared their atheism and broke with religion. But there was a time when I was the only atheist I knew.

I just didn't understand how everyone could believe such outlandish claims without evidence. I thought everyone around me was crazy, and I presume they thought I was — or that I'd outgrow my resistance to belief.

I knew my Dad had come full circle when I notice he subscribed to *Free Inquiry* magazine, the periodical that CFI publishes on secular humanism and atheism.

This was long before I became the organization's CEO. Although Dad's been dead for years, it's a very nice memory to know he was a supporter of CFI way back when.

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

Blumner: I have a B.S. from Cornell University and a J.D. from NYU School of Law. I'm a voracious reader with typically about five books going at once. There is never enough time for all the reading I hope to do.

Jacobsen: You hold two positions of high prominence in the freethought and secular communities. This may make you among the most prominent secular women with an authority position in the world.

You are the President & CEO of the Center for Inquiry as well as the Executive Director for Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science.

What is the current state of these organizations now? How did you become involved in them? What tasks and responsibilities come with the positions?

Blumner: The Center for Inquiry merged with the Richard Dawkins Foundation at the end of 2016. The marriage was a perfect alignment of interests. Both organizations have as their mission the promotion of reason, science, and secular values.

The Center for Inquiry has two flagship magazines, *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Free Inquiry*, along with a long history of scholarship and connecting preeminent scientists, philosophers, social scientists, and historians to the promotion of skepticism and secular humanism.

The Richard Dawkins Foundation has a high-profile social media presence, a commitment to promoting science in general and the teaching of evolution in particular, and the backing of a great celebrity scientist and outspoken atheist, Richard Dawkins.

After the merger the two entities still exist but the Richard Dawkins Foundation is a division of CFI. That means expenses such as administration, accounting, and legal work can be combined leaving more resources to put toward the substantive work of the organization.

As to my varied responsibilities, I wear many hats, but ultimately I am responsible for implementing the board's vision for CFI and making sure we have the resources to carry it out.

Lucky for me I have an incredible staff of committed professionals who contribute mightily to the ongoing success and growth of CFI. Some staff members have been with CFI more than 30 years.

I have attached [a brochure](#) on CFI's activities. That should give readers a full understanding of our history and ongoing work.

Among my favorite programs are 1) the Teacher Institute for Evolutionary Science, which teaches middle school science teachers across the United States how to teach evolution; and 2) Secular Rescue, that saves the lives of atheist activists overseas in places like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Secular Rescue is an underground railroad for secular bloggers who find themselves subjected to violence or prosecution due to nonbelief. The program helps them get safe passage to other countries.

Our legal program is also doing a lot to promote scientific skepticism, including suing the pharmacy chain CVS for the fraudulent way it markets homeopathic products alongside evidence-based medicine.

This shelf placement suggests that homeopathic products address medical symptoms when in fact they have no active ingredients and cannot work beyond a placebo effect. Homeopathy is a \$3 billion annual consumer fraud that CFI is taking on in the courts.

Jacobsen: Within the tenure of leadership in the organizations, what have been the emotional difficulties? What, also, have been the heartwarming stories and experiences while in the organizations? Have any mentors been integral to the work there?

Blumner: Richard Dawkins is an extraordinary mentor. He is both brilliant and kind. I have been honored over these years to work alongside him and see the impact he has on audiences — young and old alike.

The long lines Richard attracts during book signings are filled with people who tell him that his books changed their life.

They say they are no longer blinkered by religion or they chose a career in science because of Richard's books on evolutionary biology. I can't imagine a more gratifying legacy.

Jacobsen: In terms of the current moment with the rise in know-nothing, ultra-patriarchal male leaders who tend to be religious, and, subsequently or concomitantly, the emergence of the authoritarian base upon which they depend, what are the main threats to human rights, science as process and knowledge, and secularism?

How are the secular organizations working to combat this, including the Center for Inquiry and the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science?

Blumner: We fight daily against the religious Right. Currently the Trump administration is attacking secular society from many angles, including pushing for school vouchers, seeking to defeat the Johnson Amendment and its limits on clergy electioneering for political candidates, and promoting discrimination under the guise of religious freedom.

It's ugly out there, and we have a legal and advocacy department that works independently and in coalitions of other groups to push back against these dangerous incursions.

Jacobsen: This brings something to mind. What if there was an unofficial coalition of the formal non-religious from secular and freethinker organizations to humanist communities and ethical societies to online agnostics and atheists, and so on?

A common stance of no tolerance and proactive, assertive formal non-religious activism against fundamentalist encroachment into civic and political life, including into the current battlegrounds over the rights to bodily autonomy of women with reproductive health rights, i.e., individuals who openly and with little metacognitive insight want religious rights for themselves but not reproductive rights for women. Could this be done? If so, how?

It seems necessary in the current moment with Bolsonaro in Brazil, Trump in America, Putin in Russia, Xi Jinping in China, Duterte in the Philippines, Erdogan in Turkey, Modi in India, bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, Orbán in Hungary, and so on.

Blumner: We work closely with a host of secular groups as a means of amplifying our voice for church-state separation, the rights of atheists here and abroad, and the end to pseudoscience wherever it arises.

Unfortunately, most secular and ethical groups are small relative to the size, strength and resources of our ideological opponents.

For instance, CFI's annual budget of \$5 million is large compared to other groups within the secular community but we are tiny relative to the religious Right group Focus on the Family and its annual budget of \$78 million. And that's just one group among many of that size.

Jacobsen: What are the exciting new projects coming in 2019 for the Center for Inquiry as well as the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science? How can people find out more about them?

Blumner: Please check out the website: “centerforinquiry.org” and sign up for our free digital newsletters. Cause & Effect comes out every other week, as does the Richard Dawkins Foundation newsletter.

And you can subscribe for free to The Morning Heresy, our hilarious daily synopsis of the day’s news by CFI’s communications director, Paul Fidalgo.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with Center for Inquiry as well as the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science through the donation of time, the addition of membership, links to professional and personal networks, giving monetarily, exposure in interviews or writing articles, and so on?

Blumner: Again, please check out our website for opportunities to join and become active.

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

Blumner: We need everyone who cares about a secular government to become active. We need you to join organizations and respond to Action Alerts.

We need you to tell your lawmakers that you are a nonbeliever and support the separation of church and state, and will vote on those grounds in annual elections.

Unfortunately, there is still a stigma surrounding atheism and the only way to combat it is for us to organize into groups and make ourselves known. Please see the attached video that features Abby telling her story:

It shows what we are still up against.

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

Blumner: Thank you, Scott.

Interview with Silvia Park – State Director, American Atheists Virginia

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 5, 2019

Silvia Park is the State Director of the American Atheists Virginia. Here we talk about her life, work, and views.

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

Silvia Park: I was raised not going to church, though my parents did join a Unitarian Universalist church for a short time (I think more for the music than anything else), and I was required to go a few times. Luckily that didn't last long.

I grew up near Poughkeepsie, NY, and several of my friends were Catholic, and I remember feeling like I might be missing out on something when I heard them talk about going to CCD after school.

I attended Mass with friends once or twice, as well as a Methodist church service, and was not impressed. It was a morning I didn't have to go to school, so why was I up and going to church?

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

Park: I didn't start reading books by atheist writers until I was a parent myself, so I wouldn't say my philosophical development came from anyone other than my parents, who never talked about gods and religion to me. My grandmother always gave us a subscription to National Geographic at Christmas, and I would read it cover to cover.

I majored in anthropology in college, and do remember one book in particular that helped me put words to my thoughts about religion's origins—Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches, by Marvin Harris.

In my thirties I became interested in Buddhism, and I do feel many of my personal philosophical beliefs align well with Buddhist principles, though not in everything. Be kind, do good, seek happiness, kind of sums it up for me. But also stand firm and speak up against injustices.

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

Park: Do Isaac Asimov's Robots, Foundation, and Empire novels count? I think actually that reading Ain't Nobody's Business If You Do: The Absurdity of Consensual Crimes in Our Free Country, by Peter McWilliams, influenced me quite a bit, actually. It helped changed my views about recreational drug use and prostitution, which I'd never spent much time considering before.

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

Park: I used to read a lot of science and other blogs when I was homeschooling my kids, and so I, of course, found "Pharyngula" at some point, which led to other atheist/science blogs.

But I didn't engage with anyone back then, in the early 2000s. On Facebook, of course, there are plenty of atheists to follow.

I joined a brand new Meetup two years ago, the Atheist Community of Charlottesville (ACC), and I got involved right away. I took over running the group in January 2018, and started looking at the various national organizations for support, including American Atheists, Inc.

Jacobsen: How did this lead to American Atheist Virginia?

Park: I signed our group up to become an affiliate of American Atheists, and they got me in touch with the Virginia state director, Larry Mendoza. Larry was able to come to Charlottesville to give a talk to us about AA and the great work they do.

What I really liked was when he told us about AA reaching out to local groups, to grow their grassroots outreach and presence. After that meeting, he and I spoke some more, and he told me that he was looking for more assistant directors.

He said I was already doing what an assistant director does, and asked if I'd be interested in becoming one. I started that process right away, and I was even able to attend the 2018 American Atheists Convention in Oklahoma City the next month.

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

Park: There's a responsibility to remain active—to grow my local affiliate and work with other groups here, as well. I am trying to create a positive image of atheists locally by organizing volunteering events for us, and making sure to mention that we're "the atheists here to help."

I am working on our online presence as well, promoting #atheistscare. I have a lot to learn still about becoming more of an activist, and I'm looking forward to this year's American Atheists Convention, in Cincinnati in April, where I plan to attend every training session available.

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

Park: By having an American Atheist assistant director who lives locally, the secular groups here have someone who's looking at local issues and can notify them of anything they might want to get involved in that concerns the separation of religion and government.

I am also a member of the Washington Area Secular Humanists (WASH), and I am the chapter coordinator for the Charlottesville chapter. Having a direct link to the resources available from both groups is very helpful.

For example, I have attended every Cville Pride Festival since its inception in 2012. I had seen that there were a number of local religious organizations that tabled booths at the festival, but that there was no secular group represented.

So I decided that the Atheist Community of Charlottesville should be there, and that we should bring other atheist groups with us, to show our diversity and inclusion. As a chapter of WASH, we were able to create a GoFundMe page to pay for two booths, and to help with other expenses.

We were able to fly in Mandisa Thomas of Black Nonbelievers, Inc, and give her one of the booths. The ACC invited Virginia American Atheists to share a booth with us and WASH, and

they provided tabling materials for us. At our booth, we offered free memberships to American Atheists.

Samantha McGuire, president of WASH, joined us and was a great resource. The event was a big success, and we were surprised how many people stopped and talked to us, and said they didn't know there was a local atheist group. Next year, I plan to ask for our booth to be included in the area where all the religious groups are.

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

Park: Virginia is in the "Bible Belt," so it can be hard to get our voices heard. Our schools can still teach abstinence only sex ed, and we have laws that restrict the inclusion of LGBTQ topics.

That's a big problem. There are exceptions for faith healing from child negligence charges. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act allows religious agencies to discriminate when it comes to foster care and adoption.

Many other states face similar issues, so it's helpful to see what the other directors are doing around the country, how they're able to make changes to problematic laws.

One thing I'll be looking at for next winter is any nativity scenes on government property. I'll ask local atheists to be on the lookout, and if we find that there is a religious display, we'll ask to have our own secular display place next to it. We are looking to increase our public presence.

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?

Park: I think American Atheists is doing a good job of inviting women, people of color, and LGBTQ people to speak at the national convention, to have a voice in a public forum.

Virginia American Atheists' directors are a particularly diverse group. Representation is so important. When Mandisa Thomas was here in September for Cville Pride, she had people of color come up to her and say, "I've never met another African American atheist before."

I think atheists and other secular Americans need to show up anywhere there is social injustice and help create reform. We need to go to city council meetings and support affordable housing reform.

We need to lend our voices to local groups seeking racial justice. We need to demand reform in public schools, so that minority students are not discriminated against or punished unfairly.

We need to speak out against local law enforcement, particularly our jails, who notify ICE when an undocumented immigrant is going to be released so they can deport them. We need to demonstrate by our actions that these are important issues that need to be dealt with, and that we can see the underlying religious origins of many discriminatory practices.

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?

Park: The news has been full of stories of Catholic priests and nuns abusing children. Now we are also learning about similar problems in the Protestant communities.

Conversion therapy is such an immoral practice, so unbelievably damaging to a child, I cannot fathom how any parent can force their child to endure such treatment.

I am the mother of a transgender son who also identifies as gay, and the thought that children like him could be raised with anything other than the complete, unwavering support of their parents and family, is distressing.

Secular Americans need to support bans on conversion therapy. We need to push for prosecution against religious leaders who commit crimes against children, and we need to push back against faith healing.

We have to pay attention to what's happening to people who aren't secular like us, because they deserve protection against abuse, and they aren't getting it from their religious communities in many cases.

When I read about men (or women) in the secular community who are being accused of mistreating anyone, my feeling is that they must be dealt with just as strongly as anyone else. They don't get a pass because they're atheists.

We have to show that we don't exempt them from criticism just because they've been respected in the past. We need to be above scrutiny ourselves, I think, so that nobody can accuse us of going easy on our own people. There is no excuse for their behavior.

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

Interview with Derek Humphry – President, Euthanasia Research and Guidance Organization (ERGO)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 6, 2019

Derek Humphry is the Founder of the Hemlock Society USA (1980) and the President of the Euthanasia Research and Guidance Organization (ERGO). Here we talk about his 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?

Derek Humphry: Due to the six years WW2 lasted (I was 6 on the outbreak and 15 when it finished), my formal education was slender. I had to educate myself by reading widely and observation.

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

Humphry: Yes, I was obliged to be largely self-educated. Strangely, some people say that it was advantageous for me not to be cluttered with an academic higher education!

Jacobsen: Euthanasia Research & Guidance Organization is a good resource on the subject. How did this resource come to fruition?

Humphry: By the visibility of my books. Mostly ‘Jean’s Way’ (1978) and ‘Final Exit’ (1991). Both became bestsellers and remain available via Kindle.

Jacobsen: What is your current role, and associated tasks and responsibilities, with the Euthanasia Research & Guidance Organization?

Humphry: President of the Euthanasia Research and Guidance Organization (ERGO) supplying quality literature about choices in dying for the terminally ill. Spreading news and views about euthanasia generally via websites, blogs and a Listserv. Answering queries daily from people with problems dealing with their own forthcoming death, or that of a loved one.
ergo@finalexit.org

Jacobsen: What tend to be the main myths or misrepresentations about euthanasia? What truths dispel them?

Humphry: That’s a huge question. Fundamentally, my approach is to respect what opposite views on ‘dying and death’ that people have, but don’t reject my/our view to act differently.

Jacobsen: How does the Euthanasia Research & Guidance Organization provide a basis for becoming more informed on the subject of euthanasia? What are the most used resources of ERGO?

Humphry: Our publications appear in many languages and are read all over the world.
www.finalexit.org/ergo-store

Jacobsen: What sectors of societies tend to be the most against euthanasia, dying with dignity, the right to die, and medical assistance in dying, and so on?

Humphry: The Roman Catholic Church is strongly against any form of assisted dying. Protestant churches are divided. Also against are Orthodox Jews but not Reform Jews. And, of course, Muslims are opposed.

The various Medical Associations (of doctors) have always been, as policy, against my views, but they're coming round now that public opinion is swinging in our favor.

Jacobsen: What are the most important activist, legal and sociocultural, efforts ongoing at the moment for the advancement of the human rights in the likely most important decision someone will make with their life – its ending in time and in place?

Humphry: There are 50 right-to-die groups in the world campaigning to get lawful doctor-assisted dying democratically introduced in their countries. www.worldrtd.net

Jacobsen: What are some good resources, organizations, and people who speak on euthanasia?

Humphry: Relevant web sites:

www.finalexit.org

www.assistedsuicide.org

www.assisted-dying.org/blog

<https://www.youtube.com/user/TheFinalExit/videos>

www.finalexit.org/ergo-store

www.finalexitnetwork.org

www.worldrtd.net

Interview with Judith Daley – Board Member, Dying with Dignity NSW

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 7, 2019

Judith Daley is a Board Member of Dying with Dignity NSW. 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?

Judith Daley: My early life was conventional until I was about six. I mean conventional in as much as my mother and father lived together in a very small village on the north coast of New South Wales (NSW) in an area where both their parents and siblings and their families also lived.

I have a sister who is nearly 3 years younger than me. My mother and particularly my father were practicing Roman Catholics.

However, when was six and my sister was nearly three my mother ran away with a man who was 27 years older than her and who had two children who were older than her and two who were close to her age.

This was in 1950 and caused such a scandal that her siblings did not speak to her for a couple of decades. Her mother was the only relative I had any knowledge about.

My mother and stepfather stopped running when they reached Adelaide in South Australia. We lived in Adelaide, at various addresses, for the next 12 years.

It was only from about then on, by which time we had moved to Ballarat in Victoria, that I became aware that I had aunts and uncles and cousins. Those relationships have never been close.

I have very little knowledge of the Daley side of my family and did not meet my father, despite several attempts by my sister and I, until I was 31 and it wasn't a particularly happy event.

My father and two sisters and a brother, so there are a large group of Daley relations all from the north coast, are of NSW. I don't know them. I was always sent to the local Catholic school and practiced that faith.

When I was about 18 or 19, I stopped attending church and started saying I was agnostic. I now think that's sort of each way bet so now say I am an atheist.

I do have occasional moments of envy because people who do believe in God, regardless of whether they practice religion or not, get a lot of comfort from that belief.

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

Daley: Like most women from my socio-economic class and in my age group (DOB: 1944 – now 74) at that time I left school at 15-1/2 years because giving girls an education was considered a waste because they were destined for marriage and children.

I was an active union member and as a result of this, and a wonderful Australian politician named Clyde Cameron I had many opportunities to gain informal education.

It is a long story but I worked for the largest union for public servants in NSW and managed to conduct a job redesign which amalgamated two vocational groups into one more advantageous group within the Attorney General's Department.

That job redesign was considered the equivalent of a lower degree by the University of Technology, Sydney, so when I was 49 I went to university and gained a Masters of Employment in Industrial Relations.

When I was 52, after I'd finished my Masters, I went to a technical college for 6 months and gained my Private Investigators license to enhance my abilities in a job I was doing.

Jacobsen: As one of the Board members of Dying with Dignity NSW, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position.

Daley: The Dying with Dignity Board meets approximately once a month. I attend those meetings and participate in discussions and decision making. I also sometimes field queries and questions from people who have recently had a terrible diagnosis and I explain the current law to them.

I write letters and lobby politicians and attend meetings where necessary. I sometimes give presentations to various groups regarding the position regarding Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) in NSW.

Jacobsen: What are some of the current initiatives and programs for the Dying with Dignity NSW?

Daley: Currently DWD are conducting forums to educate the general populace about the existing legal position regarding VAD. A large percentage of people think VAD is something they can simply request but an attempt to put legislation through the NSW Parliament last year failed on the initial vote by one vote.

We are working to influence the politicians to make the next attempt successful. The Council of the Ageing (COTA) has recently conducted a survey of older people and 84% of participants supported VAD.

Jacobsen: There is going to be an election in NSW. The Voluntary Euthanasia Party is a real political presence. What do you intend to do in the next electoral season?

Daley: The next election in NSW will be conducted on 23rd March 2019. The VEP will be one of the smaller parties to contest a seat in the Upper House of the NSW parliament.

In NSW a 'party' has to have 1,500 members to be classified as a 'party' and if that party wants voters to be able to vote above the line, so they just have to number one box instead of anything up to 100 boxes below the line, the party must have 15 candidates.

If the VEP were to be successful it would only be our lead candidate, Shayne Higson, who would be elected. I am simple; one of the 15 candidates to make up the numbers. There is no prospect of me being elected.

Jacobsen: What are the policies and platforms of the Voluntary Euthanasia Party?

Daley: The VEP is only standing on the single platform of getting VAD in place. It is our recommendation that voters put a '1' in the VEP box and then a '2' in the box of any of the larger political parties whose policies they also support.

This is not a rare position in our parliaments. There are several special interest parties such as Animal Welfare or The Fishers and Shooters who work in a similar manner.

Jacobsen: Obviously, there is a concurrent passion between both the non-profit and the political pursuits. As with any social movement and political party, typically, there will be opposition to them. Who is the opposition to Dying With Dignity NSW and the Voluntary Euthanasia Party?

Daley: The major opposition to VAD are the two main Christian churches such as the Catholic Church and the Church of England. It is an interesting link that these bodies are often the same organisations who manage and control the palliative care wards in the hospitals.

These organisations are fundamentally right wing in their views although there are more and more surveys indicating that upwards of 80% of their parishioners support VAD. There is also a very right wing preacher elected to the NSW Upper House named Fred Nile.

When the debate for VAD was underway in the Upper House last year he told outright lies in the House and the next day he admitted the lies in an article in the Sydney Morning Herald but didn't have the guts to own it himself and said, "God made me do it". JJJJJJJJJ He also tried to get Hansard (the record of Parliament) altered but that failed.

Jacobsen: How can these oppositional forces be combatted in 2019?

Daley: VAD has been legalised in the State of Victoria although the restrictions are the toughest in the world. VAD is actively being considered in the Parliaments of the states of Queensland and Western Australia.

The tide is turning and organisations like DWD are assisting because of the lobbying and public education we do. These activities are limited because we are a volunteer organisation with limited budgets. You can access a forum DWD conducted this year by going to our website. It is two hours long.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved through the donation of time, the addition of membership, links to professional and personal networks, giving monetarily, exposure in interviews or writing articles, and so on?

Daley: We are always seeking new members and our membership is growing. We do occasional drives for donations but have to be careful not to bleed our member dry.

On our website, we have several personal stories from people who are DWD members and who explain in detail why they are seeking VAD. As an example, I have attached a link to an article written about me a couple of years ago.

This article was written by a journalist in a regional newspaper and distributed to 16 other newspapers in southern Queensland and northern NSW.

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

Daley: My interest in VAD is not entirely altruistic although I hope I would still hold these views if my circumstances were different. My partner of 33 years, who died 11 years ago, was unwell with a rare heart condition and he had many emergency admissions to various hospitals.

It was hearing other people screaming in pain in those emergency departments that first initiated my interest in VAD and made me realise that dying is not always dignified.

At those times when medical staff were questioned about why the person was in such agony, we were always told they couldn't be given any more medication.

I was diagnosed with COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease which in my case comprises emphysema, bronchitis, late onset asthma with unusual triggers and scarring in my left lung because of previous pneumonia).

I was diagnosed 24 years ago and my condition is reasonably well managed by if the condition continues as predicted I will not be breathing well at the end of my life because I will be gurgling. I don't want anyone else to have the power to tell me to keep gurgling.

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

Daley: I hope this is some use to you Scott. Thanks for this opportunity.

Interview with Dr. Meredith Doig, OAM – President, Rationalist Society of Australia

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 8, 2019

Dr. Meredith Doig, OAM is the President of the Rationalist Society of Australia. 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?

Dr. Meredith Doig OAM: Born and bred in Melbourne Australia. Australia is now a ‘softly’ secular country but was, according to the census, 96% Christian when six separate colonies federated into a united nation in 1900. My family was middle class professional, dominated by medicos – father, grandfather, uncle all doctors. While I did sciences at school, I was also fascinated by Greek myths, psychology and philosophy, so at university, I took Classical Civilisation and Linguistics, while majoring in Pure Mathematics.

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

Doig: After graduating, I taught maths for several years and then headed off to Europe for my ‘grand tour’: a year in Greece (during the fall on their military junta), a year and a half in Israel, working at a Field School on the shores of the Dead Sea, and backpacking around the rest of Europe for a while. Exhilarating, but my mind was atrophying and so I returned home to build a career.

That career grew so that I became a senior executive in large private sector corporations in the automotive, mining and banking industries. During the last 15 years I have been a professional company director, on commercial, public sector and university boards, and more recently on half a dozen not-for-profit boards.

Jacobsen: The Rationalist movement and set of critical thinking tools and worldview heuristics have been around for a long time. Indeed, the Rationalist Society of Australia has been around since 1906. What are rationalist values? How do these associate with other philosophical worldviews or, simply, sets of cognitive tools for skeptical evaluations of claims about the world?

Doig: RSA bases its policies on universal human values, shared by most religious as well as non-religious people. We believe in human dignity and respect in our treatment of one another. We support social co-operation within communities and political co-operation among nations. We think human endeavour should focus on making life better for all of us, with due regard to our fellow sentient creatures and the natural environment.

We believe humankind must take responsibility for its own destiny.

We believe morality is the natural product of human evolution, not dictated by some external agency or recorded in some written document. But morality is neither static nor absolute. As history shows, our ideas about right and wrong evolve as we learn more about ourselves, the creatures with whom we share this planet and our environment. Our beliefs about what is right

and wrong, therefore, should be subjected to periodic reflection and review, using science, reason and due regard for human dignity.

RSA believes the scientific method is the most effective means by which humans develop knowledge and understanding of the physical universe. And we believe human progress and well-being is best achieved by the careful and consistent use of science and evidence-based reasoning.

Jacobsen: Why are rationalist values and ways of thinking important in the current moment with the rise of movements making deliberate assaults on the public through campaigns of misinformation and simply lies for political gain?

Doig: Some years ago I visited a Humanist School in Uganda, one we have been supporting with funds and advice. While there I was asked to give an impromptu lesson to a fascinated class of students. Among other things (like “Why are there kangaroos only in Australia?”), they asked “What is a Rationalist?” I responded with my usual elevator quip of “We’re in favour of science and evidence as opposed to superstition and bigotry” but in retrospect, this was too glib an answer.

What I should have said was: “A Rationalist is someone who believes that the natural world we see around us is the only world there is and therefore we don’t believe in heaven or hell. We believe the best way for humans to improve their lives is through the use of the scientific method – the systematic observation of the natural world – and the use of the human capacity to reason. We believe that as humans, we are responsible for our own lives, not any external Being, Force or Destiny, and we must take responsibility for being good and doing good.”

These three pillars of modern rationalism – the real world of facts, the use of science and reason, and human responsibility – are still the best way to counter fake news, the excesses of postmodernist nihilism, and the worrying rise of populism fuelled by emotionalism.

Jacobsen: What have been the perennial issues or problems facing the Rationalist Society of Australia?

Doig: Since the 1950s the RSA has fought against the perennial encroachment of evangelical religious organisations into our government school system – which is supposed to be secular. But all States and Territories in Australia have exceptions in their Education Acts, which allow for religious *instruction* (not religious *education* but doctrinal instruction) for 30 minutes or an hour a week. We have been fighting against these exceptions ever since, with some notable successes.

Also, in Australia we have three school systems: the government system, the “independent” system (which is mostly Anglican) and the Catholic system. Over decades, the Australian public has become used to public funding of the Independent and Catholic systems, defended on the basis of “parental choice”. But of course this is simply using public funds to reproduce religious formation. While we don’t expect to change this entrenched system in the short term, it is something that’s on our long term radar.

Jacobsen: What are some of the newer problems arising for the Rationalist Society of Australia? How can there be assistance from the public, from the government, and other national and international rationalist/rationalist-oriented organizations and public commentators to combat these newer problems?

Doig: Of more recent times, our Federal Government has introduced a major program to fund “chaplaincy services” in the school systems. Chaplains are not *supposed* to indulge in any religious instruction but there is no monitoring and there are anecdotal stories about evangelical proselytising. We are challenging the National Chaplaincy program in the courts.

Also, over the last few years there was a very high profile Royal Commission into Child Abuse by Religious Institutions which exposed the sex abuse perpetrated by the Catholic church and other religious organisations. We are now campaigning to ensure the findings of this Royal Commission are implemented.

Jacobsen: Who are exemplars in the work of the Rationalists in Australia? Who are perennial – individuals or organizations – agitators for, broadly speaking, unreason or the irrational, e.g., magical thinking, anti-science, fundamentalist ideologies of the nation-state or of faith, *und so weiter*?

Doig: Our Patrons have been chosen for their renowned contributions to rationalist values:

Michael Kirby AC CMG, is a former High Court judge and long time advocate for secularism.

Professor Gareth Evans AC QC, is Chancellor at the Australian National University and a former Attorney-General of Australia. An advocate for human rights, international co-operation and critical thinking.

Dr Rodney Syme is urologist and advocate for law reform in favour of voluntary assisted dying (which was ultimately successful in Dec 2018).

Professor Fiona Stanley AC FAA, is a world-renowned epidemiologist and former Australian of the Year. She is particularly known for her advocacy of science and an open society.

In addition, we have two RSA Fellows, recognised for their particular specialist knowledge:

Dr Luke Beck is a law academic at Monash University, with specialist knowledge of s116 of the Australian constitution (the “religion clause”)

Dr Paul Monk is a public intellectual and author, with specialist knowledge of the history of Western civilisation and secularism.

Jacobsen: What books and organizations are other good resources for the rationalist movement? Also, why should rationalists, skeptics, humanists, and others gather together to work on the common concerns of science education, logical thought, critical thinking, secularism, and so on, at an international level in order to coordinate efforts?

Doig: There are too many good books to mention but I would highlight Steven Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now* as almost a Rationalist’s bible. Good use of data and evidence, good use of clear thinking and logic.

Why should rationalists etc work together? Some years ago I established an umbrella organisation called “Reason Australia” which brought together humanist, rationalist, atheists and secular groups from across the country.

Unfortunately, it fell apart because of differences in focus among the groups. Instead, the leadership of these various groups now collaborate as and when required, while maintaining our separate identities. This seems to work better than trying to force an amalgamated national group.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the donation of time, the addition of membership, links to professional and personal networks, giving monetarily, and so on?

Doig: As a volunteer run organisation, we have limited resources to organise and must prioritise our efforts carefully. Apart from becoming a formal Member, supporters can subscribe to our daily bulletin, *RSA Daily*, which enables us to communicate our views and activities on a regular basis. Donations towards our campaigns are always welcome.

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

Doig: As our patron Michael Kirby has said, “The principle of secularism is one of the greatest developments in human rights in the world. We must safeguard and protect it, for it can come under threat ...”

When I was growing up, religion was simply irrelevant to the way I lived my life; I learned my values from my parents and my school, and got my social involvement from community projects.

But I became aware of the secretive and unaccountable political power wielded by religious organisations – particularly the Catholic Church – in education, in our parliaments, in our health system.

I frankly don’t care what people believe in the privacy of their own minds but I *do* care when they try to impose their views on the rest of us, particularly using the organs of the state. That’s why I think freethought organisations like the Rationalist Society and the Atheists are so important.

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

Doig: You’re welcome!

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 9, 2019

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.

Interview with Ruth von Fuchs – President, Right to Die Society of Canada

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 10, 2019

Ruth von Fuchs is the President of the Right to Die Society of Canada. 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?

Ruth von Fuchs: My parents had met in a church choir, and I attended Sunday School, singing “Jesus bids us shine, with a clear pure light / Like a little candle, burning in the night / In this world of darkness, so let us shine / You in your small corner, and I in mine.” The church was the United Church of Canada, very low in fire and brimstone, very high in social action. That part has stayed with me.

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

Von Fuchs: I had the kind of education that was typical for middle-class children in Canada in the 20th century – public school, high school, BA. For my BA I chose a program called Honours Philosophy and Psychology, which the University of Western Ontario had set up back in the days when those two disciplines were still friends. Since I was a candidate for the ministry (the United Church having been an early adopter with respect to the ordination of women), some people worried that the philosophy half of my program might cause me to lose my faith.

Surprise – it was the psychology half which did that. Psychology in those days (the 60s) was anxious to be seen as a science, and it skated very close to biology. The more I thought about the world of animals, the more I was struck by the way good and evil could be inextricably intertwined. When a lion catches a gazelle, for instance, the event is triumph and yummy lunch for the lion, but terror and agonizing death for the gazelle. A deity who was both omnipotent and benevolent would not have created such a world. In English a very pithy phrasing of this idea is possible: “If God is God, He is not good; if He is good, He is not God.”

After I decided not to be a minister I thought of becoming a philosophy professor and enrolled in an M.Phil. program at the University of Toronto. But when I realized that the only jobs were going to be in the hinterland, the wind went out of my sails. U of T gave me an MA out of kindness because I had taken so many courses. Finally, I followed in the footsteps of a friend who had gone to Library School and had found a job she loved, without having to give up being a city girl.

Jacobsen: How did you come into the fray of euthanasia, right to die, dying with dignity, and medical assistance in dying?

Von Fuchs: There was no specific event. I just gradually became more and more aware that there was something which was certain to happen to every one of us and nobody was doing much to prepare for it, learn how to handle it well, and so on. In my teens, I somehow learned about an American group called the Euthanasia Educational Council and I joined it, receiving

their newsletters and slowly educating myself. Once I got into adulthood I began to be very busy with life – studying, working, falling in love, etc. – and my death-related activity went into low gear, though my interest remained strong.

Then around 1980, I read a newspaper announcement about some people who were starting a Canadian group on the subject. I attended the start-up meeting and became a member of the group, which had chosen the name Dying With Dignity. Their main focus was helping people to prepare, by writing living wills and appointing proxies.

In 1991 a second group, the Right to Die Society of Canada, was founded by John Hofsess in Victoria. It had quite an ambitious agenda and I signed up. I became one of the faces of the group because I lived in Toronto and could easily bike over to the CBC or host a camera crew at my home. Then in 2002, when John became less public, I assumed leadership of the group.

I enjoy writing, and people say I do it well, so I have been the editor of two Canadian newsletters: Free To Go, a quarterly serving all the right-to-die groups in Canada, and then the RTDSC Newsletter, whose final issue was published at the start of 2018.

Jacobsen: What are the main human rights linked to the right to die?

Von Fuchs: I do not believe in the concept of “natural rights” – I consider that rights are things which people in a certain society give to one another, by consensus (sometimes a slowly-building consensus). That said, I think that my society – 21st-century Canada — recognizes a right to be spared, as far as possible, from suffering brought on by factors beyond your control. It also recognizes that solitude often feels like punishment, so we should not run away from people who are dying, just because we don’t like confronting the situation.

Jacobsen: What tasks and responsibilities come along with the leadership position at Right to Die Society of Canada?

Von Fuchs: We are a pretty minimalist group, now. I maintain a website and a database (of e-mail and postal addresses which I use when I have something to send out to all the people who have expressed interest in our cause). I take telephone calls and respond to e-mails, from people who want to know “how to begin” or who would like some strategy advice. I write responses to calls for input (e.g. from government bodies), I complete questionnaires from researchers, I write letters for opinion pages of newspapers, and I attend conferences (sometimes making a presentation, and always learning something). Most of these activities I fund personally.

Jacobsen: I have immense gratitude and respect for librarians and former librarians. The quiet foot soldiers of the national intellect. You were a reference librarian. How does this set of skills help with the current human rights and, in fact, secular work through the Right to Die Society of Canada now?

Von Fuchs: I am easy to talk to! I think I was like this even before I became a reference librarian, but that job certainly kept my skills fresh. And I am good at finding things out, by both traditional and non-traditional methods.

Jacobsen: What have been some of the important legal and sociocultural wins for the right to die movement within Canadian society in the past?

Von Fuchs: The hands-down winner is the 2016 Supreme Court decision in the case known simply as “Carter”. We can now acknowledge the fact that for people in certain situations death is the best option, and we can help them achieve it instead of saying “You take it from here.”

Jacobsen: What are the current battlegrounds now?

Von Fuchs: The first law passed by the government (“C-14”) is very flawed. In several respects, it protects medical personnel more than sufferers. By requiring that help be given only when death is clearly within sight, it allows those who provide the help to tell themselves “I didn’t really do anything – the person was dying anyway.” And it requires sufferers to ease the minds of their helpers by requesting death one more time immediately before the helper’s hands move, even though research would almost certainly show that it is vanishingly rare for people in such circumstances to change their minds.

Jacobsen: Who have been the perennial enemies or opposition of the right to die movements? What have been the misrepresentations and, even potentially, outright lies stated about the right to die movement within Canada and other countries in which right to die has organizations and is, at least somewhat, an organized movement? What truths dispel those myths?

Von Fuchs: I could write a book. But here I will just say that running away from death (and its practitioners) is a long-established tradition and probably has deep roots in the human psyche. The death-control movement has much in common with the birth-control movement. The blind and cruel “life force” held sway in the early twentieth century – doctors who informed women about ways in which they could have sex without getting pregnant were entrapped and imprisoned, sometimes sentenced to hard labour. Now my local drugstore has a whole aisle labelled “Family Planning”. Here in the twenty-first century we are seeing doctors and many others telling people about ways in which they can die without suffering, not even suffering from fear or ostracism or abandonment.

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

Von Fuchs: We shall overcome!

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

Interview with Margaret Downey – Founder & President, Freethought Society

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 11, 2019

Margaret Downey is the Founder and President of the Freethought Society. 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?

Margaret Downey: I was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I lived there from 1950 until 1957. During that time, my half-sister, who is a person of color came to live with us. Louisiana was (and still is) one of the most prejudicial locations in the South. I witnessed at a very early age, the horrible way my half-sister was treated due to the color of her skin. My mother was a light-skin Puerto Rican, but, she too was terribly mistreated by strangers and by my father's family. She fled to Miami, Florida after sending for several of her Puerto Rican half-sisters to help her restart her life – which now included a total of three little girls. We had a tough life, but everyone worked hard – including me and my sisters. I learned to sew for money and I cleaned houses starting at age 10. I've been a hard worker ever since. Because of the hatred and prejudices I observed as a young person, I've devoted my life to ending discrimination at all levels.

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

Downey: Just like all my sisters, I became pregnant at age 17. There was never any hope for a college education. We lived paycheck to paycheck. Marriage was my only future. My first marriage ended in divorce when I was 21. I married my current husband five years later. I met my second husband at work. I had obtained a high level of employment because of my work ethic, but I was continually “in trouble” for demanding equality for women (pay, promotional opportunities, and even fairness in dress code standards). I began taking night classes after my son was born in the hope of getting a college degree. My husband began getting promoted which lead to us moving often. I stopped and started an interior design business five times as the moves took place. In 1992, I began attending The Humanist Institute in New York City. It was a three-year program, but I became ill after 2 ½ years and could not complete the course. I can finish this course at any time, but the responsibilities of running the Freethought Society is overwhelming.

Jacobsen: As the Founder and President of the Freethought Society, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position? What was the original impetus to create the Freethought Society?

Downey: When the Boy Scouts of America rejected my 12-year-old son's relocation application (from New Jersey to Illinois, to Pennsylvania), I filed a discrimination lawsuit against them through the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. During the nine-year investigation of facts, I appeared on television and conducted many radio interviews. This drew people to me and I realized that there was a need for a group such as The Freethought Society. I founded the group in 1993 with only 35 people helping me with initial donations. Now, we can boast about having over 8,000 supporters nationwide and some money in the bank. The Freethought Society requires

a lot of work to publish an e-zine/newsletter, pay bills, maintain accounting records, organize and implement events and conduct meetings.

Jacobsen: What have been its major developments over the years in the advancement of freethought?

Downey: We have educated the public and have enlightened many about freedom of thought, science appreciation, and secular history. We are known for doing this via our publication and hosting speakers, as well as conducting theatrical presentations, theme parties, and school assemblies. A better acceptance of nontheism has been observed over the last 25 years.

Jacobsen: Aside from yourself, who have been the integral women for the freethought communities and movements? What are some pivotal texts of theirs?

Downey: Other woman doing the similar work as I include Annie Laurie Gaylor (Freedom From Religion Foundation), Robyn Blumner (Center for Inquiry), Mandisa Lateefah Thomas (Black Nonbelievers), Noel George (Foundation Beyond Belief), and Samantha McGuire (Washington Area Secular Humanists).

Jacobsen: As we move further into 2019 with the Trump Administration, we see women's rights as very low on the agenda. What are the going to be the difficulties for the freethought community in 2019? How can we work to fight these and other regressive forces?

Downey: There are many efforts by legislators to impose bible-based laws on American citizens. We see the wall between religion and government crumbling away. Finding willing plaintiffs to object to these laws and resolutions is a difficult endeavor. We object in any way we can. The Boy Scouts of America continues to discriminate against our children and male legislators, in particular, are trying to take away a woman's right to choose.

Jacobsen: Of those against the freethinking, we can also note the even worse negativity and tone against freethinking women. Why is this the case? How can this be changed into the future? How can freethinking men help with combatting the rather obvious sexism and prejudice more strongly hurled at freethinking women from those opposed to freethought?

Downey: Since money is not readily available to the nontheist community (we don't promote tithing, after all), many male leaders are just trying to protect their territory. If nontheist women had more monetary resources, we could prove that we CAN run organizations just as well as a man! Society has not caught up with us, even in the freethought world. Men are still more thought of as the best leaders and as the "movers" and "shakers." That is simply the wrong attitude for our community and our donors. Women must be given better opportunities. The nontheist male leaders who are sexist are being found out and dealt with, but some are too powerful and well-funded to be exposed for who they really are. It's getting better, but female leaders must be more valued, financially supported and given opportunities. There is also a lot of territorial jealousy that gets in the way of progress.

Jacobsen: What are some core books and articles, and intellectuals, to pay more attention to now?

Downey: The Freethought Society crated *The Tree of Knowledge* in 2007. Each year we add new ornaments (book covers) designed to promote new authors. See this link for details about this project: <https://www.ft society.org/menu/tree-of-knowledge/>

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the donation of time, the addition of membership, links to professional and personal networks, giving monetarily, exposure in interviews or writing articles, and so on?

Downey: We have a solid core group of about 8 people who donate their time to our publication. Another 3 folks take care of the website and IT needs. We have about 15 volunteers who get involved with events. 4 – 5 volunteers can be counted upon for meetings. Our board of directors have 12 volunteers. There are very few on the team that can be counted upon for media interviews. We find that only about four people can be trusted with a professional appearance and for the delivery of quality sound bites and talking points.

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

Downey: Thank you.

In Memoriam, Deo Ssekitoleko – Representative of Center for Inquiry International – Uganda

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 11, 2019

Free Inquiry published an appreciation of the late Deo Ssekitoleko. He died at the age of 48. He has been given the credit as the individual who brought humanism to Uganda, Kenya, and East Africa. No small feat in a single lifetime.

The current director of CFI Kenya, George Ongere, stated, “Getting views about an alternative to religion was very difficult! But the work of Deo, who could cross the border and bring magazines from IHEU, gave us new perspectives, and most of the humanists and atheists in Kenya realized they were not alone.”

Ongere, himself, credits Ssekitoleko with bringing him to humanism. Ssekitoleko founded the Fair View Humanist School that was a service to villages near Mpigi in Central Uganda. Also, he was the director of CFI inside of Uganda. Deo is dead, and he will be missed. Here is a republished interview with Ssekitoleko, potentially, one of the final interviews with him.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: In brief, what is your family story?

Deo Ssekitoleko: I was born in a poor African family. I first saw my biological father when I was ten years old. I am the heir of my late father, Fulgensio Ssekitooleko. He was a very committed catholic, very social, and a committed humanitarian. I grew up with my mother Noelina Nalwada—which was typically a single-parent household (but at other times I had step-fathers).

I am the only child. My father’s children, apart from one, died after getting infected with HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s. My mother is an atheist, agnostic or skeptic. When I tried to enter a catholic seminary, she abused me and challenged me whether I had ever seen somebody who has ever seen God or returned from death.

However, one of my last stepfathers who was both a devout catholic and a believer in African traditional religion influenced me to be a very religious person (Catholic) in my early youth. My mother knew how to fight for my (and her) rights, so I never understood issues concerning human rights violations during my youth except when seeing teachers apply corporal punishment to my fellow students.

As I was growing up, I was not aware of the massive human rights abuse by the governments of the day, but, once in a while, I could hear whispers about somebody who has disappeared or killed by the government. Those were regimes of president Iddi Amin Dada, and the second regime of Apollo Milton Obote as he was fighting guerrillas lead by Yoweri Museveni—the current president of Uganda

I am married to Elizabeth, and we have been together for 17 years. We have four children: Sylvia (16 years), Diana (12), Julius (11), and Nicholas (3).

Jacobsen: Are there any other things about your personal story you would like to share?

Ssekitoleko: I grew up striving to succeed in education so that I could escape poverty, ignorance, and unfairness in society. My mother’s relatives were always exploited by

witchdoctors who claimed to have healing-powers and thus could cure diseases—including HIV/AIDS. My uncles and aunts gave away their land to witchdoctors in order to get cured from HIV/AIDS, but they later died leaving no property to their offsprings.

In the years to come, the Pentecostal movements emerged promising prosperity on earth, good health and many other opportunities. The two groups, i.e. the traditional religions and the Pentecostals, were undermining the struggle against HIV/AIDS, exploiting poor people. Yet, nobody could talk about them or challenge them.

This was a traumatising experience. I never knew whether this was a human rights issue or mere belief, or ignorance. As the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights defends the right to belief, all governments have gone on to include that article in their constitutions.

This means that ignorant people can be exploited in the name of belief as it is their human right to be exploited as long as they believe. This has been one of my most traumatising struggles in life. I have lost so many relatives out of their ignorance of science concerning health issues. Yet, governments cannot do anything about this because the politicians are also superstitious and the laws protect the charlatans.

In Uganda, almost 80 per cent of FM radio stations spend most of their time promoting the work of faith healers and witchdoctors. Rationalists do not have resources to own a radio station or to buy time on radio and television.

In my struggle to promote rationalism, I founded the Uganda Humanist Association. I became the East African Representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (2007–2012). Now, I am the Ugandan Representative of the Center for Inquiry International.

As advocacy campaigns are difficult, we now engage with local communities to talk about science and superstition in health and community development. Our work is now to invite whoever happens to be involved to discuss these issues openly and inform communities of the dangers of superstition in health and community development.

As of now, I have personally suspended armchair conference-hall humanism. I am in the trenches of community practical humanism. Whatever little I do, I feel proud that at least I am part of the struggle to rationalise African communities.

Jacobsen: What are your religious/irreligious, ethical and political beliefs?

Ssekitoleko: I grew up as a staunch Catholic, and then at university I became a radical secular humanist. Now, having interacted with various so-called humanists and observed their limitations (especially in building harmony, inclusive communities, practical approaches to societal problems, and a general lack of openness) I have reviewed my humanism. I am now a free-thinking, liberal, practical humanist. I do not mind other people's beliefs on the condition that they do not infringe on the rights, happiness, and welfare of other human beings. I can work with Catholics on a health project, but I tell them point blank that the use of condoms should not be undermined and that family planning is essential in our families.

I tell Pentecostals that by preaching miracles such as faith-healing they are committing homicide. However, I enjoy my intellectual philosophical humanism as we debate Darwinism, the Big Bang theory, the environment, and the future of humanity among others. Politically, I am a social welfare democrat. Democracy should not be only about elections, but on how society shares opportunities and resources and how it promotes harmony.

I do not support the winner takes it all type of democracy. I prefer proportional representation in government as a form of democracy, as is the case in many countries which suffered the madness of the second world war.

Jacobsen: How did you become an activist and a sceptic?

Ssekitoleko: When I enrolled in high school, I was still a very confused young man. I had experienced a lot in my childhood. My Biology teacher, the late Mathias Katende, made an explosion in my brain and changed my ideological worldview. He introduced evolutionary biology to us.

The more he taught, the more we became confused. All along, I had prepared myself to go to heaven and meet Mary, the mother of Jesus, and escape worldly problems. However, by the time I entered University to study Botany, Zoology, and Psychology, I had become completely healed from this ideological and philosophical trauma.

At University, we got more lessons on evolution, but the lecturers were not as committed to evolution as my high school teacher. In fact, most students never took evolution seriously. They just wrote their examinations and moved on with life.

At university, by luck, a friend gave me a book on discovering religions. I read about most religions, worldviews, and philosophies. I found Humanism to be more related to my new worldview. I wrote to the British Humanist Association and got a positive response from Matt Cherry who encouraged me to form a humanist organisation. That was the birth of the Uganda Humanist Association.

He connected me to the center for Inquiry International through Norm Allen who was the Director of African Americans for Humanism (AAH). The Free Inquiry Magazines that Norm sent us opened our eyes wider on how humanity sees itself. Later, we were to work with the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) on many secular projects.

Jacobsen: Do you consider yourself a progressive?

Ssekitoleko: I am very progressive. I have always been evolving in my ideological, philosophical, cultural, and political views. I used to be a staunch believer in American democracy, but now I am more rotated towards European Social Parliamentary Democracy. I used to hate China's politics, but now I see it relevant in order to maintain orderliness and social welfare to a country (that has over one billion people) under one authority. I am a progressive because I am ever open to new challenges, new ideas, and new world views for the good of humanity and the environment at large.

Jacobsen: Does progressivism logically imply other beliefs, or tend to or even not all?

Ssekitoleko: I don't look at progressivism as a confined ideology or philosophy. If so, then I need more education about it. In my view, progressivism should be open to all aspects of human life including but not limited to culture, beliefs, politics, philosophy, and views about the environment among others.

Jacobsen: How did you come to adopt socially progressive worldview?

Ssekitoleko: As I explained earlier, it is a combination of my childhood experience, my culture, my environment, and possibly my inherited biological genes. I am lucky to have been introduced to evolutionary theory by my high school biology teacher and through reading various related

literature including Richard Dawkin's The Blind Watchmaker. The works of Philosophers such as Thomas Paine's The Age of Reason taught me critical reasoning skills. Studying the American revolution was equally important in my political thought development. I was humbled by the sacrifices of Nelson Mandela and his colleagues to liberate South Africa from apartheid. Julius Nyerere's trials with community socialism in order to liberate Tanzanians from poverty and to unite them into one nation was a positive human commitment. I can not forget reading the life of Bill Clinton in his voluminous autobiography. It is a story of moving from no where to the top of the mountains of his country.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Deo.

Interview with Matthew Krevat – Board Member, Triangle Freethought Society

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 12, 2019

Matthew Krevat is a Board Member of the Triangle Freethought Society. Here we talk about his 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?

Matthew Krevat: I grew up in Brooklyn, New York in the 1970 and 1980s, moving to Raleigh, North Carolina in the late 80s for college. My grandparents were Jewish immigrants from Russia, my paternal grandfather having emigrated in 1905. Religion equaled tradition in our house (complete with Zero Mostel singing the song from Fiddler on the Roof in our heads whenever we hear the word tradition). My grandfather (born ca. 1890) never believed (to the dismay of his very religious parents) and so my father was raised with little religion. My mother was raised with more religion, but it didn't transfer much to our house. We were never kosher, only went to temple for weddings and bar mitzvahs, and rarely observed holidays in any but the most casual manner. My parents are both still alive (in their 80s) and live near me in North Carolina, my brothers are both married and have moved to the West Coast, visiting a few times a year.

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

Krevat: My parents were both college-educated, my father going on to pharmacy school to become a pharmacist. My younger brother has a Master's Degree in education, my older brother graduated from a top computer science school with honors (before comp sci was even a major, technically his degree was in advanced mathematics), and I have a bachelor's in English literature but ended up in marketing. I've taken many certificate programs and other continuing education in my field. I read a lot of nonfiction, listen to a lot of legal and political podcasts, and enjoy scientific documentaries.

Jacobsen: Was there ever a moment of "aha" in terms of moving to freethinking? Is there any sense in which some purported freethinkers aren't so freely thinking?

Krevat: Freethinking is on a spectrum. I find it unlikely that anyone is a perfect skeptic. We all have our biases and while we can recognize and minimize many of them, there will always be more lurking. My father raised us with a healthy dose of skepticism, so while I may have not understood formal and informal fallacies when I was young, I was always wary of accepting claims without sufficient evidence or consensus in the field.

Jacobsen: As a Board Member of the Triangle Freethought Society, what will be the substantive tasks and responsibilities coming with the position?

Krevat: Our board is currently made up of five members with no official titles or ranks (e.g., there is no president). We are responsible for planning events, booking educational speakers,

arranging volunteer opportunities, day-to-day operations and finances, and serving as a central point of contact.

Jacobsen: Why was the Triangle Freethought Society originally formed?

Krevat: I wasn't around in the early days, but the story goes that it was originally a meet-up group for some secular residents of the area who felt a little overwhelmed by all the focus of religion in our area. Things evolved from there (and continue to evolve) and now we are the local chapter of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the American Humanist Association.

Jacobsen: What are some fun social and communal activities of the society?

Krevat: Our signature events must be our program meetings. The third Monday of the month we have a guest speaker on a topic we hope will be of interest to our community. For example, this quarter we have Kim Ellington from Camp 42 (a secular summer program for kids and teens), Aaron Rabi from Embrace the Void podcast (a philosopher who will be talking about Moral Realism), Bart Campolo the author, podcaster and humanist chaplain, and Hemant Mehta, the Friendly Atheist blogger. We have 2 "Happy Heathen Hour" meetups a month (in 2 different cities in our area) hosted by TFS, but open to all like-minded people who are interested in community. We have a monthly game night hosted by one of our members. Every summer we have an open to the public (no membership required) picnic with a music jam, sports, juggling, pot luck food and of course grilling food. Every December we have our Festivus celebration which is part pot-luck, part food cooked and supplied by the Board members, with a number of fun activities including an improv comedy performance by a local improv troupe of mostly atheists (coincidentally, the director did not plan this...I know, because I am the director). We have some "day at the museum" weekend events planned for this year.

Jacobsen: Who have been important allies in the work for the increase in freethinking?

Krevat: The bloggers on the Internet. The YouTube atheist community (despite pockets of it turning caustic recently). The podcaster community. But most of all the religious community for being such an amazing example of how toxic religion can be. When the Catholic Church is protecting pederasts, we don't have work hard to present a better option.

Jacobsen: When you reflect on the ways in which people have been mistreated because of their freethought stances? What are some of the common ways? What are some of the more nuanced or subtle ways in which these can manifest themselves?

Krevat: My best friend hasn't seen his oldest grandchild since June, 2011 when the child was 2 or 3. He has never met his next grandchild born a few years later. Why? Because my friend almost died. When his son visited him in the hospital, he asked if his father was ready to die, if his soul was ready. My friend beat around the bush a bit, but finally said, "Listen son, your mother and I don't talk religion with you because we know how important it is to you and we don't want to push our beliefs on you. But we don't believe. We don't go to church any more and we don't believe any more." His son walked out of the hospital room, blocked his parents (and eventually his sister who was, at the time, still a churchgoer) on all social media, and has never made contact again. I don't need other examples.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved through the donation of time, the addition of membership, links to professional and personal networks, giving monetarily, exposure in interviews or writing articles, and so on?

Krevat: Yes, those things. And just living an Openly Secular life. Just let one person a month know you're secular. Be a good example of good without gods. If you can. I mean, you can lose your grandchildren over it.

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

Krevat: Thank you for the opportunity to share and for the work you are doing to promote freethought, secularism, and humanism.

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

Krevat: R'amen.

Interview with Merja Soisaari-Turriago – Secretary, EXITUS ry

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 13, 2019

Merja Soisaari-Turriago is the Secretary of EXITUS ry. 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?

Merja Soisaari-Turriago: I was born in Turku, Finland and naturally my mother tongue was Finnish. In my childhood I also heard a lot of Swedish Turku/Åbo being a very bilingual city.

I was born as an atheist. Religious issues just never interested me. Religion was taught at school, but my thoughts were elsewhere. Also at home religion was not an issue.

My Father was a medical doctor and my Mother a house wife. I went to a normal high school in Turku and studied at the same time music at the Conservatory in Turku with piano as my main instrument.

During my high school years, I spent one year in Ann Arbor, USA studying at the Michigan University Music Department. After my graduation in Finland, I left for London to study Music.

By then I had realized that my main line with my instrument was accompanying and chamber music. After London I still studied in Vienna at the Academy of Music and also worked as a correpetitor at Baden bei Wien Theater.

After my studies I worked in my field at the University of Jyväskylä. I have one son, whose is also a pianist like my husband as well. We have three grandchildren.

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

Soisaari-Turriago: I think that in the previous “chapter” you got an idea of my education. My self-education has concentrated in learning languages.

After school I have learnt Spanish due to the fact that my husband is Colombian. We also speak different languages at home every day: English. German, Spanish, Finnish.

Jacobsen: What is a living will? Why is it important?

Soisaari-Turriago: I think that living will is extremely important. I have made one. But so far, if I say that I wish to have euthanasia, it is not possible, due to the lack of law.

A “living will” can be filed into your health files. I have said in my own living will, that, if euthanasia should be legalized I want to have it applied in my case, if need be.

Jacobsen: As the Secretary of EXITUS ry, what tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

Soisaari-Turriago: Too many bureaucratic tasks: keeping the registration in order, minutes of the meetings, bank issues, international connections, giving people information f.eg. of the Dignitas Association in Switzerland etc.

Jacobsen: As EXITUS ry is an independent association, why is this independence important in the work of advocating for the adoption of an active euthanasia law in Finland?

Soisaari-Turriago: In Finland I don't see any alternative for the society being something other than independent. We could not possibly have any state or community connection. We are fighting for something that so far does not exist.

Jacobsen: What are some of the difficulties faced by EXITUS ry?

Soisaari-Turriago: Money is number one. The membership fee is very low, at the moment 20 euros. Yet we need to organize lecturers, discussion panels, send information etc. The members of the government work for free, only the trips are paid.

Jacobsen: Why is the adoption of an active euthanasia law in Finland difficult, even in the current period?

Soisaari-Turriago: Many. Above all the medical doctors' union. One can count with the fingers of one hand the doctors who publicly stand for euthanasia.

There are of course many doctors who support euthanasia, but they stay in the closet. This is very unfortunate. If we compare the process of legalizing euthanasia for example in Belgium, the whole process actually started with the doctors in connection with the development of palliative care.

And the same in Colombia. Religion is another issue. We have a state church and there are also some suspicious religious sects, especially in the North of Finland. As you probably know, there was a citizens' initiative of euthanasia that made its way to the parliament.

It seemed that it possibly would go through, but then some parliament members "turned their jacket". The citizens' initiative received the appointed amount of votes in no time. So where is the democracy?

Jacobsen: How can people, nationally or internationally, become involved in and help with the efforts of EXITUS ry?

Soisaari-Turriago: By getting us some more money and joining us.

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

Soisaari-Turriago: Just yesterday I received a message from Sweden proposing a Nordic meeting in Stockholm next fall to advance co-operation in Scandinavia. An improvement.

The WFoRtD is an active world organization, but they also need more money in keeping a worldwide cooperation going.

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

Ask Minister Poppei 1 – Morals as a Lifestyle, Ethics as a Life Stance

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 13, 2019

Minister Amanda Poppei is a Senior Leader & Unitarian Universalist Minister at the Washington Ethical Society (Ethical Culture and Unitarian Universalist). Here we talk about the attraction of ethical culture and ethical societies.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What attracts people to ethical culture?

Minister Amanda Poppei: Usually, people come looking for the community—they want something that’s “like church” but that doesn’t have dogma or beliefs that no longer fit for them.

But they DO want a place where they can be known, where people will bring them casseroles if they have surgery or celebrate with them when they meet with success in life.

And, they’re often looking for a place where they can practice their values, where what they feel is important can be reinforced in the talks and the music and they can feel like they’re really living their principles.

Jacobsen: What keeps people in ethical societies?

Poppei: I think people stay because of the relationships they make and the way society makes them feel. They stay because they feel connected to other people, and because they believe in the mission and want to be part of making it happen.

Like any community of people, Ethical Societies have conflict sometimes, and it can be tempting to just walk away when that happens.

But folks stay because they see that they have an opportunity to actually work with and through the conflict and build an even better community together.

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

Interview with William Flynn – Founder, Camden County Humanists

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 14, 2019

William Flynn is the Founder of the Camden County Humanists. Here we talk about his life, views, and work.

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?

William Flynn: I grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey. My family moved around a lot during the '80s and '90s but always around South Jersey. There was this generic feel to every place

I ever resided at. My Mom and Dad were raised Catholic which meant that I was raised Catholic. I went to a Catholic elementary school. We were a typical American family with typical family problems.

My Father was a lapsed Catholic but told me I had to go to church. My Mom grew up in a strict religious environment. The first time I decided not to go to church, my mom went ballistic.

When you're a kid, the last thing you want to do on Sunday is put on uncomfortable clothes and kneel in a depressing looking building. Religion in our family was never on the frontlines, it just existed.

I believe that rebellious part of me is what pushed me away from the church and the notion of god. I was an Atheist before I even knew what an Atheist was. I found out where I stood when it came to believing in a god when I was around 11 years old.

For me, it was simple logic that helped me reached my conclusion. Everything I was being taught about religion wasn't adding up. I began to see how religion hurt more than it helped.

I started asking questions but only received bottom line answers such as "There is a God. There just is". I think the best comparison when explaining to people how I came to be an atheist, is the Santa Lie.

After a certain age, you start to put the pieces together and you realize that is was being made up as it was going along. God was the Santa lie, the bedtime story, and the coping mechanism.

For critical thinkers, the bedtime stories were over and Santa wasn't real. Logic and Reason replaced Fantasy and Make Believe.

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

Flynn: After elementary school, I attended a Catholic High school. It was a disaster to say the least. Kids can be cruel, what can I say. The high school experience didn't last very long.

I was homeschooled for the remaining year. I attended community college while working part-time. I believe this is what lead me to enjoy the field of Sociology so much. The topic of human nature and conduct was very intriguing and philosophical to me and it still is to this day.

I had many outside influences that formed who I am today. I was 12 years old when I started watching George Carlin. My dad was a big fan of his. I really connected with everything Carlin said about religion.

George hit the nail on the head every time. Even though Carlin was a comedian, he did speak his mind and I could relate to every word.

When the internet came along and brought us Youtube, I was able to discover incredible people such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. I've read every book Hitch had written.

I would tell people about Dawkins and Harris. I would recommend articles to those who were on the fence about religion or needed to be re-educated on how much damage religion has caused since the beginning of civilization.

I studied Darwin and Huxley's work at great length. I would spend a large amount of time watching many debates about the existence of God and the nature of morality.

I made sure that if I was going to be on the frontlines defending science and rejecting religious dogma, I better know more than the person debating me.

Being the one pushing back the theocratic encroachment in today's society, it's best to have the knowledge and know-how in order to have a voice and to make a difference.

Since then, I have kept up with the ongoing work from some of the most prestigious and incredible organizations in the world including The Freedom From Religion Foundation, The American Atheists, The American Humanists, and The International Humanist and Ethical Union as well as the British Humanists to name a few.

Jacobsen: Why was Camden County Humanists originally formed? What was its original purpose?

Flynn: When I founded The Camden County Humanists back in early 2013, my purpose was to create an Atheist/Humanist presence where there wasn't one. Most of the Humanist groups were located in Northern New Jersey.

At the time CCH came along, there were only two groups, one of which was slightly inactive. There was this void that needed to be filled. CCH represented everything that the American Humanists did.

We created a family of like-minded individuals who came together to make the community a better place one good deed at a time. We raised money for different charities, fed the homeless, adopted a highway. We became a part of the community that we enjoyed helping so much.

Jacobsen: Of those community-building activities, what are those provided by the Camden County Humanists? How do these activities give a solid foundation to maintain membership and communal sensibilities – that everyone belongs together?

Flynn: To better clarify, we are very accepting of those who are "still searching". We don't judge but we do hope they end up joining. We offer such a wide variety of events that tackle so many topics, some that are a passionate cause to our members.

We have dinner once a month as a "get to know/how ya been" type event. The casual atmosphere gives people a chance to open up, tell us about themselves or simply listen to the conversation.

Many who attend are people who can't talk about atheism around their family or friends. The dinner gives them a sense of freedom and sanctuary. Over time, people who joined as strangers now participate as friends.

Jacobsen: What tasks and responsibilities come with the leadership role for Camden County Humanists?

Flynn: Being a leader means knowing how to plan events, having an open line of communication with all members and letting people know that they have a voice because they are a part of this group.

Leadership requires commitment and dedication. This means bringing ideas to the group, planning events and following through with them. The more passionate a leader is about what they are trying to accomplish, the more people will believe in them and want to help.

Jacobsen: If you look at local activism for the secular, what are some laudable efforts for the advancement of humanistic efforts?

Flynn: The way things are today, it difficult to live through the age of unenlightenment. The Trump agenda to make this a theocracy on a state and federal level is sad to witness in this day and age.

The best we can do is remind people about the details they seem to forget when it comes to the constitution. Church and State must be separate – no excuses. Secular organizations take on these cases because someone has to uphold the establishment clause of the 1st amendment.

In the end, it comes who down equality. No one should be treated any different because of race, belief, lack of belief or who they love and what gender they identify as.

Sometimes change doesn't happen as fast as it should but it still happens. This is why we keep fighting the good fight because we believe in equality for all.

Jacobsen: Some or even many secular communities undergo vilification and abuse from other local religious communities. Has this been the case for the Camden County Humanists?

If so, how? Or if not, and if other communities are going through it, what would be a good collective code of conduct to deal with these issues?

Flynn: The one thing that stood out when we approached people or businesses about our group was the fact that they didn't know what Humanism was.

Once we explained the Philosophy behind it, people didn't seem to mind. I assumed people couldn't find conflict with us if they didn't know much about Humanism. We would always put emphasis on the good that we were doing as a group.

We never ran into any conflict. Our county wasn't filled with religious extremists or prominent hate groups that you might find in other parts of the country. It was very low key.

I always told members of my group that the best way to deal with conflict was to take the high road. Fundamentalists have a knack for infecting any joyous occasion with hate.

It's easy to get sucked into that vortex of a shouting match. I've seen it happen often at various gay pride festivals. Always be the better person and display a level of tolerance that the religious bible thumpers can never achieve.

Jacobsen: What is the single most important factor in the foundation, growth, and maintenance of the humanist community? Why? How does this play out in concrete terms?

Flynn: The most important factor for any humanist group is being able to stay active. Every group should always get involved in community projects, outreach programs and other events that gain public exposure.

It's important to know that as a group there is a responsibility to uphold certain values that the American Humanists stand for. We believe in good. We believe in the advancement of science and technology. We believe in logic and reason.

Our goal is for the greater good, to better humanity for generations to come and to constantly evolve into a more informed, more tolerant, more compassionate society. To accomplish these goals, it's important to always stay active and to always be involved.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the donation of time, the addition of membership, links to professional and personal networks, giving monetarily, exposure in interviews or writing articles, and so on?

Flynn: When people would join The Camden County Humanists for the first time, I would tell them about the benefits of joining the American Humanists Association.

This meant that they could be more aware of what's going on in the Humanist community on a national level. Some groups have membership fees in order to fund their group.

This is always optional depending on the size of the group and whether or not it was a chapter of the AHA. Every year, the AHA would give out grants to groups looking to build on what they started.

Members are encouraged to write or call their local representatives, sign petitions, volunteer and even write letters to the editor of the local newspaper. All of these things help people better understand what Humanism is all about.

Donating time towards the group activities is not always easy. It depends on the size of the group, the average age of the total number of members and if group time conflicts with work schedules. I don't demand people dedicate their lives to the group but I do encourage them to help out when or if they can.

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

Flynn: I think this was a very informative Q & A. I hope that people who read this can relate to what I've said and can gain some perspective on what it means to lead a Humanist group.

We still have a long ways to go and progress will take time but if we have strength in numbers, we can accomplish anything. The tides are turning – a new generation of young adults are living their lives with no religious affiliation.

The number of atheists in this country slowly rises. I only hope that 50 years from now, society has become more tolerant, more logical and more compassionate.

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

Flynn: You are very welcome, Mr. Jacobsen. It was my pleasure.

Ask Justin 1 – From the Will to Humanpower

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 16, 2019

Justin Scott is one of the hardest working atheist activists in the United States, having committed the past four years to atheist activism to help normalize atheism and stand up for the rights of one of the most ignored minority (soon to be majority) groups.

Named Atheist of the Year by American Atheists for 2017, Scott is now currently serving as State Director for American Atheists in his home state of Iowa, which he has called home for all of his 37 years.

From “bird dogging” presidential candidates—he was able to confront every major presidential candidate during the 2016 presidential race—to delivering secular invocations at the state capitol and in city council chambers across Iowa, along with ending government endorsed prayers as well, Scott has made a name for himself as one of the most successful atheist activists out there. Scott can be reached at justinscott@atheists.org.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have been active and, more importantly, successful in activism for secularism. What have been the tools of the trade? How can others learn from the setup by you?

Justin Scott: There are a few items that I would consider “tools of the trade”.

1) A willingness to put yourself out there, on any level.

Of course, not everyone has the stomach to go out in public declaring that not only they’re an atheist but that you’re coming right at religious/Christian privilege. To most, it’s too big of a risk and I get that. But at the end of the day, if you’re interested in making a difference, even just on a local level, you may be the only one that can make a difference.

2) Do the little things.

I didn’t just wake up one morning and know as much as I do now. It’s taken me nearly four years to be as knowledgeable about church/state issues, what candidates feel which way about which issues and what the best ways to approach these issues are. I’ve had to dig into issues, candidates, the backgrounds of elected officials, various aspects of church/state separation and laws/court decisions. And the best part is I’m still actively trying to improve on this. The key to being a good activist is to do these little things in order to make you better when you’re out and about.

3) Be prepared to fail...AND LEARN FROM YOUR FAILURES.

Early on, I didn’t have all the right questions or answers. But with time and experience, I’ve gotten to the point where I can walk into most situations confidently knowing how to handle myself and how to approach the situation to get the desired result. Again, this hasn’t come easy and without a ton of mistakes. I’ve asked terrible questions. I’ve missed opportunities to follow up with candidates/lawmakers/elected officials. I truly believe however, that that’s the beauty of being an activist: you can always improve!

4) Seek constructive criticism and then use it.

One of the things I've really learned in all of this is that I'm not the first atheist activist and I hopefully won't be the last, so with that I've truly learned the value of reaching out and in some cases leaning on others. There's absolutely nothing wrong with reaching out to activists across the country and seeking their opinions on how you can become a better activist. In most cases, the person you're reaching out to has been in the same boat and would be happy to offer you some encouragement.

5) Have fun...despite the ups and downs you WILL make a difference!

It's cliché to say "Have fun!" but I'm going to do it anyways. The relationships I've made, the experiences I've had, the people I've met (and challenged), would have never come my way had I not had fun with all of this. Atheism and the path I've chosen by embracing my role as an atheist activist has already, in just under four years, provided me with a story that even Forest Gump himself would be jealous of. I can't wait for what's up next!

Jacobsen: In terms of honest failures, what can others learn from those failed activist attempts, by others or yourself?

Scott: No one "failure" stands out (I also don't refer to them as such but rather as "opportunities to get better". Here are a variety of things that I've learned the last couple of years:

- When you're approaching candidates/elected officials: It's OK to write your thoughts down and bring them with you. No one cares whether you can rattle off a 5-part question from the top of your head.

- When you're working with other atheist groups: Every kind of atheist and atheist group is beneficial to our cause. Don't try to push people and groups to be something that they're not. Embrace them for their unique qualities and celebrate how they can contribute to the common good.

- Support other groups, atheist activism is not a contest. In addition, you never know when you'll need to count on someone a few towns or area codes over.

- Work as hard as you can to create a coalition of groups wherever you live. I'd rather have too many groups working on a similar goal than not enough.

- Understand that not every atheist/atheist group is as determined as you may be on a certain issue. Do your best to sell the reasons why you're passionate about an issue but don't drive yourself crazy if you can get everyone in your area onboard. It's better to keep your focus moving forward on solving the issue.

- Lastly, and I made this point above but it's one of the best: Don't be afraid to put yourself out there out of a fear of failing. Failure will make you a better activist. Responding to failure in a positive way will also motivate and inspire those around you.

Hope this all helps!

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

Interview with Bryan Oates – Administrator, “Syracuse Atheists”

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 16, 2019

Bryan Oates is the Administrator of the “Syracuse Atheists.” Here we talk his life, 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?

Bryan Oates: I was born and raised in the suburbs of Syracuse, and for the most part that would imply a distinct lack of any real culture. My mother tried to raise me as Catholic, as that’s what she identified with religiously, and I don’t think my father really cared too much about religion.

But I don’t remember going to church as a child except for very few occasions until I joined the Boy Scouts. All the really religious people in my life at that time always seemed a little weird to me, but I’m not sure there’s any real correlation there.

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

Bryan: I have an A.A.S. in computer science, and I served in the military as a Human Resources Specialist. Informally, I enjoy watching science and math based YouTube channels like Numberphile, SciShow, Backyard Scientist, etc. I also really enjoy learning about things when the interest or curiosity arises.

Jacobsen: When did you find the Syracuse atheist online community or see a lack of it? How did this lead into “Syracuse Atheist”?

Bryan: The Facebook page was actually long overdue, as it came well after the in-person group had been around in the Syracuse area. Before using Facebook to coordinate, it was all based on Meetup.com.

Jacobsen: As an Administrator, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Bryan: Keep the page visible, and don’t let it shut down. I used to post things at one time, but without having much time to do that, I let the other administrators handle posting.

Jacobsen: What are the scope and implicitly mandated work of Syracuse Atheists?

Bryan: I don’t think there’s really any mandated work. The page is really just the online portion of a group of people that happen to be Atheist that likes to meet for drinks once a month.

Jacobsen: For the meetup, how can people become involved with it?

Bryan: Check out our Meetup.com page (<https://www.meetup.com/syracuse-atheists/>) We also post meetup dates on the Facebook page.

Jacobsen: Who tend to be the leading lights of atheism within the Syracuse community? Those individual local or international who are spoken about the most.

Bryan: I think you've got the wrong idea of Atheism communities. It just so happens that we're a group of people with a shared non-belief. There's no leaders or anything like that because it's not a religion or political party.

I guess if there's individuals that we talk about, it's to reference their scientific or philosophical work, such as Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins.

Jacobsen: What is the importance of tact in maintaining a polite discussion and dialogue grouping via meetups?

Bryan: Well, we try not to piss anyone off for the most part. It's also important to remember that the only thing that brings everyone together is a disbelief in any deity. Nothing more, nothing less.

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

Bryan: You ask some strange questions that seem out of scope, or like they were originally written to interview a completely different kind of organization, but I hope you have all the information you need.

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

Bryan: Of course.

Conversation with Lynn Perrin on More Pipeline Concerns

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 16, 2019

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

She first encountered Kinder Morgan contractors near her home when they were clearing trees in the greenspace near her home, and she became aware of the expansion proposal. She was also present at the public meeting after the 2012 Sumas Tank Farm spill.

She was feeling very vulnerable to the risks from a diluted bitumen spill at the time that PIPE UP Network was formed and became active at the time of its inception. Belonging to a group of like-minded people has significantly increased her belief in the power of people to take care of each other – no matter how challenging our opponent is.”

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let’s start from the top. You are highly involved with pipeline issues within British Columbia. Recently, there was a written argument to the NEB. For those who may not know, what is the NEB? What is Trans Mountain?

Lynn Perrin: The National Energy Board is a quasi-judicial body that is taking applications from energy companies and approving them or not. [Laughing] usually, it is with conditions. It is for energy infrastructure that crosses provincial boundaries, whether oil and gas pipelines, or electrical transmission lines.

Trans Mountain is a pipeline that has been transporting oil and gas since 1953. It has been owned by various organizations with the last one being Kinder Morgan. In May of 2018, it was purchased by the federal government as a crown corporation.

They are also trying to get the expansion built. So, the original pipeline is 300,000 barrels per day capacity. They want to add 530,000 per day. Purportedly, it is to ship to Asia rather than the United States. That is about it, for those two.

Jacobsen: The big picture here is climate change or global warming with further emphasis on anthropogenic or human-induced global warming. Do these two – let’s say – bodies take these into account in terms of future impacts, or are they only focused on the short-term profit?

Perrin: While they say this is within the national interest, most opponents would strongly disagree with it. Upstream emissions are being examined by the NEB. They are refusing to look at the downstream emissions, which, of course, are significant, especially with the bitumen.

It is very carbon-heavy oil. What is interesting, the NEB agreed to look at the downstream emissions with regard to the Energy East pipeline proposal but are still refusing to do it with the Trans Mountain proposal.

At this very moment, Stand Earth, one of the intervenors, has notice of application that the NEB wouldn't examine those downstream emissions due to the climate change implications and the effects that they would have on species-at-risk in the Salish Sea, such as ocean acidification.

Jacobsen: Also, recently, what is, or was, witnessing to the Trans Mountain survey of the mountain beaver habitat?

Perrin: Oh! Trans Mountain is doing an integrity dig on Sumas Mountain. The government bought two pipelines. One goes from Hardisty, Alberta to Westridge Terminal, BC. The other terminal goes from Sumas Terminal Tank Farm, Abbotsford down to Washington state.

They have three refineries down there. So, the integrity dig is on the pipeline going down to Washington State refineries. One of the owners has it on her property. She took photos of the beaver habitat there. It is a very shy animal.

It is really hard to get any documentation on it, at all. But we have been there twice now. The biologist hired by Trans Mountain did find some tunnels and some dens. His first comment, "These haven't been, recently, used."

We found the Trans Mountain biologists downplayed the evidence, whether it is a red-tailed frog, Pacific water shrew, mountain beaver, and so on. They really try to play down the presence of those species that are threatened species.

Yesterday, we had other biologists there, to go and have a look with the Trans Mountain people/contractors. There are some cameras installed and more dens have been found there.

Jacobsen: In terms of the media representation, how often, as a qualitative analysis, is the reportage accurate? How often is it inaccurate representation? How often is it outright lies?

Perrin: It depends on the media. *Postmedia*, they have a formal agreement with the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers. That they are going to publish articles shining a good light on the industry.

That is a fact. It is a well-known fact. The alternative media – the *National Observer*, the *Star*, the *Tyee*, the *Narwhal* – are going to give a different lens on the situation and its probably a bit biased towards the opponents.

But I think it balances out the likes of the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Province*, the *Globe and Mail*, and so on, are putting out there. Local paper, in Abbotsford reporter Tyler Olsen, it is very balanced. When he does articles, he goes to both proponent and opponents of it.

Tyler quite often calls me when something comes up.

Jacobsen: Also, something that we cannot ignore. It is the leadership of Indigenous communities around the province being done by others and yourself. What have been important allies in this work?

Perrin: First of all, PIPE UP has been allies of First Nations directly affected. I mean pipelines directly on their territory: the Tsleil-Waututh from North Vancouver Burrard Inlet since 2012,

the Sumas less time than that, the Stó:lō Nation early on when PIPE UP was first becoming a group like in 2012. We were working with them.

We have a very positive and respectful relationship with the Kwantlen First Nation. We have an understanding of how we interact with them. In fact, one of the Kwantlen people is a director of PIPE UP.

Jacobsen: Some may feel confusion based on some of the media reportage based on conflicting messages that they may be getting. On the one hand, some First Nations support pipeline work. On the other hand, some do not.

If we were to take a closer look at this, how many support it? How many are against it? How does this balance or disbalance out in the end analysis?

Perrin: I think of the 130+ First Nations that are somehow affected by this. 33 have signed benefit agreements with Kinder Morgan-Trans Mountain. However, many of them will say that because they have signed the benefit does not mean that they are in favor of the expansion.

They are kind of in a corner. If they did not sign a benefit agreement, and if the expansion did go ahead and did have a financial impact on them, they would be missing out on any compensation.

Jacobsen: Any other updates?

Perrin: What PIPE UP has really been working on during the original hearing and during the Reconsideration is the salmon habitat and protecting that, we were among the few in this last hearing, the few intervenors, who, actually, tried to address the freshwater habitat of chinook, especially, and to some extent, chum salmon.

Because they are the main prey – over 90% – of the food of the endangered southern resident killer whales. In fact, just in December, the committee that is responsible to report on if a species is endangered or threatened has listed a number of chinook species in BC that are either endangered or threatened.

Then, of course, this relates to the southern resident killer whales because this is their food. Over and over again, studies show that lack of chinook salmon is the leading cause of death of the southern resident killer whales.

We will see what the NEB has to say about our final written argument. I am always wearing my rose-colored glasses and try to be optimistic about, and will see, if they will agree with PIPE UP. That if they are going to be crossing chinook spawning areas, then they have to use horizontal drilling instead of open trench. That is what we are hoping for.

We are hoping that the NEB will agree with us. One of the experts, we are so lucky, Dr. Marvin Rosenau. He teaches at BCIT. He is highly regarded as a biologist. He is the one who issued the report for us, to submit to the NEB.

Hopefully, they will take a really good look at that.

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

Perrin: Thanks, Scott.

Interview with Sandra Z. Zellick – Secretary, Humanists of Sarasota Bay

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 17, 2019

Sandra Z. Zellick is the Secretary of the Humanists of Sarasota Bay. Here we talk about her life, views, and work.

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?

Sandra Zellick: Lived in Winthrop, Massachusetts, public school there. I am Jewish but only culturally rather than pious. I was an only child.

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

Zellick: I went to Mt. Holyoke College and Brandeis Univ. for my AB degree. on to Harvard for Ed.M., MBA at West Springfield College. In middle age got an MBA, then an MS in Counseling Psych., then an MS in Family Therapy, and PhD in Family Therapy.

Jacobsen: As the Secretary for the Humanists of Sarasota Bay, what tasks and responsibilities come with the station?

Zellick: I take minutes at Board meetings and publish them to the Board. I help out at the welcome desk for monthly lecture meetings. I also organize a bi-weekly lunch for unstructured conversation.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the humanist community and become involved with the Humanists of Sarasota Bay in particular?

Zellick: I belong to Gulf Coast Humanists as well as Humanists of Sarasota Bay (HUSBAY.) I found the Humanists a comfortable, like-minded group of people. I can't remember how I got involved initially. The HUSBAY group is quite active with many activities to choose from.

Jacobsen: Why is a humanistic and secular education important to support, not only with scholarship funds but also with the work to change current educational curricula for a solid secular foundation?

For example, in Canada and the UK, there are explicit religious schools receiving public taxpayer monies.

Zellick: Sadly, our public schools are becoming more religious with our current administration. Signs like "In God We Trust" are proliferating.

Jacobsen: Who tend to be opposed to the efforts and activities of the construction of a humanist community by the Humanists of Sarasota Bay?

Zellick: We don't have opposition to private organizations under our 501c3 non-profits. Actually anyone is free to create a club or interest group if they so choose, regardless of tax status.

Jacobsen: With the current fiascos of the Trump Administration, women's rights have been the first to be attacked now. How can there be some work to reduce the level of regression happening now?

What are some ways men can realize the attacks of women's rights as a serious problem, if they do not realize this already, and then become socially and politically active to protect them?

Zellick: I wish I had the answer to that.

Jacobsen: Who have been important women humanists in history? What books would you recommend to prospective readers on the subject matter of humanism, if they are becoming more interested in its ethic and lifestance?

Zellick: If you go to HUSBAY.org you will find lots of information.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the donation of time, the addition of membership, links to professional and personal networks, giving monetarily, exposure in interviews or writing articles, and so on?

Zellick: Are there Humanists group available to you in your area? If not, the American Humanist Association is a good resource.

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

Zellick: Thank you for your interest. I hope you can find like-minded people who share your ideas and perhaps begin your own Humanist group. The American Atheists is another organization you might find interesting.

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

Ask Mandisa 15 – Placing Blame Where It Belongs

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 17, 2019

***Mandisa Thomas** is the Founder of **Black Nonbelievers, Inc** (**Twitter** & **Facebook**). One of the, if not the, largest organization for African-American or black nonbelievers or atheists in America.*

The organization is intended to give secular fellowship, provide nurturance and support for nonbelievers, encourage a sense of pride in irreligion, and promote charity in the non-religious community.

I reached out to begin an educational series with one of the, and again if not the, most prominent African-American woman nonbeliever grassroots activists in the United States. Here, we talk about the appropriate placement of blame.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: There are some things coming to light in the general news cycle. What are those things? What are your thoughts on them?

Mandisa Thomas: Most recently, it was the airing of the Lifetime documentary *Surviving R. Kelly*, which was the documentary of the R&B singer/monster who was preying on women for sexual subjugation and abuse.

Those women were telling their stories. There are still some young ladies who are still living with, who he is holding hostage emotionally and abusing. What is significant, these allegations, and actions, go back well over 30 years.

I remember as a teenager in the 1990s. I remember when R. Kelly first came out. I remember when he debuted the singer Aaliyah. He married her. It was shown that the marriage documents were falsified. He was 27. She was 15.

The marriage documents were falsified to show she was 18. This had been a red flag for years. Unfortunately, these allegations and actions have been denied and ignored. Because he had been investigated for quite some time.

He was hanging around in an entourage. He would get girls. The entourage would cover his actions. There was a succession of lawsuits that were filed against him for emotional and physical harm.

There is a long history of investigations surrounding R. Kelly that would largely be ignored or obscured in the black community because he was so prominent and talented. There is a pathology in the African-American community of blaming young women.

Somehow, it was their fault that they were abused. Also, one of the most astounding parts of this was that when R. Kelly went child for child pornography charges. Many of the pastors in the community were protecting and holding him up as this positive image, which was absolving him of his “wrongdoings” or “sins” that were utterly disgusting.

Jacobsen: How does the playing out of that saga relate to one ongoing with the Covington Catholic High School?

Thomas: I am not sure they're related *per se*. But it is very interesting to see how there's definitely a correlation with patriarchy. Apparently, the young men who were going to the Covington Catholic High School.

They were going to protest a women's rights event and then ended up accosting some Black Hebrew Israelites, who were just as patriarchal. It is interesting to see the amount of male privilege that we see in society here.

This Administration and President, the people who still have the privilege and seem to be fighting back against that, because they are 'taking their country back.' It doesn't need to be that different.

It is interesting the reaction to the Gillette ad, which encourages critical thought about toxic masculinity. It is interesting to see the pushback from males who already have the privilege. When the idea of reconsidering that privilege and trying to consider others, and reconsider the damage that has been foisted on others' children at the hands of these guys and men, it is just such an offense taken to it.

We are seeing the level of pushback. People tell their stories.

Jacobsen: In terms of two levels of analysis, individual and collective, around policy, what can individuals do if relatively safe for them? What would you recommend for others at a larger scale in dealing with some of these issues?

Thomas: Firstly, there does need to be the reminder of what has been going on and listening to people tell their stories and, hopefully, in the near future there will be some form of restorative justice; that will be taken against the people who commit these heinous acts and then excuses not being for them.

Certainly, listening is the first step. It is trying to figure out what the root of the problem is; there needs to be some form of retribution on behalf of people who, certainly, should know better.

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

Thomas: Thank you very much.

Interview with Asuncion Alvarez del Río – Advisory Council Member, DMD Mexico

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 18, 2019

Alvarez del Río is an Advisory Council Member of DMD Mexico. Here we talk about her life, views, and work.

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?

Asuncion Alvarez del Río: I was born in a middle class family in the then *Distrito Federal* (now Mexico City). My parents were Spanish (my father died, my mother lives), but all their children were born in Mexico, so I am Mexican with an important cultural Spanish influence.

We are 6 siblings (I have a sister and 4 brothers), something that has always seemed a privilege to me, especially because we all the siblings have a very close relationship that has been transmitted to our children (my daughters and all my nieces and nephews who get along very well). There is a very special affection among the extended family.

I grew up in a Catholic family (my mother was a Catholic convinced, not only in form, but who really and deeply believed in the Catholic religion) and I was educated in a school of nuns (from elementary school to high school).

For the same reason, I was educated in a conservative way. I was a very Catholic person until I began to have doubts about religion, which increased throughout my studies in Psychology (which is my training) till I finally stopped believing (I considered my self an atheist).

I also began to question a lot of what I learned in my family and in my school and started a change that has resulted in my now being a liberal person.

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

Alvarez del Río: I studied my degree in Psychology and for many years my main interest was psychoanalysis (Freudian and Lacanian).

Afterwards, I recognized that I had a personal need to work on something related to death, as a way to complete answering the questions that had remained pending when I stopped being a religious person who, as such, I was then satisfied with the answer that a personal life continues after death.

When I didn't believe that anymore, realizing that there is nothing after death was very disturbing. I needed something more than what I had already found in my personal psychoanalysis and I looked for a way to do a research work on the subject of death to find that answers.

I was fortunate to be able to enter the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) to carry out a project about the patient's experience with death.

I soon realized that my personal concern was shared by many more people, including doctors and patients, and that my personal question needed to become a research topic that was important to pay attention to in Mexico, especially in the field of medicine (I was in the School of Medicine).

At the same time that I was doing my project, I decided to study a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology (I continue the project I had been working on in my thesis research) and upon completing the master's degree, I studied a doctorate, also at the UNAM in the field of Bioethics.

By then, I had renewed my initial contracts for a year until I obtained the tenure as a full-time professor (my current position) in the Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health of the School of Medicine of the UNAM. My PhD thesis was about euthanasia.

I concluded it in 2004 and since then I have remained intellectually and personally committed to the topic (we cannot avoid death, but we can remain free till the very end, even to decide how not to live), following as much as possible everything that happens in terms of news, regulations and academic articles on the subject; not only about euthanasia, but, in a broader sense, about decisions at the end of life and what is called dying with dignity.

Jacobsen: As a member of DMD Mexico, what do you see as its important values to inculcate in Mexican society?

Alvarez del Río: First of all, respect different ways of thinking. This is something we have to go for, because many people respond as if it were a personal threat that others think and decide differently. This is especially evident when the differences refer to religious beliefs on which some positions are based, such as being against abortion or euthanasia.

We have to advance to be a society in which a person who, for example, is against abortion for religious beliefs, can respect that another is not, based on other beliefs. Related to this, in Mexico it is necessary that secularism be respected and that includes politicians who have allowed or favored the imposition of laws based on religious beliefs.

Solidarity is another value to inculcate (on which DMD is ultimately based). Be sensitive to what others may need and this is especially important at the end of life. For a person to have a good end of life, she needs the support of others, in the hospital, in the family, with friends.

And another value that needs to be instilled is honesty. We Mexicans have a hard time being clear and talking about what is happening; we take many detours because we feel that being direct is offensive, but this often leads not to assume something that needs attention and this happens very often when a person is very sick and is going to die. Not talking about what really is happening, leaves the persona with many needs unattended and wishes ignored.

Jacobsen: What have been the important legal victories for DMD Mexico in its history?

Alvarez del Río: The first achievement (not legally speaking) has been to put the subject of the end of life in a visible way and to make more people interested in it or find an interlocutor to whom to go with their doubts and concerns regarding the end of life.

In 2016 DMD conducted a national survey that has been very important because it gives current data that were unknown about what people actually think about being able to receive help from a doctor to die in case of suffering a terminal illness and having intolerable suffering.

The results were, in a way, surprising, because close to 70% of the population supports that this help is possible. This is very important data to support legislative proposals.

DMD has played an important role in the recognition of the right to a dignified death and the autonomy of people in the constitution of Mexico City.

Jacobsen: What are its current battlegrounds for more sociocultural acceptance?

Alvarez del Río: One of the objectives that we intend to achieve is to disseminate the issues related to dying with dignity and the right to die further by inviting society to participate.

In this way, there is the opportunity to remove the prejudices and ignorance on which many people base their opposition to assisted death. Their position changes when they better understand what it is about and they see that anyone can be in the situation of needing it.

Recognizing, both the important role played by doctors and the Catholic religion in our country, we are looking to have a visible group of doctors and priests who support the association.

Jacobsen: Who have been the most vocal opposition to personal autonomy in terms of the values and goals of DMD Mexico?

Alvarez del Río: The Catholic Church as an institution that strongly condemns that a person decides to die and receives help for that, although we know that there are members of the church who do not share that position.

Based on their religious beliefs, there are groups with economic and political power in Mexico that also oppose personal autonomy to decide the end of life.

Jacobsen: How can external organizations coordinate with DMD Mexico to further the aims of dying with dignity, right to die, euthanasia, and medical assistance in dying?

Alvarez del Río: On the one hand, it is very important to be part of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies, which allows us to be in contact with other associations that share our goal, some with more years of experience and with more legal achievements, while others sharing the same obstacles and challenges; in both cases, they represent an important support and source of learning.

On the other hand, it is very valuable to join efforts with other groups of academics, doctors and lawyers in Mexico (in the UNAM, el Colegio de Bioética, el Colegio Nacional, to name a few) that defend the right to a dignified death and share our interest to change the laws and conditions so that all people can choose the best way to die.

Jacobsen: What are some core books and articles, and intellectuals, to pay more attention to now?

Alvarez del Río: DMD published two books in recent years that are worth knowing: 1) Álvarez del Río A (coord.).

La muerte asistida en México. Una opción más para morir con dignidad [Assisted death in Mexico. One more option to die with dignity] and 2) Espinosa Rugarcía A (coord.). *Por el derecho a una muerte digna*. Por el Derecho a Morir con Dignidad [For the right to a dignified death. For the Right to Die with Dignity].

Among the authors worth following in the media (although they not only write about the end of life, but other bioethics topics) are Arnoldo Kraus, Luis Muñoz, Patricio Santillán, Ricardo Tapia, Roberto Blancarte, Raymundo Canales and Héctor Méndez.

There are other intellectuals who do not normally write about euthanasia or other bioethical issues, but who express their opinion on this when these issues appear in public attention, such as Bernardo Barranco or Jesús Silva-Heerzog Márquez.

Since March 2018, I've been writing monthly in *El Semanario* (an online newspaper) an article under the general subject: *For a better end of life*.

I also recommend following the DMD website (<https://dmd.org.mx/>) in which articles and news related to the themes of dying with dignity and right to die are constantly published and updated.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the donation of time, the addition of membership, links to professional and personal networks, giving monetarily, exposure in interviews or writing articles, and so on?

Alvarez del Río: On the DMD website (<https://dmd.org.mx/>) you can find the link to make donations and to establish contact for any of these interests.

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

Alvarez del Río: I feel grateful for the opportunity of having this conversation that can be shared to the public because it is very important that more people know more about DMD and about the subject we are promoting: legal and social changes so that Mexicans can have a dignified death, without pain, in peace, and in accordance to their own decisions

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

Alvarez del Río: Thank you Scott.

Interview with Bwambale Musubaho Robert – School Director, Kasese Humanist School (Rukoki/Muhokya/Kahendero)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 19, 2019

Bwambale Musubaho Robert is the School Director of the Kasese Humanist School (Rukoki/Muhokya/Kahendero). Here we talk about his life, views, and work.

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?

Robert Bwambale: I am Bwambale Robert Musubaho born in a family of 4, 2 boys and 2 girls, I am the second born, All my parents passed away in my early years and was orphaned at 5 years.

Am born in a monogamous home and I grew up a mixture of polygamous homes in an African extended family setting where my uncles had polygamous families with several homes.

I attended a rural school called muruseghe primary School in my early years for seven years, then moved to a town school called Kampala High School and was there for two years, the other two years I was a school dropout, thereafter joined school again this time in a rural village school called Karambi secondary school where I was for two years, then joined Rwenzori High school for Advanced level and went to college where I attained a Diploma in Biological Sciences.

I grew up in a staunch Anglican devoted family and was baptized, confirmed in the early years but lost my faith as grew up during my college days. In my earlier years I was very critical and curious of religion.

The language we grew speaking was Lhukonzo, I belong to the Bakonzo tribe who speak the Lhukonzo language. It is the dominant tribe in the Kasese region. When I moved to Kasese town and Kampala in my youthful days I adopted other languages like Rutoro, Swahili, Luganda to mention but a few.

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

Bwambale: I hold an Ordinary diploma in biological sciences and a certificate in Human resource management & Entrepreneurship

I have been informally self educated by growing up with curious minds, accepting to listen to stories and information from old people, my parents where ever I grew up and interacting with people I grew up with.

I grew up with a great passion of loving to explore the world, engage with friends and the internet revolution has helped me more as it has made me learn a lot of things on how to relate with others and to plan things that matter in making this world a better place.

Jacobsen: What are the current projects ongoing from before 2019 into 2019 for Kasese Humanist Schools?

Bwambale: The current projects ongoing are the Child Sponsorship program where we continue helping needy and orphaned children join or keep in school.

We have the chicken project where we are keeping the chicken for educational and income generation.

We have the vocational skills trainings in carpentry, welding, tailoring, art and craft making, auto mechanics and gardening.

The tree planting project is moving forward where we are creating a forest around the Rukoki school.

Jacobsen: What are the central difficulties of the construction of a humanist community and set of schools?

Bwambale: Accessibility to funding sources on the local scene is not easy.

Poor school fees payments by parents due to low income levels and people's low attitude to educate children.

Threats from religious leaders in fear of humanist school principles that gives students the freedom to question everything.

Jacobsen: What are the most rewarding aspects of this life project and initiative for you, as this remains an incredible endeavor and achievement by you?

Bwambale: I feel great seeing Ugandan children getting an education through my efforts.

I am feeling happy when I notice a section of Ugandans steadily adopting a reading culture exposing them to plenty of information which helps to broaden their minds and levels of thinking.

Creating jobs for people is also something am happy about, the teachers and non teaching staffs at the schools, orphanages, hostels and farmlands has helped improve on people's lives.

Humanism being an alternate to religious bigotry is a good thing, it helps people to think out of the box and come up with critical and skeptical minds which is good and healthy for them.

Jacobsen: What are the stereotypes about humanists in Uganda? How does this impact the social and emotional lives of young Ugandan children?

Bwambale: Humanists in Uganda are doing good works in improving lives of people in different disciplines and even though there are threats of smear campaigns about what we stand for and what we are doing, the locals are perceiving a positive trend in us since we are always there to dispel the rumors and lies propagated by our enemies.

I am optimistic the young children of Uganda will not remain the same if they get exposure to the worldview which we stand for.

Jacobsen: What is the full curriculum provided for the pupils in a humanist education? How can other African nation-states learn from this example?

Bwambale: There is no designed curriculum in place but of recent we run critical thinking workshops, drills and debates on several topics. At our schools we are recommended to teach the Ugandan school's curriculum and we spice it with the humanist values and ethos to generate an all round child.

Other African nations can copy a leaf of what we are doing and we all move in a direction where our students have exposure to secular ideas and rational minds.

We need Africa to embrace evidence based learning; this is the only way that we can kick off the beliefs in magic and superstitions which is synonymous of Africa.

They can set up schools on humanist foundations in their localities, access resources on humanism/atheism which is readily available online, can network with us and with other secular communities worldwide and can initiate debates or workshops on humanism related themes in their areas.

Jacobsen: What organizations can others help in order to support Kasese Humanist Schools, e.g., Brighter Brains Institute?

Bwambale: Other than Brighter Brains Institute, other organizations doing a wonderful work in changing lives are: Atheist Alliance International, Humanist Canada, Foundation Beyond Belief, Rationalist Society of Australia, Uganda Humanist Schools Trust UK, Manitoba Atheists, Halton Peel Humanist Community, Kalmar Humanists Sweden, Atheist Community of San Jose,

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the donation of time, the addition of membership, links to professional and personal networks, giving monetarily, exposure in interviews or writing articles, and so on?

Bwambale: We do accept volunteers to come work with us in our projects, we welcome those who might be interested in fundraising for us online or in their areas of jurisdiction, or willing to feature us on their blogs and web pages for wider publicity.

We also welcome personalities with ideas that can push forward some of our projects like the Back packers and safari lodge project.

We also welcome mutual collaboration with potential organizations that we share with core humanist values.

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

Bwambale: Am so thankful for your efforts to always interview me at specific times, this gives chance to people who cherish and value what I do to perhaps learn more about me.

I also appreciate those who have contributed to my initiatives over the years, you are doing good guys, you have made me what I am and not only me alone but many families including children are having good lives and getting an education.

With Science, we can progress.

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

Interview with Soma – Administrator, “Secular Indian”

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 20, 2019

Soma is the Administrator of the “Secular Indian.” Here we talk about her life, views, and work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How is religion more bad than good?

Soma: Any thought process that relies on an assumption- and it is an assumption- that a parental figure no one has ever seen is observing every move of an individual from birth to death, opens a door wide open.

The door to interpretation and fanciful imagination. The result of this fantastic lie taking root in human civilization is there for all to see.

The divisions created among humans based on which god (or set of gods) a group of people would collectively agree to believe in (and creating exclusive communities out of such beliefs), are essentially artificial divisions.

And any competitive vying for the top spot that naturally occurs in group behaviors inevitably culminates in mutual suspicions, hatred, superiority complexes and violence. All consequences of these artificial divisions that are based on a lie of gargantuan proportions.

Most religions are based on faith. They spread the doctrine that faith is essential for human life. All of them are perpetuated through childhood indoctrination.

This results in the conditioning of vulnerable children into adults who are averse to not only critical or scientific thinking but averse to thinking in general. Religions claim to have (simplistic) answers to complex problems which makes thinking a liability.

Religion creates adults who can't think for themselves; so these adults are incapable of solving real problems at individual and social level. This is the recipe for stagnation, strife, social divide, atrocities, gender inequality and other such social evils.

Jacobsen: What events in history most speak to this evaluation?

Soma: Wars, conflicts, in-fighting, rioting and all other kinds of violent behaviors have been occurring throughout mankind's history that are based on which god/s are true vs which are false.

Invasions, conquests, persecutions and oppression have all been influenced by different religious identities forever obsessed with claiming victory in a never-ending power game India has been involved in these bloody and catastrophic power struggles right from the word go.

Temple desecrations and consequent fatalities were common between Hindu, Buddhist and Jain Kingdoms long before the arrival of the Muslims.

For example, around 18,000 members of the Ajivika sect were executed as a result of an order given by Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Dynasty who reigned between 268-232BCE.

The Ajivikas opposed the philosophies of Buddhism and Jainism and were, thus, considered to be “rivals”. Ashoka would famously go on to reject all violence, yet he continued to pose a threat to the lives of tribals who had their own way of life and were therefore, considered to be “rivals” or, the “other”.

The Muslim invasions and subsequent rule have only added more fuel to the fire. The hostilities that firmly took root between Hindus and Muslims have gone on to fester through the centuries and serve as a catalyst to one of the severest incidents of religious massacres in world history- The Partition.

It is estimated around 2 million people lost their lives and 14 million people were displaced during the creation of Pakistan along religious lines. The ongoing conflict in Kashmir is mainly a religious one.

I need not add that all of this is revolved around the celestial rivalries between fictional sky dwelling creatures.

Jacobsen: How is this replicated right into the present?

Soma: Mob scenes erupting between religious communities are not an uncommon occurrence in India. Practically anything and everything can set off a riot. Most notable mentions would be the 1984 Sikh massacre in which the unofficial death toll is estimated to be up to 18,000; the 1969 Gujarat riots which left 660 dead and 48000 displaced; the 1989 Bhagalpur riots that saw the deaths of over 1000 people and 50,000 displaced; the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992 by Hindu Nationalists that saw the deaths of around 2000 people; the subsequent Bombay riots which took a further 700 odd lives; the Muzaffarnagar riots that claimed 62 lives and left almost 50,000 displaced; the 2002 Gujarat riots which claimed the lives of around 1044 people and over 200 missing; the 2012 Assam riots between Bodos and Muslims in which 77 lay dead and 400,000 displaced; the Pilibhit riots.... the list is actually endless.

Especially if one is to include mob scenes that erupt after a movie release or a book release or the elopement of inter faith lovers. And of course, caste violence.

The worst part of this already sordid scenario inside the world of religion is the oppression that goes on of women and minorities within religious communities that largely go unreported. Dogma is a way of life.

Most right wing ideologues nowadays claim a golden past or religious utopia in the past which appeals to most of the fanatics and religious moderates who don't want the trouble of thinking for themselves.

They can blame all the social ills or economic challenges on those past invasions by “outsiders”. That is the reason they categorize science as “eastern” and “western” and thus reject scientific method, evolution and modern medical science.

Also they can create an illusion of every form of knowledge existing in the past and getting destroyed by those outsiders. All this propaganda may lead to systematic dumbing down of a whole generation of India and we may lose the demographic dividend of our young population.

The youngsters of India are receiving this vile opiate; so they are totally unaware of the real challenges the humankind or world in general is going to face in 21st century.

Jacobsen: What are the positives of religion?

Soma: I first need to state the obvious with a generalization. As we are social animals, we bond in groups. Whether a group has a destructive agenda (a neo Nazi group, for example) or is completely benign in nature (a book club), the dynamics at work that hold a group together are the same.

Like minded people converging together and feeling solidarity, a sense of belonging, a sense of community.

Religion is a first attempt to know and understand the world. A primitive baby step taken towards the direction of science and philosophy. And is a first venture of humans to undertake large scale cooperation.

Along the way religion has provided the inspiration for great works of art, architecture, literature, music and so on.

I would add a p.s. that, religions had all the wealth in their hands; hence, obviously they were the sponsors of such great artistic endeavors.

Jacobsen: What inspired the foundation of Secular Indian?

Soma: I turned atheist in my teens. I come from a liberal family and my father, who was an agnostic, told me some ugly truths about religion when I was 7.

A few years ago, I met up with my fellow admin in an atheist group. He had already created this page and asked me if I would run it as he could not find the time. The rest is history.

Jacobsen: How is criticism of religion healthy and normal rather than something to be condemned?

Soma: All ideas need a healthy and continuous dose of criticism, introspection and evidence-based dissent if they are to evolve and survive into the next phase. Religious belief should have faded off into oblivion a long long time ago after scientific thought broke free from it to hold its own.

The only reason religion is surviving today is due to the fact that religion employs fear tactics over those who dare question it. As a result, religion has been able to get away with some of the worst cases of human rights violations history has ever seen.

The long and short of it is that without merciless criticism and expose, the oppressor will continue to oppress and the oppressed will continue to live a life in silent acceptance.

Religious philosophies portray a completely different picture of reality which clashes with the world view given by science. When religions ruled the world that era is termed as “dark ages” because religions had a stranglehold on every aspect of human lives.

Every belief has its consequences. So, the world never progressed much, the human condition was always bleak & uncertain. When the “Enlightenment” principles like science, reason, humanism and progress took roots in the psyche of (mainly European) the society it loosened this stranglehold of religions on human thinking.

When criticism was recognized as part of public discourse (at least in learned circles) and a vital part of science; the progress which ensued is still going on in leaps and bounds.

Hence religions all of which promote faith (unquestioning belief) should be treated as “human ideas” instead of divine ideas. If those ideas are questioned and criticized, then mankind can have a choice of accepting or rejecting them on the criterion of reason.

The constructive criticism combined with freedom of speech has done wonders in the arena of science; same revolution can happen in the world of religion too which will be the best thing to happen in a world dominated by blind faith.

Jacobsen: What are the reactions within Indian culture of those who reject the common Hindu, Islamic, and other mythologies?

Soma: I am an ex Hindu and have always been completely open and outspoken about my rejection of the religious identity that was slapped onto me at birth. Hailing from a liberal family as I do, I am lucky that I have not faced any repercussion.

I cannot say this is the same for everyone. The usual family backlash will be faced by those who hail from a conservative household. In fact, the option to leave is not even presented to a child with the result that one would have to live a life in the closet in adulthood should one opt to leave faith behind.

The situation inside Muslim communities is on another level as the penalty for leaving the faith is met with disownment by the family, or worse.

Jacobsen: How are religion and politics mixed together for the benefit of the dominant faiths in India? Is this reflected in the current leadership?

Soma: A highly successful divisive policy of ‘divide and rule’ instilled in the psyche of the general public, whence the British Raj took over the reigns from the East India company in the mid 1800’s – has been the main stay of politics ever since the country gained independence a 100 years later.

The origin of various religious based (or caste based) political parties in India has benefited those that seek the all-important vote. A vote that keeps them in power – and the power that allows for them to drive their agenda further.

Be it the lower caste’s, the Muslim majoritarian, or the Hindu majoritarian – all parties seek victory based on their consistent rhetoric of caste/religion-based policies.

The present incumbent party in India has been at the forefront of a dialogue that has been finding newer ways of wedging a greater divide between the two main religions in India –Hindu’s and Muslim’s! From eating habits (beef/meat consumption and the lynchings that rose out of it), to the recent controversial Muslim divorce process – everything has been based on religion-based appeasement or exclusion.

The benefit is obvious – political power is seized, intrinsic human rights (freedom’s of various orders) are constricted, the religious identity strengthened – resulting in (the hope of) an authoritarian religion based nation.

Jacobsen: How do electronic media provide a safe platform and space for the non-religious?

Soma: One word: anonymity. This means that one can engage in open discussions and debates safely without the fear of persecution. The anonymity of social media coupled with instant

exchanging of ideas with people around the world has enabled atheism to spread today at a speed that is unprecedented. Because religion cannot find you and hunt you down here, you are safe.

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

License and Copyright

License



In-Sight Publishing by Scott Douglas Jacobsen is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Based on a work at <https://www.canadianatheist.com/>.

Copyright

© 2012-2020 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen and *In-Sight Publishing* 2012-2020. Unauthorized use and/or duplication of this material without express and written permission from this site's author and/or owner is strictly prohibited. Excerpts and links may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to Scott Douglas Jacobsen and *In-Sight Publishing* with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.