

A person with dark hair, seen from behind, wearing a dark quilted jacket. They are standing on a shore, looking out over a calm body of water. The sky is a mix of blue and grey, with some clouds and a faint contrail. The water reflects the sky and the distant shoreline.

# Canadian Atheist Set XII

SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

# In-Sight Publishing

## **Canadian Atheist: Set XII**

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**Scott**



## **Canadian Atheist**

## Ask Gretta 4: Why Are Canadians Less Likely To Be Fundamentalists?

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 20, 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 reasons for Canadians being less statistically likely to be fundamentalist than Americans.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Looking at much of the religious demographics of the world, in terms of adherence to particular beliefs, especially in comparison to the United States of America, Canadians seem more ordinary and moderated in personal faith positions and assertions. Why?

**Rev. Gretta Vosper:** That is a locked and loaded question, using terms far more familiar to Americans than Canadians. Using it because belief is so central to so many people that addressing beliefs can become a very fractious undertaking. But that, of course, is what we're trying to do.

I've been reading *Atheism and Secularity, Volume 1, Issues, Concepts, and Definitions*, edited by Phil Zuckerman. It includes chapters by researchers who explore issues central to the understanding of belief and the lack of it. It is filled with interesting data, much of which supports the idea that high levels of religious belief correlate to a deficit of social progress, or a low rating on the "Successful Societies Scale" (SSS). Repeatedly, the author of *The Evolution of Popular Religiosity and Secularism*, Gregory S. Paul, exposes the many social deficiencies that countries experience when they fail to transfer programs providing social benefit from the purview of religious organizations to government. Without the stability provided by government programs, individuals and families are at greater risk of chaos as the result of financial or health challenges. And, he argues, they hold to religious claims as a self-soother, a coping mechanism.

*Provided with comparatively low levels of government support and protection, [Americans] of even the middle class are at serious risk of financial and personal ruin if they lose their job or private health insurance... These high-risk circumstances and the strong variation in economic circumstances help elevate rates of social pathology and strongly contribute to high levels of personal stress and anxiety. The majority are left feeling sufficiently insecure that they perceive a need to seek the aid and protection of a supernatural creator, boosting levels of religious opinion and participation. The nation's good score in life satisfaction and happiness is compatible with a large segment of the*

*population using religion to psychologically self-medicate against high levels of apprehension.*[i]

It is important to remember that as Western countries arrived at a point in time when their economic welfare was plentiful, most of those countries began investing in the social framework and programs that increased social wellness. The United States did not. Instead, they embraced laissez-faire economics at a cellular level, each person responsible for his own economic health, each family living the life they deserved whether it was wealthy or destitute. If you didn't reach for and achieve the American Dream, it was your own bloody fault and enjoy your just desserts.

Read the above excerpt again and you can imagine a very strong correlation between the need for the "ruling class", if you will, to maintain the narrative of a divine, interventionist being who would sort it all out in the end. Not that I'm suggesting that there is a top-level conspiracy, but for those who live in the top one or two percent and who are or have the ear of those in power, there is absolutely no reason to dismantle that story. It works for them because their sole responsibility toward those who are constantly scrabbling to survive and turning their lifeblood over to the elite in doing so, is simply to remind them to pull up their socks. Maintaining the illusion of belief is an enormous and significant element of the social ills in America.

If you look at what is currently happening in the US under the Trump administration, it gets both clearer and more disturbing. Those Trump panders to, from his appointment of Betsy DeVos, a woman with no experience in or with the education system in the US, as Secretary of Education to his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, are all white, evangelical Christians. But their acceptance of Trump's presidency remains a moral paradox. How could they support a man who admits to sexually molesting women, who lies constantly, who treats people with contempt, and who does not honour the Christian's deepest responsibility: to love one another and to bring about justice for the "*anawim*", the little people, those who are marginalized, ignored, and tragically unable to save themselves? The only way they could do that would be to completely ignore their own belief system, in my opinion. And the only reason they would do that publicly, is if they were prepared to lose the privilege and power they have achieved.

Canada is not a perfect country. As I write, a scandal is burning its way through the government. But Canadians chose to go the other way when wealth grew to the point that providing education, healthcare, supporting the arts, building up public institutions and infrastructure were possible. The higher the government involvement in those very public and often universal benefits, the faster belief in a theistic deity disappears. Canadians do not need that deity anymore. Americans do. It is as simple as that.

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[i] Gregory S. Paul, "The Evolution of Popular Religiosity and Secularism: How first World Statistics Reveal Why Religion Exists, Why It Has Been Popular, and Why the Most Successful Democracies Are the Most Secular." in *Atheism and Secularity, Volume 1, Issues, Concepts, and Definitions*, Phil Zuckerman, ed. (Denver: Praeger, 2010) p. 163.

# Interview with Claudette St. Pierre – President, Freedom From Religion Foundation, Metro Denver Chapter

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 21, 2019

*Claudette St. Pierre is the President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation Metro Denver Chapter. 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?

**Claudette St. Pierre:** I was born and raised in southern California, one of three sisters. My parents were both French Canadian, born and raised in Quebec, Canada in large catholic families.

We were raised Catholic and I went to private catholic school for 12 years, graduating from an all girls catholic high school. We went to church every Sunday, but as my sisters and I grew older and went off to college we went less frequent.

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

**St. Pierre:** I graduated from college with a bachelor of science in Nursing. I have read many books on freethought and atheism and that is how I finally knew I was an atheist.

**Jacobsen:** How did you come to find the Freedom From Religion Foundation? How did you take on the leadership role within the Freedom from Religion Foundation Metro Denver Chapter?

**St. Pierre:** My younger sister introduced me to FFRF and we went to see Dan Barker (co-president of the national organization) debate other religious leaders.

It was thought provoking and enlightening. When I learned there was a group of interested individuals working to start a chapter in the Denver area, I went to the first meeting and was on the founding leadership board. I have been involved in the leadership of the group from the beginning and continue now.

**Jacobsen:** How are you work to build a robust community locally through Freedom from Religion Foundation Metro Denver Chapter?

**St. Pierre:** Our chapter affiliate focuses on educating the community about freethought, atheism and the separation of state and church. We participate in several local events by hosting an informational table to provide interested individuals basic information about what we do and how to get involved.

We also hold our meetings at the Secular Hub, a local Denver meeting location for secular groups. We get many members thru these avenues.

**Jacobsen:** What are the challenges of community there?

**St. Pierre:** Our membership demographics are unfortunately not diverse. Mostly white older males but getting more women and younger (<40 years) individuals slowly as well as people of color.

**Jacobsen: Who has, typically, been opposed to the operations, and mission and mandate, of Freedom from Religion Foundation Metro Denver Chapter?**

**St. Pierre:** Evangelical Christians who have the incorrect belief that our country and government were founded on christian principles. Many religious individuals want more religion in schools and government.

**Jacobsen: What are the local problems in the past right into the present? What has worked as solutions, partial or complete? How can other secular advancement organizations learn from the successes there?**

**St. Pierre:** FFRF's primary focus is to educate thru letters and follow up when someone files a complaint/violation. If you go to the national website [www.ffrf.org](http://www.ffrf.org) you will find a great list of the "wins" that the organization has had.

Most from writing letters and when that doesn't work, thru filing court complaints and using those legal means. I think other secular groups have learned the importance of fighting these violations, even if they seem mundane. If we don't address them, its sets a precedent that would not bode well for state church separation.

**Jacobsen: What are some books or thinkers who best represent the aims of the Freedom from Religion Foundation Metro Denver Chapter?**

**St. Pierre:** The two co-presidents of our national organization, Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, have great books they have written. Dan Barker has several written in the past few years that really exemplify what it means to be a freethinker.

**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?**

**St. Pierre:** I believe that the best way people can become involved in secular ideals is to educate others on what it means to be secular and the importance of the separation of state and church.

People need to know that there is a movement on the "right" to destroy the wall of separation that has ensured success in the democracy of the US and it is at risk.

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

**St. Pierre:** FFRF has been in existence on the national level for 40+ years fighting for our first amendment rights and will continue to do so. What we do is more important now than ever.

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

# Ask Herb 1 – Separate Church From State, Not Activism From Secularism

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 21, 2019

*Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition of America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. Here we talk about secularism and activism.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What are the pragmatics or the first practical considerations of secular activism?

**Herb Silverman:** What to do, when to do it, and how to frame it? Those are the questions. Since open secularists are still a minority, we must pick and choose our battles. We do not ask for special rights, as many religions do. But we deserve and should demand equal rights in a country with a secular (and godless) Constitution, which does not favor one religion over another or religion over non-religion. We can focus on win-win situations, where we either gain equality or get sympathy for being discriminated against.

As a personal example, the Charleston City Council in South Carolina started its meetings with an invocation, usually a Christian one. Our local Secular Humanist group persuaded one council member to offer more diversity, and he invited me to give an invocation. But as the mayor introduced me, half the council members walked out because they knew I was an atheist. They didn't return until it was time for the Pledge of Allegiance, and they turned toward me as they bellowed the words "under God." Those who heard my invocation, including the mayor, thought it was fine.

I didn't expect such defiance, but it was an opportunity for the "Law of Unintended Consequences." A reporter from our local newspaper wrote about the incident, along with comments from those who walked out. One councilman quoted Psalm 14: "The fool says in his heart there is no God. They are corrupt, their deeds are vile, there is not one who does good." He then told me that the walkout was not personal. In other words, his religious beliefs compelled him to demonize an entire class of people he was elected to represent. Frankly, I would rather it had been personal. Another councilman said, "He can worship a chicken if he wants to, but I'm not going to be around when he does it." I responded, "Perhaps the councilman doesn't realize that many of us who stand politely for religious invocations believe that praying to a god makes no more sense than praying to a chicken." (At least you can see a chicken.)

Several days later, six favorable letters appeared in the paper criticizing the improper behavior of council members. I can't tell you how unusual and satisfying it is for Christians in South Carolina to side with atheists against other Christians. Movements are most successful when they appeal to folks outside the group.

It helps to establish a relationship with a religion reporter, who often looks for different kinds of stories. For example, a reporter once asked if atheists in our local group celebrate Thanksgiving, a holiday when Americans thank God for their blessings. Here is the answer from one of our secularists that appeared in the paper: "We gather with friends and family, just like most

Americans, and know whom to thank for our Thanksgiving meal. We thank the farmers who cared for the plants and the migrant workers who harvested them. We thank the workers at the processing plant and the truck drivers who brought the food to the grocery store. And finally, we thank our friends for helping prepare the meal and for being present to share in the festivities.”

The newspaper got some angry letters about our members not thanking God, but several secular humanists heard about us for the first time and joined our group. That became a pattern. Whenever we received media attention, we’d hear from people who disliked us and also from people who wanted to join us. It was easily worth the trade-off. Almost all publicity is good.

One of the difficulties in getting independent-minded secularists to cooperate revolves around labels. An atheist is simply someone without a belief in any gods, while a secular humanist focuses on being good without gods. These are two sides of the same coin. Many secularists are uncomfortable with the word “atheist” because it describes what we don’t believe, rather than what we do believe. After all, we don’t go around calling ourselves A-Easter Bunnyists or A-Tooth Fairyists. “Atheist” gets more media attention and “humanist” gets more respect from the general public. Other labels include freethinker, skeptic, agnostic, ignostic, rationalist, naturalist, materialist, apatheist, and more. If you don’t know what each word means, don’t worry. Even those who identify with such labels often disagree on their meanings. Parsing words might be a characteristic of folks engaged in the secular movement.

Certainly word choices can be important, but our special designations are sometimes nothing more than a matter of taste or comfort level rather than deep theological or philosophical differences. We are more effective when we let each person use the word with which they are most comfortable, rather than try to “convert” secularists to their favorite word.

Here’s an interesting distinction between Christians and secularists: Christians have the same unifying word, but fight over theology; secularists have the same unifying theology, but fight over words. At least our wars are only verbal.

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

# Interview with Dr. Rob Jonquiere, M.D. – Executive Director, World Federation of Right to Die Societies

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 22, 2019

*Dr. Rob Jonquiere, M.D. is the Executive Director of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies. Here we talk about the right to die.*

**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?

**Rob Jonquiere:** I am Dutch born in 1944, had no religious upbringing. I went to University (Leiden) to study Medicines (graduated to MD in 1972).

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

**Jonquiere:** see above. After graduation, I started to work as Family Doctor (GP) in my own (solo) practice in Hengelo (O). Since there was no formal vocational training for GP in that time, you could say I educated myself in the peculiarities of this specialisation (that currently takes 3 years).

In a way, you could also defend that my practicing end-of-life care, euthanasia included, also is self educated.

**Jacobsen:** What distinguishes right to die, dying with dignity, euthanasia, and medical assistance in dying, and so on?

**Jonquiere:** These different terms are used in different countries, and unfortunately enough the definitions are not always the same. “Our” issue is about actions at the end of life, primarily on the request of the person involved. It is about “choice”, “self determination” and autonomy.

More and more we tend to leave the use of ‘right to die’ since every individual of course has the right to die – since we all die! Of course to be complete it should be: the right to die in a dignified way and at the time and place of one’s choice (but that is too long to use).

Since mostly such way of dying is achieved with the help of a doctor, nowadays we more often use the general term of ‘medically assisted dying’ (see Canada where one speaks of MaID).

Leaving out the M(edically) if the assistance is not given by a doctor – as in Switzerland where legally a lay person is allowed (under strict conditions) to assist someone with his/her suicide.

**Jacobsen:** What other organizations, books, and researchers/activists should people interested or intrigued in this subject matter pay more attention to now?

**Jonquiere:** There is a lot to be mentioned, too much to do here. My advice would be to look at our World Federation of Right to Die Societies (WFRtDS) website [www.worldrtd.net](http://www.worldrtd.net) or visit national societies (look for lemma Member Organisations on left side of home page).

**Jacobsen:** What tasks and responsibilities come with being the Executive Director of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies?



**Jonquiere:** After I retired as CEO of the Dutch Right to Die Society NVVE, I became involved in the international movement WFRtDS. This is a – volunteer based – umbrella. In my role as Executive I am responsible for keeping up the website, I support the Committee (5 members from all over the world) executing the consequences of their decisions.

As ED I also function as the central contact point for issues in relation with the international movement and our 51 members.

**Jacobsen:** Who are the perennial and newer opposition or even enemies of those working for the right to die? What are their standard arguments? What rights considerations, facts, and arguments counter their claims and, even potentially, misrepresentations of the right to die movement?

**Jonquiere:** Generally seen the mainstream of opposition comes from the religious side: orthodox protestants in NL, and Catholicism world wide. Of course nowadays we find opposition from palliative care groups, but my opinion is that the whole idea of palliative care is mainly religion-based on Christian Charity and Samaritanism.

Standard arguments are mostly that every life is worth to be lived, of course ignoring that a person can consider his/her live as no longer “humane” and thus wants it to end it rather than to live on in a situation considered to be inhumane.

**Jacobsen:** What are the largest direct victories for the right to die movement? What have been some of the more nuanced wins in history, which have a subtle, less directly impactful, but important, sociocultural impact on the perspectives of the right to die movement in the nations that have an organized front for the right to die movement?

**Jonquiere:** The movement as such only ‘celebrated’ victories in countries/states/jurisdictions were the right for people to make their own choice (practically everywhere in the world population studies show overwhelming support of over 75%) at the end of life is legalised: Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, 7 states in USA, Colombia, Victoria (Aus) and Canada at the moment.

**Jacobsen:** What are the newest battlegrounds? How can people become involved, active, and work to change the general cultural attitudes around the right to die, legally and socioculturally?

**Jonquiere:** Strong advocacy is found around the world in many countries: France, UK, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, USA, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand. You will find in all these countries RtD Societies that advocate (see on [www.worldrtd.net/member-organizations](http://www.worldrtd.net/member-organizations)).

**Jacobsen:** If individuals and communities want to start organizations and groups devoted to this form of activism, how can they start to do it?

**Jonquiere:** Again: visit the WFRtDS website at [www.worldrtd.net/joining-information](http://www.worldrtd.net/joining-information).

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

**Jonquiere:** Not specifically.

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

# Interview with Anne Landman – Founder & Board Member at Large, Western Colorado Atheists and Freethinkers

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 23, 2019

*Anne Landman is the Founder & a Board Member at Large of the Western Colorado Atheists and Freethinkers. Here we talk about her life, work, and views.*

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

**Anne Landman:** I have eight years of full time college and university-level education, but only a bachelor's degree to show for it. My degree is in communications. I also have an associates degree in Environmental Restoration and Waste Management Technology.

Two years of my college time was spent in technical training to become a registered respiratory therapist (RRT) and I worked as an RRT for 15 years to make a living. I went back to school in the late 1980s-early 1990s to complete a bachelor's degree.

I had artistic inclinations early on, but my parents assured me I would never be able to make a living as an artist, or in the humanities, which I also loved, and they urged me not to go into the arts or humanities, so I was a little lost in finding a calling and wandered around in education for years without much focus.

I ended up taking years of science (biology, chemistry, anatomy & physiology, soils science, etc.) to go into fields that could make me a living, but these were not subjects I was wild about. I also got into researching tobacco industry documents online in 1997 and did a 15-month fellowship at UCSF in 2005-2006 in a department where everyone else was a post-doc.

I ended up publishing a number of papers about tobacco industry strategy in medical journals like Tobacco Control, the Journal of the American Medical Association, Social Science and Medicine, and the Journal of the American Public Health Association.

**Jacobsen:** As the Founder and a Board Member at Large for Western Colorado Atheists and Freethinkers, why was the atheist and freethinker organization originally formed?

**Landman:** I created the group to provide support for atheists locally, to help us find each other and provide some fellowship, to educate the public about the atheist world-view and to act as a watchdog group for separation of church and state issues locally.

**Jacobsen:** Following from the last question, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

**Landman:** I arrange for the monthly meetings, created and maintain our website, post to our social media channels, come up with ideas for our holiday billboards, and sometimes serve as a speaker for media when I can't find someone else to do it.

**Jacobsen:** Of the community social activities, what tends to be the most popular?

**Landman:** The solstice parties. I host a summer solstice BBQ and swim party and we have a winter solstice dinner party at a restaurant, or sometimes it's a potluck at someone's house, or we'll go to a bowling alley. People bring their kids and we have a great time.

**Jacobsen: What has been the general trajectory of growth of the Western Colorado Atheists and Freethinkers? What have been the demographics over time, too?**

**Landman:** We've gone from zero to having fans all over the world. We started in 2007, before use of Facebook and Twitter became commonplace, so we had maybe 30 people initially.

Now we have several hundred fans here on the western slope where we live, and started a second group in Montrose, 60 miles south of there that has been very successful.

People follow us on social media from all over the world, including from the U.K., Australia, India, Canada, the Philippines, Germany. Our fans are 52% male and 47% female, most of our fans are in the 25-55-year age range.

**Jacobsen: In terms of activism, what have been some efforts in the history of Western Colorado Atheists and Freethinkers? What have been the real successes and honest failures? How can others build on the successes and learn from the failures?**

**Landman:** We've had lots of successes. We've worked on trying to get our city council and county commission to stop praying to Jesus at the start of their public meetings.

We've had some result on that — we got the City to stop limiting prayers to 95% Christian and instead open up invocations to everyone, including atheists, and we've had a number of atheist invocations and there has even been a Satanic invocation at the start of a city council meeting.

Our county fair used to let a local church host a prayer service on the fairgrounds before the fair opened up for the day and then the county would give free admission to anyone who attended the prayer service.

We got the church to move its prayers off taxpayer-funded property and have their members pay admission to the fair like everyone else. We succeeded in getting Colorado Mesa University to stop the Gideons from thrusting bibles at nursing students at their graduation ceremony.

We exposed the religious proselytizing going on in the Delta County public schools (teachers quoting the Bible in class, children being forced to attend a religious nativity play at Christmas time, a Christian missionary teaching "sex ed"). Delta County is the county next door to us.

As for a failure... We haven't been able to get prayers out of our local public meetings completely. Our county commissioners used a sneaky technique to keep the public from being able to observe their prayers on the TV live cast of their meetings by instructing the videographer who records the meetings not to turn the cameras on until they were done praying.

**Jacobsen: What books and intellectuals would you recommend for the audience here, today? Any freethinking women who need more prominence and media coverage than they, currently, get within the general society?**

**Landman:** Christopher Hitchens, Phil Zuckerman, Sam Harris. And I really admire Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-founder of the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Madison, Wisconsin. That's one group that will really jump in and help when you need it.

**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?

**Landman:** They can contact me through our Facebook page, or call me at (970) 216-9842, or mail us at WCAF, P.O. Box 1434, Grand Junction, CO 81502, or donate to WCAF through the “Donate” link on our web page at <http://WesternColoradoAtheists.org>.

We accept PayPal. We are also on Amazon Smile, so people who shop on Amazon can choose to have a small donation given to WCAF with every item they purchase, at no extra charge. Just go to [Amazon Sign In](#) and choose Western Colorado Atheists and Freethinkers as your charity.

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

**Landman:** No, thank you very much.

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

**Landman:** You’re welcome!

# Interview with Lucie Jobin – President, Mouvement Laïque Québécois

Scott Douglas Jacobsen (Interviewer) & David Rand (French to English Translator)

February 24, 2019

Notes from the translator (David Rand):

- “*État*” and “*état*”

In French, the word *État* (state) is capitalized when used in the generic sense. For example, in Canada, each province is an *État* just as in the United States each *état* is an *État*. So for example, “employees of the State” may be written “fonctionnaires d’*État*”. I do not know if this is the norm in English, but I have decided to follow it in the English translation. Thus, I write Quebec State to mean the institutions (legislature, government, public service, etc.) of the province of Quebec.

- “*Sécularisme*” and “*laïcité*”

There is always a problem translating these two words into English because they both correspond to “secularism”. However in French the first is used to mean the limited, incomplete form of secularism understood in English-speaking countries whereas the second means true secularism as understood in Quebec, France, Turkey and other countries. Where the distinction is important, it can be specified in English by translating these terms as “religious neutrality” and “republican secularism” respectively. In any context where the distinction is not relevant, then just “secularism” will do.

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*Lucie Jobin is the President of the Mouvement Laïque Québécois. Here we talk about personal background, the Mouvement Laïque Québécois, and much more.*

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

**Lucie Jobin:** As a young woman I was a feminist and had already developed a sceptical attitude towards various systems of religious belief.

As a student, my considerable work in philosophy led me to think more deeply and to develop a critical attitude towards religions. Furthermore, I found that religious ideologies were very sexist. Indeed, not only did they give very little space to women, but the roles reserved for women in religion were very unenviable. This reinforced my positions as a “non-believer.” I pursued a career as a teacher and in union and political activism, in an environment where rights and freedoms were promoted and democracy supported.

**Jacobsen:** Why was the Mouvement Laïque Québécois founded in the first place? How did you become originally involved with the organization and then earn the title of its president?

**Jobin:** It started off as a group of parents concerned about respect for freedom of conscience and who wanted their children to be exempted from the religious program given in all Quebec schools. In 1976, this group of parents launched an organization called “Association québécoise pour l’application du droit à l’exemption de l’enseignement religieux” (AQADER) or “Quebec

Association for the Application of the Right to Exemption from Religious Teaching.” The pressure exerted by that activist organization forced the Montreal Catholic School Board to provide an alternative to the religion course so that their children would not be discriminated against. However, it was not until 1985 that this exemption arrangement was definitively replaced by a system of two options, religious education and moral education, so that all students had a real choice.

The MLQ grew out of this group. It was founded in 1981, independent of any affiliation with political parties, open to all citizens, regardless of religious belief or affiliation, all sharing one common fundamental goal: the complete secularization of the Quebec State and its public institutions. Ultimately the MLQ would like to contribute to founding a democratic secular republic of Quebec.

The MLQ is neither pro-religious nor anti-religious. Its purpose is to work towards a society that allows believers of all faiths and non-believers to live together in mutual respect with freedom and equal rights for every citizen before the law, protected from any form of discrimination or segregation. The MLQ has always advocated freedom of opinion and belief, which nevertheless must be exercised within the limits of civil law.

During the 1980s, as a teacher and atheist, I refused to teach the religion course and asked to be exempted from it. At the time, it was still difficult to obtain such an exemption. After several unsuccessful attempts and after threatening the school board to take my complaint to the Ministry of Education, I finally obtained the exemption after 8 years of employment.

I was a member of AQADER at the end of the 1970s and I was present when it reconstituted itself as the *Mouvement laïque québécois*. I was on the Board of Directors of the MLQ for several years and was elected president in 2010.

### **Jacobsen: How does the conversation on secularism differ between the Anglophone and Francophone sectors of Canadian Society?**

**Jobin:** In Anglo-Saxon culture, instead of *laïcité* (for which no exact English equivalent exists), there is a form of State secularism which is limited to religious neutrality, granting the same privileges to all religions. In the United States, for example, the constitution bans the establishment of a State religion but does not forbid the establishment of special relations with religions. In the Ontario legislature, the MPPs alternately recite no less than eight prayers of various faiths, all in the name of “neutrality.” It is by virtue this same “neutrality” that Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, dons the trappings of all religions even in his position as head of government. In Quebec, this approach was also followed by the previous government of Philippe Couillard in adopting its *Act to foster adherence to State religious neutrality* which authorizes the wearing of obvious religious symbols by State employees.

From our point of view, this kind of neutrality is an illusion and amounts in reality to complacency. The republican secularism (i.e. *laïcité*) which we promote, and which a very large majority of the Quebec population also supports, requires instead that all religious manifestations be proscribed within State institutions. This is in fact the approach taken by the Supreme Court of Canada in its decision about municipal prayers in Saguenay, but which no government has yet had the courage to enforce. Even though that Court did not explicitly mention the principle of *laïcité* which is non-existent in Canadian and Quebec legislation, the Court nevertheless rendered a judgment in conformity with *laïcité* by banning prayer in public institutions.

**Jacobsen: How is the activism and conversation around a single secular school system proceeding in Quebec now? Why is it at this stage now? How can other secular organizations help you? What most needs doing?**

**Jobin:** Currently in Quebec a new debate about secularism is beginning. The new government of the *Coalition Avenir Québec* (CAQ) intends to table draft legislation concerning that issue in the spring. Ever since 1980 the MLQ has called for the deconfessionalization of the school system and we have submitted briefs, with that purpose in mind, for every new draft bill which dealt with the issues of education and public institutions.

We participated in the Coalition for the deconfessionalization of the school system, demanding the repeal of Section 93 of the British North America Act (BNA Act). There were some sixty organizations in that Coalition. Finally, the government of Quebec obtained the repeal and school boards thus became language-based starting in 1998.

This deconfessionalization was the obvious key which allowed Quebec to welcome immigrants from all origins into French-language schools, immigrants who had previously been shunted off to the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal. This absurd situation had led inexorably to Québécois becoming a demographic minority in the Montreal region.

Over the course of the last few years, governments of the Parti québécois and the Liberal Party of Quebec have tabled draft legislation (Bills 60 and 62) dealing with secularism. We have submitted briefs and participated in the *Rassemblement pour la laïcité* (RPL) with the goal of obtaining legislation which would implement true secularism by inscribing *laïcité* in the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

We also launched a petition for the withdrawal of the *Ethics and Religious Culture* program implemented in Quebec schools in 2008 and which promotes religion. That petition collected more than 5000 signatures and was tabled before the government in 2017.

Currently we are waiting to see what the new government will do.

**Jacobsen: What was *Mouvement laïque québécois v Saguenay (City)* (2015)? How was this a victory for secularism? How can other organizations and collectives learn from a positive outcome?**

**Jobin:** The complainant, Alain Simoneau, an ex-resident of Saguenay, supported by the *Mouvement laïque québécois*, stressed the fact that he had proposed to the mayor of Saguenay, Jean Tremblay, that the prayer be replaced by a minute of silence. Such an arrangement would have made the whole judicial saga unnecessary, but the mayor refused and today the situation has turned against him.

This unanimous decision made in April of 2015 by the nine judges of the Supreme Court of Canada stipulates that real neutrality requires that the State neither favour nor disfavour any religion and that it abstain from taking a position on this issue.

For its part, the preamble to the Canadian constitution which recognizes the “supremacy of God” is reduced by the Court’s decision to a “political theory” with no legal significance. This preamble, which was another argument put forward by Saguenay, “cannot lead to an interpretation of freedom of conscience and religion that authorizes the State to consciously profess a theistic faith.”

We see that, with this decision, society has taken one more step towards recognizing true State neutrality and freedom of conscience for non-believers.

**Jacobsen: What is the Condorcet-Dessaulles award? Who have been previous awardees? What are the criteria for earning it?**

**Jobin:** The Condorcet-Dessaulles Prize was initiated by the *Mouvement laïque québécois* in 1993, some 25 years ago, to recognize the remarkable contribution made by a person or a group of persons towards the promotion and defence of secularism in Quebec.

Recall that Nicolas de Condorcet (1743-1794) was a great French political philosopher, economist, mathematician and politician who was actively involved in the fight for human rights and for the defence of freedom of conscience, for women's right to vote, for freedom of the press, for the right of every citizen to practice the religion of his or her choice or no religion, for separation between religion and State, and for the equal distribution of wealth. Condorcet is thus rightly considered to be the theoretician of modern secularism and republican democracy.

In 19<sup>th</sup> century Quebec, Louis-Antoine Dessaulles (1819-1895), essayist and politician, nephew of Louis-Joseph Papineau and member of the *Institut canadien de Montréal*, led a fight inspired by the same ideal, for freedom of thought. He confronted ultramontane clericalism which promoted the idea that ecclesiastical power should constitute in effect a State within the State. By his action and his work he was thus a kindred spirit of Condorcet in Quebec.

Several individuals have been awarded the Prize, including Dr. Henry Morgentaler, Pierre Bourgault, senator Jacques Hébert, Rodrigue Tremblay, Paul Bégin, Daniel Baril, Guy Rocher and legal expert Luc Alarie, Mss. Jeannette Bertrand, Yolande Geadah, Danielle Payette, Djemila Benhabib, Louise Mailloux and, in 2018, Mss. Andréa Richard and Nadia El-Mabrouk. Various organizations have also been honoured: the Committee of Institutionalized Duplessis Orphans, the teachers' union *Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec*, the Quebec Public Servants Union and the *Mouvement laïque de langue française* (MLF).

**Jacobsen: How can Francophone and Anglophone secular organizations in Canadian society organize and mobilize larger activist efforts to ramp up secularization and equality of non-religious people in Canadian society?**

**Jobin:** At the time when we were undertaking court proceedings in the Saguenay prayer case, we appealed to these organizations for financial support and some responded by supporting us when we appeared before the Supreme Court, including the *Canadian Secular Alliance* and the *Canadian Civil Liberties Association*.

The decision of the Supreme Court concerning State neutrality could be used at different levels of government and in different provinces to demand an end to various religious practices.

We could challenge fiscal privileges enjoyed by churches and other religious institutions and by any cultural or charitable associations affiliated with them.

In the general public interest, we should make common cause to denounce the countless cases of sexual abuse committed by members of various clergies, principally the Catholic clergy, as churches are so obviously incapable of policing themselves.

**Jacobsen: What are the next big steps for secularism in Quebec?**



**Jobin:** In the upcoming months, our action will consist in demanding a real law on secularism (*laïcité*) in Quebec by submitting briefs, writing articles and collaborating with other organizations which promote secularism and support a ban on obvious religious symbols worn by public sector workers, in particular teaching staff. We will pursue our existing campaign for the withdrawal of the *Ethics and Religious Culture* program and will attempt to establish contacts with parents and students.

We also plan to organize public lectures on these issues.

**Jacobsen:** How are reactionary fundamentalist religious forces working to restrict the efforts of secularism in Canada?

**Jobin:** We have to deal with complacent media which defend so-called “open” secularism and who support the opponents of any ban on religious symbols while favouring multiculturalist positions.

**Jacobsen:** What are your hopes and fears for 2019?

**Jobin:** We hope for a veritable law on secularism which will inscribe *laïcité* into the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms and ban the wearing of religious symbols in the public service.

Our fear is that strident opposition from multiculturalists and fundamentalists may undermine that hope. We shall see...

# Ask Mandisa 16 – From Governments to Households: Upstream, Downstream

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 24, 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 effects of things happening and then the consequences of actions, even of forces outside of one's own control.*

**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 Minister Amanda Poppei – Minister, Washington Ethical Society

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 25, 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 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?

**Amanda Poppei:** I was raised in upstate New York, and went to a Unitarian Universalist congregation that was quite humanist in orientation.

My strongest memories of Sunday School include learning about Taoism and other world religions, and participating in a Coming of Age class where we really delved into what we believed, what values shaped our life. It was part of that class that I first thought about becoming a minister.

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

**Poppei:** I was a Religious Studies major at Yale as an undergrad, and really enjoyed that—it was primarily a history major, so a lot of learning about religious history around the world and especially in the United States.

I focused on women's roles in American religion. A few years later, I went to Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC for my Masters of Divinity, which is a required degree for people preparing for the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

I completed that preparation—which also includes doing a unit as a chaplain intern at a hospital, and an internship with a congregation—and then when I was brought on as Senior Leader at the Washington Ethical Society I also went forward with preparation to be a certified Ethical Culture Leader.

That work is mostly independent study, working with existing Leaders to prepare. Now, I'm lucky to be able to take continuing education classes through the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association and through the American Humanist Association!

**Jacobsen:** As a Minister for the Washington Ethical Society, what tasks and responsibilities come along with the position?

**Poppei:** In terms of what I \*do\*, it's really a lot like a minister in a more traditional religious setting.

So I speak on Sundays (although we also have wonderful guest speakers at times), I provide pastoral care and counseling to people going through difficult times in life, I teach classes and run small groups, I work with a great staff to provide programming in the congregation, and I engage in justice work—usually in coalition with other clergy or community organizers—out in the world.

**Jacobsen: For those who do not know about it, how does an ethical society differ from atheism, agnosticism, humanism, and Unitarian Universalism?**

**Poppei:** Ethical Societies are part of a movement called Ethical Culture, which was founded in 1876 by a man named Felix Adler. Adler really started the movement as a way to bring together people who believe differently from each other, so they could act for justice together.

Ethical Societies share most of their core values with Unitarian Universalist congregations, and sometimes the two can feel pretty similar on a Sunday morning, but they have different histories—and those histories influence them today.

So whereas in a UU congregation you would likely use historically Christian language (even though the movement isn't Christian now, but more pluralist), in an Ethical Society you're going to hear more secular language for some of the same things—for instance, instead of “sermon” we say “platform address” and instead of “minister” we say “leader.”

Atheism and agnosticism are both descriptors of personal belief, so those labels would apply to individuals who might then attend an Ethical Society or an UU congregation. Humanism I think of as a broad tradition, which has connections and roots and influence in Unitarian Universalism and in Ethical Culture—and it's also a way people describe themselves.

At the Washington Ethical Society, we say we are a “humanist congregation,” which says something both about what we value (human experience, human responsibility, human worth) and about how we organize ourselves (as a congregation, which meets regularly, runs a Sunday School, etc).

**Jacobsen: Moving into 2019, what do you see as the difficulties for the activism and maintenance of community for the ethical societies under the current Trump Administration?**

**Poppei:** I think people are tired right now—the last two years have felt like such an onslaught, with policy after policy that hurts people we love.

So my job is to figure out how to both care for people, to nurture them and bring joy and some sense of groundedness to them, while at the same time continuing to encourage them to resist, to be active in working for the world they want to see. It can be hard to balance those needs in a community, but I do think they're both important.

**Jacobsen: How can other societies and secular groups work to coordinate activist efforts in the locale of Washington Ethical Society?**

**Poppei:** We love working in coalition—in fact, that's how we do almost all of our justice work. So come join us!

There's always room for more folks to engage, whether with immigration reform and support of individual immigrants and asylum seekers, or with efforts to make affordable housing more available in DC.

**Jacobsen: For those wanting some Spring reading on ethical societies, what do you recommend for them? Also, what about intellectuals – known or not so much – in the history of the high-level thought of ethical societies?**

**Poppei:** I recommend *The Humanist Way* by Ed Ericson, who was the Leader here at the Washington Ethical Society in the 1960s. I think that book is still the best description of Ethical Society.

**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?

**Poppei:** We love having folks tune in on Facebook, where we livestream our Sunday platform services—and if you're enjoying them and finding something there that nurtures you, of course we invite you to give toward our work as well, using our text giving link!

And I'm always glad to connect with people across the country who are thinking about the same things and trying to live good lives and build a more just world.

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

# Interview with Payira Bonnie – President, Humanist Empowerment of Livelihoods in Uganda (HELU)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 26, 2019

*Payira Bonnie is the President of the Humanist Empowerment of Livelihoods in Uganda (HELU). Here we talk about his life, views, and work.*

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

**Payira Bonnie:** First of all, I want to thank you for this interview. I was born in an extended family of over 15 uncles and aunties. I have one twin sister two stepbrothers and two step-Sisters.

I lost my mother when I was three and my father when I reached eight. I kept switching from one home to another between my paternal to maternal relatives.

Both families were Catholic Christians. It was a rule set I think by the catholic parishes that every child must be baptized before they celebrate their first birthdays.

I grew up and studied in the Northern District of Gulu. At the time, I was growing up life was on the edge with not even a single hope of making it to adulthood due to high level of insurgency caused by the “Lord’s Resistance Army” (LRA).

This was a rebel group that operated in northern Uganda with a base in South Sudan. The rebels abducted mainly children to build on their army and killed elders.

It was tough growing up where everybody was displaced in internally displaced camps or where children would seek shelter every night in churches and hospitals.

I think I am lucky not to have any of my family members killed or abducted and to also have a second home in the central region of Uganda. Entebbe. Psychologically the entire region was affected.

The northern part of Uganda boasts of the highest number of Christians compared to other parts of the country with few visible Mosques.

I was raised in a Catholic family but I hear from my grandmother that at the age of 5 years old; I was rebellious when it came to going to church on Sundays because I never wanted to go.

I wouldn’t take my offertory money given to me by my uncles to the altar. Remember, it is culturally acceptable to give a child some few (three) strokes of canes as punishment. I think I received a lot of that. For not going to church.

I come from one of Uganda’s tribes known as Acoli who are a Luo speaking people found in the North of the country and some, of course, in Kenya and Tanzania.

I have a Bachelors Degree in Mass Communications from Kampala International University. I fully pronounced myself atheist in my senior one in 2000.

This was at a time when the war in Northern Uganda was tense and Ebola outbreak had rocked the district. Everybody else was praying. I was asking myself very many questions about the gods and their existence.

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

**Payira:** I think it all started in 2009 in my Primary 7. I started feeling more mature. The pressure of adolescence took over me in a good way until when I joined my secondary school level.

This is the time I was a little bit away from home with both new and old friends. My love for science subjects and the hope to one day be one of the few geneticists in the continent gave birth to freethinking and speaking freely.

Reading culture in Uganda is the weakest, and yet, it looked like the only books I borrowed from the school library were only literature books. Novels and mostly plays eg., *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare, *An Enemy of the People* Henrik Ibsen, and so on.

*Things fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. And many others. I never used to copy general notes from the teacher, but would make my own notes when the teaching is teaching. I loved reading things outside classroom. I do a lot of self-education these days.

**Jacobsen: As a President of Humanist Empowerment of Livelihoods in Uganda (HELU), what are the tasks and responsibilities coming with the presidency?**

**Payira:** First of all, I don't want to hide from our dark history, which almost leads to the collapse of the organization after its former president, Ms. Agnes Ojera, left for the US to start a new life. I don't blame her.

It was our time to keep things moving. As the Board Chair, I was also managing a new FM Radio Station far away from where the HELU offices and operations were.

With our successfully funded project of giving vocational training to single mothers in tailoring, baking, and goatrearing, we decided to venture into another project, the preschool.

Without close monitoring of the project and its finances, money was misused by the then project manager leading the Organization into decaying mode. Members scattered.

Donors left. I left my job at the Radio in August 2018 to come and see that the organization doesn't go just like that. One big task I know and all Board members are aware of is building trust with individual donors and organizations.

We lost that. I know it will be a big hurdle to pull things back together, to build a system/institution where individuals are not superior to the organization. It is the hardest to find an atheist or humanist who is fully devoted to the core values of secularism.

The majority of the members were Christians who go to church every Sunday and can't really openly say, "God is an illusion." I want to see the free thinkers club grow for better understanding of Humanism. Promote secularism mostly to the youth in schools and public gatherings.

With my background in media, I also hope during my time HELU will own the first secular Radio Station in the Whole of Africa with ownership and programming all targeting secularism.



Today it is only the preschool HELU is running as a project and I want to see it grow to Primary and Secondary Levels with structured secular lessons. Hopefully, the funding comes in.

Our society is fully embedded in the bible and Quran gospels as being the truth where some people label Atheism as a cult and baby eaters.

Uganda has over 300 FM Radio stations and about 50 of them are religious base whose main targets are the young people and abusing non-religious people. I will also use radio to challenge this.

Where I stay I see so many Child Mothers every day and all they know it to keep producing for their older polygamous husbands. Sensitization and giving these child mothers Vocational raining.

This is one of HELU's 2019/20 goals. Keep those children who are still in school in school and work with authorities to put whoever defiles a child to face the law.

**Jacobsen: Why was Humanist Empowerment of Livelihoods in Uganda (HELU) founded in the first place?**

**Payira:** HELU was founded in 2011 by Ms. Ojera Agnes at the time when the scares of the Lord's Resistance Army's 20 years war was in each and every family in Northern Uganda. HELU was established to promote Humanism, and to help single mothers, those with HIV, victims of witchcraft.

The war confined people in one place. This was easy for the infected to infect others. From then HELU has distributed over 40 goats to abandoned single mothers.

More than 110 women have benefited from our vocational training in baking, tailoring, hairdressing, and business management. The preschool is up and running and being supported 100% by parents.

**Jacobsen: In Uganda, what are the unique humanist concerns simply not faced by other parts of Africa or of the world? What have been effective alleviations or solutions to these concerns or problems?**

**Bonnie:** Uganda is surrounded by countries that have been in the domestic and political scramble for power for some years by a few individuals and this has made Uganda always a destination for refugees and Humanism in Uganda has been so instrumental in arranging for shelters and transportation of a few humanists and their families from the affected countries.

In 2016 when war broke in neighboring Burundi Humanists were targeted most by government soldiers, Humanists in Uganda managed to move one humanist family safely out of Burundi into Uganda.

I do not think in the world there are humanist organizations doing this in their countries. Individuals contributed financial support to make this happen.

**Jacobsen: What does humanism within the Uganda context look like to you? How is this form of Humanism similar to and different than humanism in another context?**

**Payira:** In Uganda, Humanism is still more of a lifestyle. It is actually fancy to be a humanist or associate with humanists for the young people. We strongly believe in the respect of human

rights, freedom of speech, and respect for women and children, which I think is the same with other humanists.

The only difference I see is the financial powers to take us up in the big stage to promote humanism and push for the separation of state and religion like it happens in other countries. Humanists in Uganda are also not open for fear of family disownment and also losing Christian friends.

**Jacobsen: Who are some important writers, thinkers, and speakers on humanism and secularism in Uganda and within Africa as a whole?**

**Payira:** Director of Kasese Humanist Schools in SouthWestern Uganda Mr. Alusala Moses in Kenya, Andrew Mwenda the director of the IndependenceNews Paper in Uganda. Roslyn Mould from Ghana. President, Humanist Association of Ghana.

**Jacobsen: Who tends to be opposed to humanist empowerment in Uganda? What are effective means by which to combat them and, also to protect the humanist efforts of HELU and others?**

**Payira:** Humanist empowerment in Uganda is mostly opposed by religious leaders and their followers, traditional leaders and witchdoctors. Basically, these are a group of people who don't believe in divergent views.

If you also notice our national motto is "For God and my country," which politicians tend to use to oppose our activities. We do not intend to be bullied by the majority.

There is a proverb in my native language. Luo, which says "Otigo ma nok bene tyeko kwon." Loosely Translated as "however small Okra soup is served for you in a plate, you can still use it to finish a whole lot of bread."

All we need is continued engagement with the community that we live in, political and religious leaders. Humanists in Uganda and Africa as a whole need financial support for their different projects.

I said it earlier in the interview that we need a medium to air out our views to the masses. This way we can counter the different opposing sides. HELU was visible when we still had supported programs running.

This kept us visible and active in the community. We need more financial support from our friends out there. We can't have a generation of children giving birth to children. A generation of illiterate mothers and fathers when we have the means to support.

**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?**

**Payira:** I think what we need most especially here in Uganda is speaking truthfully about what we do and stand for to the outside world. We also need to embrace the idea of setting strong institutions that won't depend entirely on one person.

This will allow the continuity of these non-profits we establish and also for accountability purpose. Humanists need to go out there and challenge the status quo.

The silence is way too loud especially on abuse of human rights, child labor, and other forms of inhumane acts by religious leaders and witchdoctors in Africa.

We need to be more visible to attract bloggers, newspapers, funding, and interviews like this. And I want to thank you so much Mr. Jacobsen for this opportunity.

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

**Payira:** All I want to say is extend my gratitude to you Jacobsen and African Freethinker team for this wonderful opportunity. This is going to allow many humanist voices from Africa to be heard.

I would also like to tell the world not to give up on humanity despite all the injustices being practiced by religious and political groups in the world. May we continue thinking freely and promoting free thoughts.

The only way for humanist in other parts of the world to understand what we do here at HELU and in Uganda is to come to Uganda and meet with us, meet the people our projects are meant for.

This is a personal invitation to you who will be reading this interview.

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

**Payira:** I am honored Jacobsen, thank you.

# Interview with John Hamill – Member, National Committee, Atheist Ireland

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 27, 2019

*John Hamill is a Member of the National Committee for Atheist Ireland. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.*

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

**John Hamill:** I graduated in Computer Science from Queen's University, Belfast. For most people, that educational background doesn't seem at all relevant to atheism, but it has been for me. Computer Science undergraduates typically spend some time studying Turing's work.

The new mathematics he created, broadly speaking represented the invention of computer software and programmable machines, but he also did some of the formative work on artificial intelligence.

Taking all of this work together, I found it hard to avoid the conclusion that the human brain is just a wet meat computer, even if it's still much more complex than our best silicon equivalents.

This is a view that is impossible to reconcile with the religious perspective, whereby our most important decisions are made by our eternal immortal soul, which will be accountable for those decisions after we die.

Since Turing published his most famous papers, I think that more recent advances in neuroscience and artificial intelligence have supported the idea that acts of thinking and decision-making, are mechanistic and deterministic.

**Jacobsen:** As a Member of the National Committee within Atheist Ireland, what tasks and responsibilities come with the station? Why is this an important position for the advancement and, indeed, the protection of the atheist community in Ireland?

**What remain the perennial and, potentially partially, unique concerns of the Irish secular communities? How is this translated into practice over the course of Atheist Ireland's history?**

**Hamill:** The most time-consuming activities within our committee over recent years have related to some significant referendum campaigns that we have been engaged with.

In Ireland, we have had consecutive popular votes to introduce marriage equality, to introduce abortion services, and to remove our constitutional provision on blasphemy.

Our organisation invested huge energy in these campaigns and in the case of the blasphemy referendum, Atheist Ireland was the primary voice arguing against such religiously-inspired artefacts in our statute book. These successful campaigns represent very significant progress for our agenda, but there is much still left to do.

Ireland still retains several laws and constitutional provisions that discriminate against atheists.

We are working hard on lobbying about these issues within our own parliamentary processes, at the Council of Europe, at the European Parliament and within the United Nations. There are also human rights abuses of atheists in Ireland within core public services, like health and education.

For example, Ireland is unique in that 90% of our State-funded primary education system is controlled by the Roman Catholic Church, such that a Catholic ethos pervades the entire school day. The fact that the Irish State is imposing this ethos on non-Catholic families, is an issue that will take up a large part of our time and attention in 2019.

**Jacobsen: In personal opinion, what is the central concern of the secular and freethought community within Ireland?**

**Hamill:** These are issues in which our population seems to be a long way ahead of our politicians. Secular people in Ireland generally do not want to interfere in any way with how the Catholic majority practice their religion.

Similarly, most Catholics in Ireland do not want to impose their faith on non-Catholics through the civil law or through public services.

I think our recent referendum campaigns demonstrate a large majority in Ireland for State neutrality in matters of faith. For example, even when we were working on the blasphemy campaign, we had some strong support from devout and pious Catholics.

**Jacobsen: What have been and can be resolutions or solutions to these concerns of the secular and freethought community within Ireland? Who have been the main opposition to the efforts, in activism or even in basic community-building, of Atheist Ireland?**

**Hamill:** However, as an outsider it seems to me that there is an increasing distance between the institutional Catholic Church and the average practicing Catholic.

Both the recent referendum results and some consistent outcomes from polls, agree that there are large numbers of people in Ireland who describe themselves as Catholic, but disagree with central tenets of the faith on contraception, abortion, gay marriage, divorce, and many other issues.

It seems to me that in Ireland at least, the more doctrinaire institutional wing of the Church is in decline. For example, there is a crisis in vocations, with the numbers of trainee priests in seminaries dropping steeply.

There are also increasingly vocal movements within the Church itself who are campaigning for reforms, such as the Association of Catholic Priests and the Roncalli Community. It's no small thing that the priests within these organisations should be so publicly critical of the institutional Church.

Consequently, I hope and expect that as we seek to follow the Canadian lead in removing Church control of State-funded schools, we will actually have some support for those changes from within some parts of the Church itself.

Conversely, of course we will also anticipate that the institutional Church and other conservative Catholic groups, will strongly oppose the changes that we will be seeking, just as they have been the main opposition to our agenda for many years now.

**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?

**Hamill:** In our history, Atheist Ireland has never sought or received State funding. While this imposes many limitations and we could always do more if we had more financial backing for our campaigns, it is also relevant to note that our campaigns are very often critical of the State.

Personally, I'm grateful that when we are doing this work, we never need to be concerned about some livelihoods being dependent on institutions that we need to be very critical of.

However, this independence also means that we are especially grateful when we can recruit new members. People can join Atheist Ireland online at [www.atheist.ie](http://www.atheist.ie) and we're always delighted to hear from those who wish to help with our work.

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

# Interview with Brian Stack - Organizer, Atheist Humanist Society of Connecticut and Rhode Island

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 28, 2019

*Brian Stack is the Organizer of Atheist Humanist Society of Connecticut and Rhode Island. Important to note, Stack has since moved. Here we talk about 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?

**Brian Stack:** I was born and raised in North Carolina, in a large religious family, Southern Baptist for my immediate family but other protestant denominations for cousins, etc. I have cousins on my father's side that are smart and educated but extremely religious.

It's confusing that they are quite smart but believe things that are absurd (Noah's ark, 6-day creation, etc.). I began to question religion early, around 12 or 14, by 16 I was basically an atheist.

When I went to college I studied physics, math, philosophy and logic, and took several classes about religion, and got more convinced that religion and god were ancient superstitions, and not worth believing any more.

In college I was reading Skeptic magazine and I saw the word atheist, that's when I realized what to call myself. My parents pushed me to get baptized but I refused.

After I turned 18 I quit going to church, I never really told my parents that I was an atheist, but they figured it out. My sister is also an atheist, she's 2 years older than me, she's also gay so that also pushed her out of church.

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

**Stack:** I have degrees in physics (bachelor's) and engineering (master's) and took classes in logic and philosophy. All of these shaped my worldview. I've read many books about atheism, those have given me ammunition in my arguments against religion.

**Jacobsen:** Rhode Island Atheist Society was an organization or, rather, a community for you. What was the community like for you?

**Stack:** It was great to have a community where you can freely criticize religion and have open discussions. Even in New England (it's not very religious) it's still hard to say you're an atheist.

Everyone in the group had a story about rude comments or being insulted because of being an atheist. We had monthly meetings and a few times a year a social gathering (movie, picnic, etc.).

**Jacobsen:** In terms of social activities, what have been some of the more heartwarming activities for you?

**Stack:** We donated blood once or twice, had a college scholarship, donated money to charities (this and another group I attended in Connecticut). We had a few hikes and tours (Salem, Massachusetts), a few movie nights at someone's home.

**Jacobsen: Looking into 2019, what do you consider some important activist work or efforts of the secular and the atheist communities in general in America?**

**Stack:** The group I belong to now in North Carolina, we have several goals, one of which is to expose believers and churches to the fact that we're good people, we're just like them but without religion, that you can be good without god.

I think that's a goal all secular/atheist groups should have. Also, the separation of church and state is big, in the south we get a lot of religion pushed in our faces, at school, work, local governments, etc.

**Jacobsen: Who tend to be opposed to the mere existence of the Rhode Island Atheist Society community? You moved to North Carolina. Is there much difference in this community?**

**Stack:** We had a website, a month after it went online we got threatening emails, but I'm not sure from whom.

I occasionally got religious pamphlets in the mail (I was the state representative for American Atheists, so my name and address were public), never with a return address. I know several people in New England that were fired or had their jobs threatened after being exposed as atheists.

The same is true here in the south. Here in the south the atheist groups seem larger, we need to stick together in this more religious area.

**Jacobsen: Who have been important intellectual influences on you?**

**Stack:** I love James Randi, Michael Shermer and Joe Nickell, debunkers of paranormal claims, they really got me moving into the skeptical mindset of questioning everything and being critical of extraordinary claims.

I took two college classes called logic and critical thinking and philosophy of religion, those were fantastic. I'm a physics nerd, so Einstein, Newton, Sagan and Neil DeGrasse Tyson are some of my heroes. And Mr. Wizard from the TV show.

I also had some great teachers growing up, they got me excited to learn everything I could. Hitchens, Dawkins, Dan Barker and Doug Kreuger (he's a philosophy professor) are also big influences.

**Jacobsen: What are some of the more important areas of work for the secular community?**

**Stack:** Charity and volunteering and making it known we are atheists, so people would see us doing good. My current group donated bags of supplies to the city's homeless and we put our group name on the bags.

Also, being vocal about being non-believers. There are more of us than people realize, if you look at recent studies, over 20% of the US population is non-religious.

If we got together and campaigned or voted, we could really shake up the political landscape and the rest of the country would have to take us seriously.

**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?**



**Stack:** Find a local atheist group (Facebook or meetup) and get involved. Organize a blood drive, adopt a street and pick up trash, donate money to a charity and make sure they know it's from an atheist group. Write letters to the editor of your newspaper or speak up at a city council meeting.

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

**Stack:** We need to get organized and make our voices heard, join groups of non-believers, and let other know we're good people, we don't eat babies, we don't worship Satan, we have morals. We're good without god or religion.

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

**Stack:** No problem, I've taken surveys and done interviews before, happy to help!

## Ask Herb 2 – Sacrificial Activist: Shepherding Community Civic and Political Life

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 28, 2019

*Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition of America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. Here we talk about activism and sacrifice.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Activism, by its nature – real active involvement in community civic and political life, requires sacrifices. How should secular activists gauge their ability to participate in the variety of activist efforts available to them, not only in terms of opportunity costs between different activist efforts but also the costs to aspects of their lives and liabilities to personal safety?

**Herb Silverman:** Perhaps the most important and effective thing for secular activists to do is to come out of the closet. Attitudes toward gays changed rapidly when people learned that their friends, neighbors, and even family members were gay. Attitudes about atheists are slowly changing as atheists are slowly coming out, especially among millennials.

You've probably heard there has never been an atheist president, but the truth is that there has never been an *open* atheist president. I expect there have been several closeted atheist presidents. Barney Frank, the first openly gay member of Congress, only acknowledged that he was an atheist after he retired from Congress. I also doubt that presidential candidate Bernie Sanders is the only Jewish socialist in the country who believes in God. A recent Harris survey showed that 52% of Jews (myself included) do not believe in God. <https://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/jewsdontbelieve/>

The bad news about coming out of the closet is that you might lose some friends, though I would question what kind of friendship it is if you can't be honest about who you are. Of course, caution may well be necessary when dealing with religious family members or employers. The good news is that you will gain friends. I've heard from people who guardedly mentioned their secularism to friends and coworkers and were pleasantly surprised by a "Me, too" response. Better to be comfortable in your own skin than to hide who you are in order to please those you might not respect.

I think it's counterproductive to come out as arrogant atheists. We should not gratuitously bash religion or become atheist evangelists, promoting atheism to those who have shown no interest in discussing religion. We can answer questions about our naturalistic worldview without trying to convince others to adopt it. If questioners are open-minded enough to consider our views thoughtfully, some may convince themselves that atheism makes sense, as many of us did.

We mostly want our worldview to be respected in a culture where many distrust us because we don't believe in a judging God who will reward or punish us in an afterlife. When I hear such concerns, I ask how their behavior would change if they stopped believing in God. If it wouldn't, then it doesn't make sense for them to think we are less moral. If behavior would change because of God belief, what kind of morality is that? I like to emphasize behavior over belief, that we are

good for goodness' sake. Religious or not, silent evangelism might be the most effective approach for all of us. People are likely to respect our worldview more for what we do, than for what we preach.

Here are some things to do in our community, while respectfully (as appropriate) describing our worldview. Write letters to the editor, especially countering those that promote ridiculous or unfair religious ideas. Write letters to members of Congress and local politicians, even visiting them in their offices. Support candidates (including financially) who share your values. Those who want to commit more of their time and energy could consider running for public office. There are important offices that might not be too competitive—perhaps local school board positions in some communities.

Atheists need to reach out to and work with progressive religionists who support separation of religion and government, and who judge people more on their deeds than on their creeds. That includes organizations like The Interfaith Alliance, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, Catholics for Free Choice, and other allies in liberal churches. When we meet people face to face, we are more likely to become friends and break stereotypes. Working with diverse groups provides an additional benefit of gaining more visibility and respect for our perspective. Improving the public perception of secular Americans may be as important to some of us as pursuing a particular political agenda.

My bottom line advice for atheists is to do what you enjoy doing, according to your comfort level. I understand why many atheists, especially in the Bible Belt, are quiet about their religious views so they won't appear impolite or offend others. However, being polite by avoiding conflicts has never been a guiding light for me.

I think a top priority for most of us should be to fight (nonviolently) against those who try to force their religious beliefs on people who don't share such beliefs. Especially politicians. Government must not favor one religion over another or religion over non-religion. Religious liberty must include the right for taxpayers to choose whether to support religion and which to support. Forcing taxpayers to privilege and subsidize religions they don't believe in is akin to forcing them to put money in the collection plates of churches, synagogues, or mosques.

Some secular activists may be disappointed because they haven't seen change fast enough. But we are evolutionists, not creationists. Evolution takes a long time. Whenever you feel discouraged by slow progress, keep this in mind: If we do nothing, nothing will change. You don't have to do it all, but I hope you will all do something. I hope we will one day see an America that respects secular viewpoints and an America where the influence of conservative religion is mainly limited to within the walls of churches, not the halls of Congress.

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

# Interview with Jason Torpy – President, Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers (MAAF)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 1, 2019

*Jason Torpy is the President of the Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers (MAAF). Here we talk about his life, work, and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What was early life like for you? What have been some pivotal movements to more freethinking in personal life?

**Jason Torpy:** I grew up in southeast Ohio in a Catholic family. I spent much of my early teens investigating other kinds of Christianity and even occult options in my community.

Once Catholic confirmation came around, I could confirm I wasn't Catholic, and that I was relatively secure in my atheism. I wouldn't say anything pivotal other than the freedom to investigate. That accelerated my opportunity to learn.

On the other hand, repression during that process would most likely have just increased my desire to learn at the first opportunity. I think I would have ended up at the same place.

**Jacobsen:** What levels of formal education have been part of life for you? How have you informally self-educated? How have these been important for building a more robust view of the world?

**Torpy:** I have an engineering degree from West Point and an MBA from The Ohio State University. I took a number of philosophy electives at West Point and took graduate philosophy courses through California State.

I deployed to Iraq in 2003 and then started planning for an MBA, so I didn't complete the coursework. Education is important. Having the interest and opportunity to learn more leads to truth and resilient values, mostly. I'd like to think it worked out that way for me, but I'm still growing.

**Jacobsen:** As the President of the Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers, who have been the important people in the work for MAAF? What have been some successes within the military through the work of the MAAF through its history of operation?

**Torpy:** There is a really long list, and I'd first like to apologize to all those I don't list here.

I hope they don't feel unappreciated. took formal leadership of the group in 2002 and then set up formal nonprofit status in 2006. Jason Heap stood forward as a Humanist Chaplain candidate from 2012 and later a plaintiff in the ensuing lawsuit.

Major Ray Bradley was the plaintiff who stood forward to successfully get the addition of "Humanist" to the Army's religious preference listing. Taylor Grin partnered with Vicki Gettman to start Humanist Services at Air Force Basic Training.

Under Vicki's leadership, those services are now trending over 1500 every weekend. Ray Doeksen has volunteered for weekly Humanist Services at Navy Basic Training now. And there are many others unsung.

For example, Doug Wright who has appeared to speak in a number of contexts and was primary organizer for a Memorial Service on the USS Midway in 2014.

Jen Kiesling, Carlos Bertha, Jeff Lucas, Cliff Andrew, Ryan Jean and many others have contributed to MAAF events at each military academy. It's really hard to list all those who have contributed to successes over the years with their time, money, and negative career impacts.

**Jacobsen: In terms of some of the losses in the activism of MAAF, what have been those losses? How can other organizations learn from those honest failures? How have military and civilian leader leaders failed to protect the rights of military atheists equally?**

**Torpy:** We have a long list of successes, but this is in the context of a US military still controlled in large part not by religious people but by political evangelicals.

These elements have Christian evangelism as a first and only priority. Our allies who value things like supporting all troops and a chaplaincy that fulfills its mission of religious pluralism are not able to overcome the anti-atheist culture and practice within our military.

I'm sorry I'm not providing a specific story. We as military atheists are the oppressed minority. It's best to ask our military and civilian leaders why they have failed to protect our rights equally.

To put a fine point on it: Military leaders are refusing service, but they are not calling me telling me what I've done wrong or what our people have done wrong, other than just being atheists. They offer no path to equality.

**Jacobsen: As the MAAF focuses within a niche atheist and freethinker sector, what are some of the potentially unique challenges faced by the association not FACED by other associations or organizations?**

**How does solidarity with minority religions alongside atheists in service provide a better basis upon which to show organizational support of the general principles of equality and fairness in treatment in the military for all members?**

**Torpy:** I wouldn't want to diminish the struggle of any other group that needs help.

We've celebrated successes and spoken in support of Sikhs and Hindus, women, lesbians and gays, affirming chaplains, trans members and others. I might say that our needs as atheists and humanists, are minimal relative to those other communities.

Gender confirmation surgery, special clothes, or days of the week for service are needs others have that we don't. I think the opposition to our needs is as great as some of those other communities, but what we're asking for is relatively minimal.

I wouldn't call this solidarity exactly. That's useful of course. More numbers are good for any movement. We appreciate their support when we have it, and we hope they appreciate ours. Presumably there is a logical connection between support of one minority and support of equality for all. In that sense, it may be a better basis.

The point is that inclusion of diverse perspectives, protection of minority rights, and equality including religious equality are all our values. Whether or not it is a better basis for our own equality, we will still help those in need.

**Jacobsen: Of those considerations of the atheists and freethinkers within the military, what are their community concerns? How are they, possibly, having some issues in building communal activities in the midst of more religious oriented other communities within the military?**

**Torpy:** Many religious communities in the military, including even Wiccans, have chaplains who provide for their needs.

These chaplains might not be Hindu or Wiccan or Muslim personally, but they are trained about the needs of those communities. They have materials and local clergy contacts who can provide authentic services.

Chaplains have free facilities and advertising they make available to enrich those events. Not only do they not provide services to humanists, they seem to be told specifically not to provide those services.

This paid and resourced full-time cadre of religious support personnel are available to everyone but us. And that lack of equal access does restrict our ability to build communities.

MAAF exists to remedy this shortfall, to do chaplains' job for them especially while they refuse. (Please note that our support of training activities is in the absence of chaplain support.

Other non-chaplain leaders have made a space for us to do everything entirely with our own volunteers and at our own expense while all others enjoy religious services with chaplain sponsorship.)

**Jacobsen: Of those books and articles written around the military atheists and freethinkers, what ones really nail the appropriate tone and contextualization of the military for atheists and freethinkers?**

**For a prospective author, what can they do in order to write on this subject matter in a competent manner to better represent this ignored minority within the military?**

**Torpy:** I'm not sure I understand. A few books have been written about the atheist perspective and certainly many have been written around the military perspective. I'd say no book adequately addresses the military atheist perspective.

The first step is to be a quality author or have some basis to write. It's harder than it sounds to just write a book. Others can speak better on that than I can. But beyond that, just meet with people and tell their stories. The stories are out there.

Also remember the good stories. Too many authors, especially journalists, just want to hear the bad stuff. There are lots of inspiring stories as well, and just humanizing stories that are about life not activism specifically.

**Jacobsen: What are the demographics of MAAF? How does impact its services of limited resources?**

**Torpy:** As you mentioned earlier, we are an atheist minority within a military minority within the US. Resources are limited, especially relative to the well-funded efforts to evangelize the military through chaplaincy and ministry.

That having been said, we have broad support through the larger atheist and humanist movement and are gaining interfaith allies. Over 100 interfaith allies including military chaplains, divinity school leaders, and denominational leaders signed on in support of humanist chaplains.

To the extent that those allies, atheist and interfaith, spend some of their resources to reform our military's continuing anti-atheist bias, that will support their general mission of pluralism.

MAAF can guide the efforts of many organizations to the MAAF goal of equal support for military atheists and the broad goals of equality for atheists and of religious freedom and harmony for all.

**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?**

**Torpy:** [militaryatheists.org](http://militaryatheists.org) is a primary resource to join, donate, and to read more about the organization. Outreach through [militaryatheists.org](http://militaryatheists.org) is also the best way to find case-by-case opportunities to share articles for publication, to gain insight or interviews, and to find resources like demographics and regulations to inform shared campaigns for reform.

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

**Torpy:** This is a long term effort, and we need to stick together. MAAF has a number of Canadian members and it would be great to see that core grow and become more active to support the larger effort of equality and support for Canadian Atheists.

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

**Torpy:** Thank you.

# Interview with Christopher Smith – Member, Triangle Freethought Society

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 2, 2019

*Christopher Smith is Member of the Triangle Freethought Society. Here we talk about 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?

**Christopher Smith:** I was born in Charleston, SC, but moved to Charlotte when I was two, so it is the only home I remember. Charlotte is a big city, so though I have lived in the South forever; I was always in a larger city, so it was not until I was an adult that I experienced what most might associate with the south when I got a job in rural NC.

My family was fairly WASPy, with both my parents having gone to college and working full time. We were not wealthy, but we were quite comfortable.

My parents are Baptist, and we went to church kind-of often. I was in youth group and church choir, but no one ever mentioned religion at home, or family functions, so it was not a huge part of my life.

I was baptized as a child, and we were Christian, and believers, so it was not just cultural Christianity, but reading the Bible at home was not something our family did.

My father is an engineer, and he has always been fairly rational. I saw this in him, and I would like to think I myself try to be rational as a human being.

I drifted away from religion as a teenager when too much of it warranted more proof than it presented. As religion was never a huge part of my life, this journey was relatively painless, and I did not suffer from much of the same trauma that many have.

My family life has been a bit different since my parents asked me about my faith as an adult. My father's father was a preacher, and his last words to my father were "make sure Christopher goes to church."

Needless to say, this has affected my father substantially, and my atheism continues to be a weight around his neck. It pains me that my father suffers in this way, but we do not talk about the issue, and so I see no resolution in sight.

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

**Smith:** I went to UNC Chapel Hill and received BAs in Classics and History and received my NC teaching license from UNC Asheville. Informally I have done a lot of historical reading, as I tend to enjoy it a lot more than fiction.

I am currently listening to the History of Byzantium podcast, having finally finished The History of Rome, and the last book I read was "The Storm Before the Storm" by Mike Duncan (host of the History of Rome podcast).



I have also done a lot of reading on religion as my major of ancient history focused on Rome, and the rise of the Christian church is a big part of the empire's history.

Becoming familiar with history is one of the things that drove me away from religion, as I found out that some Biblical events simply did not happen.

There was never a census by Augustus that required people to travel to their "familial homeland," for instance. We have no record of it happening, and the disruption to commerce would have been astronomical.

**Jacobsen: As a member of the Triangle Freethought Society, what seems like the more important social and community-building activities?**

**Smith:** I feel like the social and service aspects of our community are the most important. It is important for those without faith, in the ocean of believers that we live in, to know that others around them feel the same way, that they are not alone, and that we are here to laugh, cry, and talk with them should they need.

We also try and participate in community service, visibly, to let everyone know that it is not only possible to be "good without gods" but that religion holds no preeminent position of authority on religion. We are all in this together, and I think that the secular community has just as much to offer as those of faith.

**Jacobsen: If you had to rank-order the principles or values behind freethought, what would these be to you?**

**Smith:** While I do not know that I can rank them specifically, I would include justice, kindness, forethought, and curiosity.

**Jacobsen: We have a variety of public intellectuals. Who have been the most influential on personal intellectual and philosophical development?**

**Smith:** I have enjoyed the writings of Sam Harris, Dan Finke, and Christopher Hitchens immensely over the last few years in regard to freethought, philosophy, and morality. In regard to history, I think Richard Carrier has put forward quite a few of well-reasoned arguments for the possible non-existence of Jesus, and Mike Duncan has helped keep my love of Rome alive.

**Jacobsen: Who have been important allies for the Triangle Freethought Society?**

**Smith:** We are a chapter of FFRF, and our parent organization has been fantastic in not only advocating for issues we believe in, but also getting involved more locally in church/state legal cases. Local NARAL chapters and Durham Pride have also been local allies in hosting events that we feel advance a freer and happier future.

**Jacobsen: As we transition more and more into 2019, what seems like the important activist activities now?**

**Smith:** The religious right has seen a resurgence in the last few decades, and it is encroaching upon all of our lives. Secular voters make up a huge voting bloc, and we need to be more visible and vocal as we contact officials and let them know what we want. Many issues are at risk with administration officials like Mike Pence and many of the recently appointed Trump judges, including LGBT rights, refugee/asylum issues, and of course, the separation of church/state.

**Jacobsen:** Who have been the central opposition to the Freethought Triangle Society? I ask because, typically, this has been the case in most other secular or non-religious organizations. They develop and then a group directly opposes them locally.

**Smith:** I cannot say that we have any.

**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?

**Smith:** We are an organization of several hundred and would LOVE to have more come join us. If anyone has the time or money to donate, or just wants to be a part of a community that advocates for everyone to be able to live free from myths, then please go to [www.trianglefreethought.org](http://www.trianglefreethought.org), visit us on twitter at @freethoughtsoc, or email me at [christopher@trianglefreethoughtsociety.org](mailto:christopher@trianglefreethoughtsociety.org).

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

**Smith:** Thank you for reaching out, and for advocating for our cause up in Canada. If you are ever in NC, be sure to come visit!

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

**Smith:** It was a pleasure.

## Interview with Roy Speckhardt – Executive Director, American Humanist Association (AHA)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 3, 2019

*Roy Speckhardt is the Executive Director of the American Humanist Association (AHA). Here we talk about 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?

**Roy Speckhardt:** I grew up in the suburbs of New York City in a town that was almost entirely Catholic or Jewish, and my family was the former. That said, religion didn't play a big part in my life and my family never attributed successes or failures to anything supernatural.

Since it was my great grandparents who immigrated to the US from eastern Europe, many years before I was born, that heritage didn't play much of a role in my life either. Coming from a working class background, I was the first in my family to graduate college, and then go on to get and MBA.

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

**Speckhardt:** I was a sociology major and religion minor in undergraduate school, and that education had a significant impact on my interest in challenging societal injustices, and honing my thinking on religious questions.

While I was already heading toward atheism, understanding more about ethics and the study of knowledge (epistemology) helped me become a humanist.

**Jacobsen:** As the long-term Executive Director of the American Humanist Association, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

**Speckhardt:** I enjoy the challenges of this position juggling the various needs related to long term visioning and program planning, staff supervision and organizational management, outreach and public presentation, and related tasks.

I'm glad that I've managed to fit in enough time to write the current primer on humanism (Creating Change Through Humanism) and am most of the way done with a new volume that I hope challenges our members to expand their thinking on social problems of the day—I'm titling it Justice Centered Humanism.

**Jacobsen:** What are some of the important initiatives and programs coming online in the recent past or in the near future? Why were these specific initiatives and programs founded? Or, in the latter case, why are these specific initiatives and programs going to be created in the near future?

**Speckhardt:** While we have a natural survival oriented focus on church-state separation, humanism addresses nearly every issue under the sun and beyond, so there's never a shortage of potential projects or reasons to engage in them. Project ideas arise from leadership, staff, and supporters and if funding can be secured we often go forward with several at once.

Within just the next month we'll be 1) arguing a cross case before the US Supreme Court, planning public events around it to use it as an opportunity to educate the general public on the need for government to stay out of the religion business, 2) putting finishing touches on a national advertising campaign to raise awareness and activism around climate change, 3) planning a distributed conference to take place in June in 5 cities and online, 4) launching a book addressing the misuse of religious exemptions, 4) holding a master class for humanist movement leadership addressing ways to combat racism, 5) Awarding a prominent university for it's openness to humanism, and 6) continuing our regular operations supporting hundreds of local groups, publishing multiple periodicals, and the like.

**Jacobsen: What have been the important social and communal activities of the American Humanist Association within its history?**

**Speckhardt:** Though much can be said on the social/communal side for our many local chapters and affiliates, the national organization focuses more on advocacy, so, besides networking and lobbying, the social is emphasized only annually at our conference and this year will be our 78th annual.

**Jacobsen: In terms of activism, in legal and sociocultural contexts, what have been the important victories and honest failures of the American Humanist Association? How can others build on those successes? How can they learn from the failures?**

**Speckhardt:** Our legal department holds a remarkable 90%-win rate, with no precedent setting failure to date.

Historically our organization and its leadership secured conscientious objector status for nontheists, kept government sponsored religion out of schools, and opened the door for humanists and other nontheists to obtain the same benefits reserved for the religious.

There are a number of areas we haven't succeeded yet, but failure is only a result of trying something and stopping, which I can't think of any good examples of. Examples of areas we're still actively pursuing include obtaining humanist chaplains in the military, removing "under God" from the national Pledge of Allegiance, passing an Equal Rights Amendment, and reforming our racially biased justice system.

**Jacobsen: Who have been integral humanist men and women within the American humanist tradition? What are important speeches or writings – articles or books – by them?**

**Speckhardt:** There are too many to fairly answer this question in part because humanism isn't an authoritarian or hierarchical tradition. We don't venerate a founder or take direction from any particular leaders, and never have.

So that's opened the door to a myriad of contributors who were directly involved with the American Humanist Association's work. Beginning with those like Albert Einstein and Margaret Sanger, thought leaders such were drawn from psychologists (including Maslow, Rogers, and Fromm), feminists (including Friedan, Ehrenreich and Steinem), scientists (including Sakharov, Sagan, and Weinberg), authors (including Asimov, Atwood, and Vonnegut) and many more.

We aren't dogmatic and require no litmus test to be a humanist, but the closest thing we have to a source document is Humanism and its Aspirations which you can find at: <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto3/>

**Jacobsen: In terms of 2019 and also a tad into the 2020s, what will be the important areas of activism for the humanist and other secular-oriented communities to become involved in and coordinate their efforts towards, as targeted objectives?**

**Speckhardt:** Nontheists are rapidly growing in number and acceptance, with over 50 elected officials openly nontheist and nearly a quarter of the population leaving religion behind. In the coming years the gains we'd been striving for regarding equal representation and secular government will be achieved.

And always looking forward, humanism will turn its focus toward more societal challenges in order to utilize our sound, reason based, compassionate approach, to make this society and the world we live in a better place. So you can expect an increasingly diverse humanism addressing a wider swath of issues, locally, nationally, and internationally.

**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?**

**Speckhardt:** Donations are key to our success and folks can find various ways to give at <https://americanhumanist.org/ways-to-give/> Folks can find local communities to engage in at <https://americanhumanist.org/get-involved/find-or-start-a-chapter/>.

People can read and contribute material to our various publications found at <https://americanhumanist.org/what-we-do/publications/> And our activism can be followed on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/americanhumanist/> and Twitter: <https://twitter.com/americanhumanist>

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

**Speckhardt:** Interesting and atypical depth of inquiry, it's refreshing.

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

**Speckhardt:** Thank you Scott!

# Ask Mandisa 17 – Care for Oneself to Care for Others

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 3, 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 caring for oneself as much as they care for others, in order to better care for others.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How do you manage self-care?**

**Mandisa Thomas:** It seems to be a trendy term now. But I will go to the gym and workout whenever I can. I will also eat ice cream [Laughing], and get my nails done.

Because I have to deal with a lot of things. I make sure that I keep up my sense of style. I got to the spa whenever I can. I will also have breakfast, lunch, or dinner by myself. That is part of my self-care routine.

Those are the things that keep me in line If I am having a rough day or a rough patch. I try to set some boundaries. I have a problem with answering so may things right away.

I try to curb that habit to keep my piece of mind. It helps a lot.

**Jacobsen: If you were helping a mid-level manager or a high-level person, what would be the different levels of self-care recommendations?**

**Thomas:** I would recommend people know what their limits are and to ask for help. I would make sure that they are doing what is within their capabilities.

If they recognize that there are problematic people, then they are empowered to say, “No.” No is a complete sentence. You don’t have to accommodate everyone. We are a welcoming organization, but we are all not licensed professionals. There is a limit to what we can do. And that’s okay.

**Jacobsen: When is self-care too much care?**

**Thomas:** Self-care becomes too much care when you become disconnected from the process. If you aren’t checking up on things regularly, if you are not responding in a certain time frame, or if you find yourself in something too distracting from all the problems in your life, then that becomes too much.

Even though we should take time to rest and relax, this is still something that we stepped up to do, and we are responsible for it. When you find yourself becoming too disengaged, then that is a problem.

**Jacobsen: What are some recommendations for boundary setting, you can engage in the self-care?**

**Thomas:** I give myself a 24-48-hour window of response time. That way, I stay on track. Also, for those of us who manage online spaces, we tend to have guidelines. For example, on Facebook, we are not a place to be harassing and discouraging, and violators can be ejected at our discretion.

We make this clear from the onset. We also send reminders to our members to read up on our policies.

Because, unfortunately, it is the nature of people to not review things carefully. We go by that. We set the boundaries. And if we find people aren't following them, then we will manage them right out of the door.

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

## Interview with Zenaido Quintana – Chair & Acting Executive Director, Secular Coalition for Arizona & Secular Communities for Arizona

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 4, 2019

*Zenaido Quintana is the Chair and Acting Executive Director of the Secular Coalition for Arizona & Secular Communities for Arizona. 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?

**Zenaido Quintana:** Born in Phoenix, Arizona to working class, Catholic Mexican immigrant parents.

Spanish was my first language but all my formal education was in English, I was fortunate to have outstanding public education teachers throughout primary grades and a couple of great ones in high school.

Raised in home that observed Catholic rituals and traditions with a devout mother and observant but not particularly devout father. Had one brother and five sisters, family was loving and close with normal strains of economic limitations.

I was first member of my family to go to university, educated as a Chemical Engineer. Never a believe, even in my youth.

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

**Quintana:** Chemical Engineering BS. Voracious reader, loved classical literature and history, continuing student of Greek philosophy kindled in college.

**Jacobsen:** As the Chair and Acting Executive Director of the Secular Coalition for Arizona and of the Secular Communities for Arizona, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

**Quintana:** Secular Coalition for Arizona was founded in 2011 with a goal of lobbying the Arizona legislature for secular public policies, at first we tried to do it as part-time amateurs to little effect so we decided to professionalize our lobbying.

That means we had to find donors, hire an experienced lobbyist, and marshal support from organizations that support secular government. The non-theistic organizations joined us so that we could truthfully say we represented thousands of active constituents.

Our leadership team is responsible for all the compliance, governance and programmatic issues that arise from managing American 501(C) 3 (educational with tax deductible donations) and 501(c)4 (lobbying without tax benefits) non-profit companies.

**Jacobsen:** What seems like the positives and the negatives of religion to you?

**Quintana:** Primary positives are that at their best they can organize for humanitarian and charitable causes, at the personal level faith can provide inspiration and comfort in adversity.



Chief negatives are erroneous teachings, rampant corruption, abuses covered by a false mantle of moral authority, and willfully ignorant opposition to scientific progress.

**Jacobsen: In terms of the ways in which the secular organizations have been opposed in Arizona, socially and legally, how have they been opposed? Who has opposed them? What has been effective means by which to combat them?**

**Quintana:** Organized religion, particularly evangelical Christians have always used scripture to justify discrimination and oppression.

Evangelical lobbying groups such as Center for Arizona Policy and Alliance Defending Freedom have been very effective in co-opting politicians to legislate laws that provide preferences for Christian believers.

In the beginning Secular Coalition for Arizona was painted as a bunch of angry gays and atheists, we have refused to be marginalized by embracing all secular government supporters, of any belief system.

We have instead painted the opposition as religious extremists who are anti-Constitutional. We have had speakers, including clergy, from many Christian and non-Christian denomination deliver secular invocations, in lieu of opening prayer at legislative sessions.

We did the first one about six years ago with outcries from many legislators, last year we did 18 including some by clergy and some that we did not even help with.

One of our best initiatives, which we started in response to our legislators initiating a second weekly “Bible studies” program, a lunch-time voluntary program presented to legislators.

Every week we hold a “Secular Studies” program where we bring in specialists on topics that our legislators should be focused on, e.g. LGBTQ and Women’s reproductive rights, improving public education, combating poverty and homelessness, etc.

After a short presentation we facilitate discussions among the legislators. This is a unique program that is applauded by all legislators that attend it.

**Jacobsen: As we move into 2019, what are some of the important ways in which to work with other secular organizations for the advancement of social and legal conditions more conducive towards secularism in the United States?**

**Quintana:** At the local level Secular Coalition for Arizona does an effective job of lobbying in behalf of all our constituent organizations, which include local Chapters of most of the National Secular and non-theistic organizations.

They are all either unincorporated meet-up groups or educational 501(c)3 groups. I believe Secular Coalition for Arizona remains the only state level Secular lobbying organization with a professional lobbyist.

We now have several openly non-theistic legislators and are focused on flipping one of the state houses so that we can be more effective in introducing legislation that reverses some of the many years of gains by the religious right.

**Jacobsen: What are some of the more important social and community activities of the secular in Arizona? Can you also recommend any secular authors for those more interested in more than a lay understanding of secularism?**

**Quintana:** Secular Coalition for Arizona sponsors several events to which we invite all individuals and groups that support Secular public policies, as a former President and ongoing Board member of ACLU of Arizona, I always include the Arizona ACLU affiliate in all our events.

They have rightly increased in influence due to their aggressive legal actions against the Constitutional transgressions of our new administration.

Our major events are our Secular Day at the Capitol where we arrange presentations on secular topics and visits with legislators for our constituents. At the end of each legislative session we hold Happy Hours to honor our “Secular Stars”, legislators that went above and beyond the call of duty to aid our causes.

We have held these events for the last four years and have gone from two or three honorees to eight last year. Just before the start of the legislative session we hold a Secular Summit” to bring in the leadership from our constituent organizations to analyze and prioritize the issues arising in the coming legislative session.

In the last year Secular Communities for Arizona has helped several of our constituent organizations organize memorials, tribute dinners and other fundraising events and we are currently leading the restart of the local chapters for two National organizations that went dormant due to the death of one of our local secular leaders.

**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?

**Quintana:** We welcome everyone to attend our events, people who want to commit significant time to making a difference in pursuit of secular public policies should contact me about joining our Board or one of our committees. The current National situation has made it difficult for local groups like ours to raise funds.

Donations to Secular Coalition for Arizona (non-tax deductible) and Secular Communities for Arizona (tax deductible) can be made by sending checks to Secular AZ, P.O. Box 19258, Phoenix, AZ 85005. Or on our website: [www.Secularaz.org](http://www.Secularaz.org) Other information may be requested via email at: [info@secularaz.org](mailto:info@secularaz.org)

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

**Quintana:** Our current administration has cynically embraced the agenda of the Evangelical Christian denominations and dog whistled approvals to white supremacists. Many of their abuses continue the long tradition of oppression of religious and non-believing minorities.

But the tide is turning and more and more of the youth of our country are seeking tangible improvements in their lives and in this world. We are pleased to play a modest part in aiding their enlightenment.

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

**Quintana:** Thank you, Scott. It was a pleasure to share our story with you and your readers.

## Interview with Jim Hudlow – President, Inland Northwest Freethought Society

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 5, 2019

*Jim Hudlow is the President of the Inland Northwest Freethought Society. Here we talk about 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?

**Jim Hudlow:** I was raised on a small farm north of Spokane, Washington in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Our family was unable to make ends meet with just the farm income so both my parents worked over the winter as well.

Growing up on the farm was very rewarding, it encouraged independence and creativity in terms of play activities and learning the importance of work (not prayer) to achieve desired outcomes.

My parents did not go to church and only sent us kids to ‘bible school’ to get some adult alone time on Sunday. When I was 8 or 9, I was disinvited from church for asking too many questions.

The Sunday school teacher was my Grandma! The preacher came over to the house and got my parents to let him take me out in his car so he could try and scare the hell into me. It was July...and 95 degrees...so it felt like Hell in that car. The preacher took an hour trying to bring me into the cult.

However, he could not sufficiently answer even the basic questions of an 8-year-old. (Why did god make hell? Why doesn't god just tell everyone exactly what he wants? Why do little kids get sick and die?) I entered the car an ambivalent agnostic and exited a sweaty little atheist and have remained so to this day.

My Dad and Brother were both atheists but never talked about it. The topic did not go over well in the community and they did not want to make waves. My Mom was not religious until the end of her life when she was slowly dying of cancer.

She was understandably afraid as she had little to do all day but contemplate her fate and turned to religion as a distraction. I, on the other hand, was always outspoken and I did not hesitate to express a contrary point of view. Stirring the pot was great fun.

However, I did not become really active in atheism until around 10 years ago when I became aware of the actual harm that can be suffered when religious dogma is inflicted on the unaware, the helpless and the unwilling. I lived in Gladstone, or for 11 years and was just minutes away from a church that did not believe in going to the doctor (though the adults would sneak off and get attention).

In their private cemetery they had babies and young children buried there at a mortality rate 26 times the national average. I was horrified and became an antitheist regarding certain harmful beliefs and activities in the name of religion, especially regarding children.

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

**Hudlow:** As far as education my Dad did not finish high school until he got his GED at age 52. My Mom graduated high school.

I have degrees in Philosophy and English...taught school for 2 years and then went to work for an airline for 25 years. I have made it a point to educate myself. I have read more books in the last 8 years than in the 60 before that. Among those books was the bible.

That was quite a slog, but you cannot talk about it if you don't know what is in it. I would recommend The Skeptic's Annotated Bible by Steve Wells. His annotations are helpful and entertaining. The bible is the King James Version.

I also read history, science (all branches) and some math related books to inform my point of view. I have read some Josh McDowell, Steven Prothero and so on as a good skeptic should consider all sides of an issue.

The arguments supporting religious dogma of any stripe get tedious pretty quickly as they all require belief without testable evidence in the end and I see no way to determine what is likely to be true using faith as a 'methodology'.

**Jacobsen:** As the President of the Inland Northwest Freethought Society, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

**Hudlow:** There are the mundane things like arranging for monthly meetings, securing a venue for that meeting, sending out notices and reminders for the meeting.

I take donations and do the banking for the group. I try and pull together any suggestions for speakers or activities that we might enjoy as well. I send in a yearly report to FFRF on our activities, current FFRF membership and give an accounting of donations and how we spend our money.

While I often speak for the organization, I always ask the opinion of other long-term members what they think should be emphasized or discussed. Being President is more of a figure head for several contributing members. We have been interviewed on the radio and briefly a couple times on TV.

**Jacobsen:** For the locals of Inland Northwesterners, what are the concerns for the freethought community there?

**Hudlow:** When you have a group where the only common thread is a lack of belief in any deities that means in many other areas our individual members have widely varying points of view. Some are liberal.

Some are conservative. Some are pro choice and some pro life. Some have various thoughts on climate change and the validity the current evidence on either side. So, with this in mind finding common ground on what we want to participate in can be a lot of work.

Right now, my main concern is effecting a change in leadership. We need to transition to younger leadership more in tune with the younger generation that is leaving organized religion in droves.

The trouble with atheists is they tend not to be 'joiners' and are hard to organize...like herding cats as folks say. So, I would say my biggest concern is insuring the group continues to flourish by finding enthusiastic younger leadership.

Other than that, I want to make sure our group provides a safe haven for atheists and agnostics who are isolated and looking for likeminded people to talk to and gain confidence from.

**Jacobsen: What are some of the salient social and communal activities of the Inland Northwest Freethought Society?**

**Hudlow:** Over the years our group has gone on camping trips and day trips to various natural areas to have lunch and explore. I am a birder and it is fun to imagine the dinosaur in each little bird I see.

We have taken trips to other cities to get together with other secular groups such as The Missoula Secular Society to exchange ideas and just have fun. We do the occasional picnic in the park as well.

We do what we can to support getting people out to vote by signing new voters up. When there is a day long 'fair' in some part of town we will set up a booth so folks can come and talk with an atheist.

These 'fairs' always have a heavy religious presence we need to counter. It also makes people realize the secular voice is growing louder and stronger and it is socially acceptable to add your voice to our ranks. Our meetings are open to anyone who is curious.

**Jacobsen: Why was this particular freethought society originally formulated? What are some important ways in which the Inland Northwest Freethought Society has provided a safe haven for the freethinkers of the area?**

**Hudlow:** This group was formulated in 1992 by folks that wanted to make the secular point of view more widely known and to provide a safe place to identify yourself and discuss issues that were hard to talk about with religious family and friends.

One of the original leaders was Ray Ideus, a preacher for decades that became an atheist later in life. Ray was very involved with The Clergy Project which allowed priests who had become atheists and could not continue to lie to their congregations just for a paycheck.

Ray has since passed and replacing him has been hard though we have had some good people carrying on his legacy. Ray is the person who began our fair booth activity as well.

**Jacobsen: Have there been any relevant and important freethought activist efforts of the Inland Northwest Freethought Society? If so, what? Why were those the specifically targeted objectives?**

**Hudlow:** Over the years we have tried to grow awareness of the atheist and agnostic presence in the Pacific Northwest.

We had billboards for a couple of months showing our members and their families with one-line statements like "Good without God" or "I believe in Good!". We have also run some similar large bus picture ads promoting our organization and the absolute separation of church and state.

We also had booths at both the Spokane Interstate and Idaho county fairs for an 8-year stretch. We displayed our colorful 4 foot by 8-foot banner that says "Atheism: A personal relationship with reality" (pic attached) which gets a lot of attention.

At the booth we had 3 goals: 1. Promote our secular groups in the Spokane and North Idaho area  
2. Promote absolute separation of church and state and explain how that benefits the religious and secular alike 3.

Let people come up and talk to an actual atheist and ask them questions. However, we would not debate their dogma with them nor would we be drawn in by typical religious questions like “what happens when you die?”

We would just explain to them that some things are unknown at this time, but we are continuing to investigate. However, we will not jump to supernatural conclusions just to arrive at a quick “answer” as religion often does.

Also, I will mention one member of our group whose name is James Downard. He has studied creationism and the creationist culture extensively over the years.

He wrote a great book dealing with every major creationist author and every creationist claim under the sun. His book is titled Evolution Slam Dunk and is a very elucidating and enjoyable read...except for creationists!

Jim also has a web site <http://www.tortucan.com> where he addresses many of the creationist’s claims. James also has a YouTube channel where he does live chats on all kinds of creationist topics. (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRdnABwU9uUJw1k40LGYcQA>)

**Jacobsen: What are the current goals and activism for 2019? Also, who have been important allies in the work to advance freethought values within your locale?**

**Hudlow:** Our current goals are to keep finding new ways to put our atheist voice out into the public domain. We will keep having booths at the day fairs around Spokane, marching in science and secular related marches, participating in voter drives, celebrating Darwin Day with a booth and taking advantage of volunteer opportunities as we find them.

We work with or coordinate with several groups. Most important is the Freedom From Religion Foundation which has helped us fund some of our more expensive endeavors.

Regional groups we interact with are The North Idaho Secular Society, Spokane Secular Society, Eastern Wash. Univ. Atheists and Humanists of the Palouse (who have a great Darwin Day festival with excellent speakers with archives on the web).

In March Dan Barker (co President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation) will speak to our group at that month’s meeting. That will be a great way to start off the Spring!

**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?**

**Hudlow:** People can go to our web site [www.infreethought.org](http://www.infreethought.org) and email us for dates and times of meetings or ask us other questions.

The Inland Northwest Freethought Society and North Idaho Secular Society both have Face Book pages people can join. They are private so you need to ask permission, but that process is easy. Our meetings and such are posted there as well.

Also, some good conversations and posts are available there as well. Donations to our group (INFS only) are tax deductible. We can accept donations at meetings of course or through the mail. For mailing options or other questions please contact us at [info@infreethought.org](mailto:info@infreethought.org).

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

**Hudlow:** In writing this I can tell you it is not easy finding effective ways of communicating our secular point of view to those outside our 'bubble'. I hope what I have said has been at least a little informative for those who follow the secular path.

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

**Hudlow:** You are certainly welcome Scott. I hope this provided info you can use.

## Ask Gretta 5 – Upon This Rock: A Shared Future With Those Still Comforted By Their Religious Beliefs

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 5, 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 a shared future of the religious and the non-religious.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** The agnostics, atheists, brights, freethinkers, humanists, rationalists, skeptics, and the like should come together in a unified coalition with the ordinary religious believers where the supernatural beliefs tend to remain rather benign, motivate unobtrusive and even positive affect and behavior in communities, and remain comforting – in your phraseology – to them, especially against the rising forces of authoritarian strongmen and fundamentalist religion. What might be a theological grounding for this union of forces? How might this play out in a Canadian context?

**Rev. Gretta Vosper:** Religions, because they assert obligatory ways in which individuals are to engage with one another, with god(s), or with the world around them, necessarily divide the human community. Additionally, because they prescribe those obligations for a group, religions strengthen in-group loyalties and commitments, seeing all outsiders as of secondary merit (if not dangerous) to their own adherents.

Members of a religion can find and establish seemingly instant rapport with others of the same religion even if they have never seen one another before. They simply share their religious affiliation and doors that might otherwise be closed to them, are immediately opened; the newcomer is affirmed with recognition and acceptance. In an episode of *West Wing*, the President confirms an illegal Chinese immigrant is an evangelical Christian seeking asylum because he utters the word “Shibboleth” after answering a series of questions.

In *Infidel*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali writes of the critical importance for Somalian children to memorize their genealogy back several generations. Should a child, or even a grown adult, find themselves in difficult or unfamiliar circumstances, reciting their genealogy might uncover a familial bond with someone otherwise unknown who might then provide protection or support. In some situations, knowing one's family tree could be the only difference between life and death. Religion can provide a similar security.

But that, it seems, is also religion's greatest weakness. The rigidity of its boundaries can prevent engagement across them by those of other faiths, each asserting its own truth. What might the President have done if the dissident had been fleeing for other religious reasons? The movement



toward interfaith dialogue has been a slow-moving process. In recent years, Christian-Jewish dialogue has stretched to become conversations among those of the Abrahamic faiths, though those conversations don't generally include Bahá'ís who might see themselves of the same tradition. Stretching ourselves to reach out to more geographically and linguistically distant faith traditions continue to remain limited gestures.

Difficult though it may be, interfaith dialogue often seems more feasible than engagement within a religion of its own conservative and liberal factions. The two interpretations of the same documents or practices that diverged long ago now have few shared beliefs between them. At a Rutgers University Interfaith symposium some years ago, the progressive Muslim participant refused to acknowledge Islamists even existed, stating that there could be no such thing if the Koran was read properly. Clearly, for her, Islam had nothing in its texts that could be used to incite extremism or violence. She simply disowned such positions.

Within Christianity, Liberal Christians are happy to remove themselves from what they see to be the glaring ignorance of fundamentalist Christians who, in turn, are happy to lob their own criticisms back at those they consider unworthy of the Christian moniker. Rarely do we get a fundamentalist of any religion sitting down for meaningful conversation with one of that religion's progressives. Conservatives would rather engage with fundamentalists of another religion, someone whose passions they could at least respect if not understand. Indeed, Jews for Jesus is an organization doing just that: it builds a purposeful relationship between messianic Jews and fundamentalist Christians that each party believes will benefit its own end-of-the-world agenda.

Because progressive religious beliefs often result from a critical investigation of the truth claims of one's own religion, the landing pad is often a secular one. That doesn't mean religious progressives quit their religious traditions, or the peculiarity of their festivals, or their ritualized, sacred language. But it can mean that what they consider to be the most important elements of their participation in a faith community are no longer its beliefs – if, indeed, it ever was – but is, rather, one of its “off-label benefits”. It might be that they find peace and wellbeing through the ritual and ceremony or through the rich social connections they experience. Or it might be the critical assessment of the values by which the individual is called to live in the weekly presentation at the place of worship.

Those who fall off the left edge of the pew, the rail, or the mat – and someone in the lineage of most secular people did at one point – often lose the communities that might have sustained their energies, their wellbeing, and their commitment to a set of values by which they choose to fashion their lives. Like those who continue in religious communities, they will have friends and social circles. They will go for drinks after work with colleagues. They'll chat with other parents as their kids play T-ball. They might go on an eco-vacation with a group of friends or carry boxes of clutter to their local donation centre when “tidying up”. But the chances of them running into values-laden conversations or being regularly called to account for their opinions, their lifestyle choices, or their ignorance of the world around them are significantly lower than those who sit in front of someone being paid to heckle their consciousness every single week.

Which is dangerously close to my suggesting that all religious leaders do that important work; most probably don't. But those who do challenge people to be citizens, not just people who are here to have a good time, or simply get through the day. And that call to citizenry is one I believe religion should aspire to providing. I think it might have been what Jesus was trying to do with

his radical ways and impatience, only remnants of which we have to explore. And even if it wasn't, it's what *we* should be doing: building relationships so embedded in concern for one another, for those we'll never meet (like generations yet to be born), for the fragile world upon which we spin, for the exquisite beauty of life on this planet which throbs in all our hearts. If you want to call the quest for that feeling "god", you wouldn't be alone in that. But you've no *need* to call it anything but the right thing to do.

So, bring on the secularists. Let them rub shoulders with people with progressive beliefs. Invite them to take part in humanitarian efforts. Teach them a thing or two about tolerance. Show them how to have a good, rich conversation and still get along at the end of it. Invite them to join you at their own reason rallies. Take them with you to the offices of government and have them hand the petition over to whomever is in charge of the latest travesty. Let them get in on the action. Organize them. You'll be helping them find themselves along the way.

Oh, and invite them to potlucks, of course. But tell them to bring something gluten- and nut-free and vegan, if they can, because, you know, who wants to exclude anyone, right?

**Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Rev. Vosper.**

# Interview with Michael Cluff – President, South Jersey Humanists

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 6, 2019

*Michael Cluff is the President of the South Jersey Humanists. Here we talk about 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?

**Michael Cluff:** I'm about as white-bread as you get! In a nutshell, I'm a WASPy Gen-Xer who grew up in a military household. Dad fought in Vietnam, and we moved around a lot.

(We even lived outside of Toronto for a year, so does that make me an honorary Canadian?) [Ed., close enough, just remember the Maple syrup for breakfast... If you visit, you can borrow the keys to the moose if you need to get around, too.]

Mom's family was super-educated, patrician Episcopalians, while my Dad was a farm boy who excelled as a Marine officer. My young life wasn't straight out of the Great Santini, but it was close.

Religiously speaking, we were Episcopalians who were pretty laid back about Christianity when I was little. But by the time I reached high school, we were much more devout.

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

**Cluff:** I studied Cognitive Psychology in graduate school, researching processes of spoken word recognition. I wound up leaving before I completed a Ph.D. due to health problems.

**Jacobsen:** As the President of the South Jersey Humanists, what tasks and responsibilities come along with the role?

**Cluff:** It's pretty much what you'd expect: planning and publicizing meetings and events, speaking out for Humanism wherever possible.

**Jacobsen:** What are some of the community social activities of the South Jersey Humanists?

**Cluff:** Each month we have one formal meeting and one informal gathering. In the meetings, we discuss a predetermined topic or have a speaker.

"Drinking Skeptically" is our informal gathering at a bar, where we hang out and get to know one another better.

**Jacobsen:** What are the demographics of the community there?

**Cluff:** Our group is pretty small at the moment, so it's hard to characterize. (After Trump's election we lost conservative members who balked at Humanism's liberal leanings.

And some of the more liberal members focused their energies on more politically activist organizations.) Like most Humanist and atheist groups, we have our share of middle-aged white

guys (including me). But we draw from many demographics, especially among our elected leadership.

**Jacobsen: What are important activist efforts in South Jersey now? What are some targeted objectives for activism, whether legal or social, for 2019?**

**Cluff:** Since we're in a blue state, we don't have a lot of the usual bread-and-butter atheist issues here. Not many church-state separation battles. But there's a lot of social justice work that needs to be done.

Atlantic City is severely economically depressed, so I'd like to see our group work toward economic and racial justice here. Our area is also a hub for human trafficking, and I'm hoping we can help out some of the local organizations fighting this issue.

Also, there's an inspiring local organization doing relief work for Syrian refugees.

**Jacobsen: Looking at the United States now, for the secular-oriented and the humanist community, we can see the general view of the fundamentalist religious towards the secular and the non-religious – severely negative.**

**Where does this image of the inherent badness of the non-religious in the United States stem? It seems apparent and stark from the cold place to the North – the big place crammed underneath the disappearing white place on the map.**

**Cluff:** It seems to me that Americans like to think of themselves as deeply religious, even though the average American knows very little about Christianity. Sure, there are many Americans who are deeply devout and find meaning in their religion.

But to most Americans, Christianity is like a favorite football team. You wear the team colors and cheer for your side on Sundays. To them being on Team Jesus is more of an identity than a philosophy.

You don't need to know the names of the players, just so long as you know when to wear the team colors. So to them, atheists are the weird neighbors who refuse to cheer on the hometown boys at the homecoming game.

Mixed in with that is the belief that being on Team Jesus is the only way to be a good person. Not being on Team Jesus means that at best you're being a contrarian, and at worst you're a snake in the grass.

**Jacobsen: What do you hope for 2019 for the South Jersey Humanists? Also, how have you been mentored into this role in the past?**

**Cluff:** To be honest, I've been facing serious burnout over the last couple of years, and so one of my personal goals in 2019 is to bounce back with renewed enthusiasm for Humanist activism.

For now, this means focusing on fostering our community, learning its strengths as it grows, and letting our activism emerge from those strengths.

**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?**

**Cluff:** Again, since we're small, there's plenty of opportunity for people to take initiative and to get involved. We're a caring and intelligent group of people who are eager to get out and do the right thing.

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

**Cluff:** I believe that the humanist and atheist movements need to be more grass-roots than ever before. Too many of our big names have failed in big ways. Some have been guilty of sexual misconduct, while others have exposed themselves as bigots wrapped in pseudo-intellectual self-justification.

Time to abandon hero-worship and create communities of people who do the right thing not for fame but because it's the right thing to do.

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

**Cluff:** Thank you so much, Scott, and thanks for all you do.

# Interview with Rob Boston – Editor, Church & State (Americans United for Separation of Church and State)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 7, 2019

*Rob Boston is the Editor of Church & State (Americans United for Separation of Church and State). Here we talk about 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?

**Rob Boston:** I was born and raised in Altoona, Pennsylvania, a faded railroad town in an economically depressed area of the Rust Belt. My father was a housepainter, and my mother was a housewife.

I'm the eighth of nine children. We were not well off, and I've known some lean times. Given the size of my family, life could be somewhat chaotic, but my parents (especially my mother) were warm and caring and made sure that we were provided for.

My mother was a very devout Roman Catholic and raised all of us in that faith. I attended a Catholic elementary school until eighth grade. As a child, I was fairly devout.

However, by age 16 I started to entertain doubts, and the following year I left the church. The area I grew up in is also very politically conservative. I began to break away from that sort of thinking around the same age.

I moved away from Altoona and relocated to the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., in 1986.

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

**Boston:** Despite my family's lack of means, I was able to attend college thanks to a scholarship and government assistance. I earned a bachelor's degree in journalism with a minor in political science from Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 1985.

Even though the university I attended was only 50 miles from where I was born, my time there really opened my eyes.

I got to meet people from different cultures and backgrounds, and I remember several professors who really did a great job not just instructing us in certain subjects but conveying how to think. I also had some really good English professors who introduced me to great literature.

I had always had an interest in learning, however. When I was a kid, we lived in the center city about five blocks from a public library. I spent a lot of time there.

I've always loved to read, and I believe learning is a life-long process. Since graduating from college, I've continued self-education by filling some gaps through reading. I'm a serial reader.

I finish one book and then start another. I always have something in the pipeline, and I read from a variety of fields, both fiction and non-fiction.

**Jacobsen: With Americans United for Separation of Church and State, what are some of its more important activist activities to pay attention to, as we move further into 2019?**

**Boston:** Church-state separation is pretty much under constant siege thanks to the Trump-Pence administration. One of the biggest threats we face is the attempt to redefine religious freedom and turn it into an instrument that fosters discrimination.

We've had several cases in this country where the owners of businesses are seeking a legal right to deny goods and services to members of the LGBTQ community, arguing that allowing them into their stores and shops violates their religious freedom.

This sort of thing reminds me of the Jim Crow era in American history where African Americans were denied the right to eat in certain restaurants or be served in some shops. It's discrimination, plain and simple.

At the same time, the administration is implementing rules that would allow health care providers to deny services to people as well, again on the basis of religious beliefs.

This is very dangerous, because it could put some people's lives at risk, and again, it is the LGBTQ community that will bear the brunt.

Trump has also tried, unsuccessfully so far, to change federal law so that houses of worship can intervene in partisan politics.

Allowing that kind of activity would not only make a mess of our campaign-finance laws, which are already quite weak, it would also fundamentally change the nature of houses of worship and the role they play in society.

Trump is also putting far-right extremists on the federal courts, which is a very serious problem.

**Jacobsen: As the Editor of *Church & State*, in terms of its original emphasis on the secular movements within the United States, what have been the major victories over time?**

**What have been the major failures, too? How can those successes be built upon and losses attenuated and learn from now?**

**Boston:** We've done a lot of work over the years defending the public school system from aggressive, fundamentalist religious groups that have tried to use the schools to promote their particular forms of dogma – and we've won landmark cases.

For example, we have filed legal cases to keep creationism out of public school science classes. We've reminded the nation that public schools serve a vast array of young people from many different religious beliefs as well as those who have no belief. We can only get along if the school remain neutral on matters of theology. It's important work, and I'm proud of it.

At the same time, more recently we've been working to expose the connection between church-state separation and issues like LGBTQ rights, women's rights, censorship, reproductive freedom, sound science and others. In our view, you are never truly free if the government is forcing you to live under the rules of someone else's religion.

One area where we've lost ground is the question of tax funding of religion. It used to be a given that religious groups had to rely on voluntary funds to pay for their work.

But some religious groups have been lobbying for public support for their private schools, to pay for their social service work and even to maintain and upkeep their facilities.

Unfortunately, the Supreme Court has allowed some types of this funding – mainly school vouchers. I fear the situation is only going to get worse as more and more Americans leave formal religious groups.

Houses of worship will get less money from members, and some will be tempted to turn to the state to make up the difference.

As for what lessons we have learned, it's simple: We have to teach Americans anew that religious freedom is firmly linked to church-state separation.

True religious liberty can't exist without some distance between those institutions. If you are being taxed to pay for someone else's faith, you are not truly free. If your children are being compelled to recite some other faith's prayers in a public school, you are not truly free.

If your town is festooned with the symbols of the majority religion, you are not truly free. If your basic rights are being taken away because of someone else's religion, you are not truly free. If what you can see or read is limited because of another's religion, you are not truly free.

**Jacobsen: When you're looking to accept submissions of articles, what are your general criteria for vetting the submissions? How would you recommend prospective contributors use this as a heuristic for their own submissions to *Church & State*?**

**Boston:** Most copy for *Church & State* is generated on staff by myself and Liz Hayes, the assistant editor of the magazine. We do consider outside writers for our "Viewpoint" columns.

These are opinion pieces that explore different aspects of church-state relations. What we're looking for here is a fresh perspective – maybe a new spin on an old issue or perhaps a different way of framing an emerging issue.

**Jacobsen: As a long-time activist and writer, who have been the great writers and intellectuals – well-known or not – in your time as a professional?**

**Of those writers making the case for the separation of church and state, who have, in your opinion, made the most compelling and important case for it, in the United States?**

**Boston:** Leo Pfeffer was a giant in this field. He wrote a massive work called *Church, State and Freedom* that was for many of us the standard reference on church and state for a long time.

Leo died in 1993, but his work is still consulted by many people working in this field. Robert S. Alley, a professor at the University of Richmond and a scholar on the work of James Madison, was an inspiration to me.

Bob, who died in 2006, did excellent work debunking the Religious Right's false "Christian nation" claims. Also important is the late Robert O'Neil at the University of Virginia was an expert on Thomas Jefferson and his views on church-state separation.

There have been others – I've enjoyed the work of Katherine Stewart, who has written about creeping Christian nationalism in Americans politics, and Chris Rodda has done yeoman's work debunking many of the Religious Right's claims about history.

In addition, a lot of good investigative journalists are out there every day digging into the Religious Right's goals and exposing their schemes. I'm thankful for their work.



**Jacobsen:** As a small personal question, do children change the focus in life? If so, how? Do you think this is a different shift in some ways than those who have an assertion of a hereafter in their view of the world?

**Boston:** My wife and I have two children who are now young adults (ages 24 and 21). Yes, children definitely change your focus in life. On a practical level, parents are compelled to put some aspects of their own lives on hold for a bit and transfer their time and energy to raising children.

Speaking just personally, I found that parenting forced me to think more deeply about moral education and, more importantly, how to impart moral instruction. I always knew where I stood, but I hadn't thought much about how to raise good, decent and caring children – until I had to do it.

Traditional Christian morality holds that if you are good, you will go to heaven when you die, but if you are bad, you'll go to hell. Thus, the idea is that you should be good to receive a reward.

I think this is a simplistic version of ethics. We are called to be good and decent for its own sake, because it is the right thing to do – not just because we want a reward. Getting that point across to children is to me the key to their moral development.

**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?

**Boston:** People who are interested in getting involved with Americans United should visit our website, [www.au.org](http://www.au.org). You can join there, get information about chapters, find links to our social media sites, make donations and read updates on the latest news concerning church-state separation.

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

**Boston:** I would just like to add that Americans United has always been an organization composed of religious believers and non-believers. I think this partnership has been key to our success.

While our members may not agree on theology, they are united in the belief that only separation of church and state can protect our precious freedom of conscience.

The whole point is that we don't all have to agree on religion, but we must respect one another's rights and not seek to use the power of the government to force anyone to live under the religious views of another.

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

**Boston:** Thank you.

## Ask Herb 3 – Founding the Grounding, Keeping on Pounding

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 7, 2019

*Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition of America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. Here we talk about activism, safety, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What is the fundamental risk to normal livelihood for those who enter into a full life of activism through the founding of organizations devoted to church and state separation, or, in other countries, mosque and government division?

**Herb Silverman:** It's a good question to think about before committing to a full life of activism, especially if you commit to what many view as an unpopular cause. I can mostly describe my own experiences along with what went right and what went wrong.

I expect my situation was less risky than for most, with little or no financial or personal safety concerns. When I began my secular activism, I was teaching at a public institution that prides itself in having academic freedom.

I ran for Governor of South Carolina in 1990 to challenge the state constitution prohibition against atheists holding public office.

Whenever I received publicity, I heard from people who thought they were the only atheists in South Carolina. I took their names and with them founded the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (SHL) based in Charleston.

I became its president, newsletter editor, and wrote almost all the articles. In calling for others to take a more active role, I even wrote an editorial titled "Stop the Dictator!"

I encouraged new ideas, but looking back I wasn't very supportive; I'd often respond with reasons why the new ideas would not work. Sometimes I'd ask whoever came up with an idea to develop it on his or her own, without any guidance or assistance.

Nevertheless, others gradually began assuming leadership positions. Since I was becoming engaged with national organizations and had a full-time job as a math professor, I was devoting less time to SHL.

So I worried about doing a half-assed job, but was reluctant to leave the position for fear that the organization I built would fall apart.

This is known as "Founder's Syndrome." One of the biggest mistakes leaders can make is to believe they are irreplaceable. I've seen many good leaders, whether in atheist or other organizations, outstay a welcome.

For an organization to flourish, I think a high priority for a leader is to make him or herself replaceable. Atheists, above all, should recognize that organizations must not give too much power to any one individual.

We have no "dear leaders" who communicate to us through a supernatural being. We pride ourselves on being independent, and we recognize the fallibility of all.

I left the presidency of SHL after 15 years, and it turned out to be beneficial to both SHL and to me. Not to sound too much like a vampire, but new blood is good.

My first national board involvement was with the American Humanist Association, where I (with considerable leadership objection) proposed that the AHA and other national organizations begin to cooperate in coalition. This eventually led to the Secular Coalition for America.

I left the AHA board after many years when they mostly began to agree with my positions and I was no longer pissing people off, at least not in significant ways. It was not as much fun as in my early years and I had become the oldest board member. It was past time for me to go.

As founding president of the Secular Coalition for America, I looked for and encouraged active participants and talented replacements. I'm still on the SCA board, not as president, and it's a good feeling to know that were I to get hit by a bus tomorrow, the Secular Coalition would continue to thrive.

Now one hazard of having a devotion to a cause is that it might get you labeled a "zealot." If you resent being called the "Z" word, I don't blame you. The word has a sordid past because of the damage done by "religious zealots."

I did not like, nor did I accept, the media-invented pejorative "atheist fundamentalist" because there is no atheist equivalent to religious belief in biblical inerrancy. But "zealot" is more flexible. While zealots are often described as fanatics or extremists, it's not easy to come up with objective criteria for such terms.

What passes as extremism in some circles is viewed as moderate or mainstream in others. An accusation of "excessive" devotion to a cause says as much about the accuser as the accused.

Here's the good and the bad news about zealotry. Zealots are the ones most likely to make a significant difference by achieving their goals and changing the world. Richard Dawkins and Osama Bin Laden are both known as zealots, and they are greatly admired (though never by the same people).

While I've talked about leaders with too much power, there's the opposite danger of members in an organization who do nothing but complain about their leaders. We need to be careful about whether our criticism is constructive or destructive.

Some good leaders have left organizations because of too much micro managing. I have no magic bullet about how organizations should best be managed. It's easier, though, if power is divided among competent people and if everyone has a sense of humor.

It also helps if members are working for the same goals, and if they genuinely like one another. And that brings me to one of the most important insights of all: People are more likely to stay active in an organization if they are having fun. And eating together. Let's drink to that.

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

# Interview with René Hartmann – Chairman, Internationaler Bund der Konfessionslosen und Atheisten

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 8, 2019

*René Hartmann is the Chairman, Internationaler Bund der Konfessionslosen und Atheisten. Here we talk about 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?

**René Hartmann:** I live in the area of Frankfurt, Germany. I was brought up in a Lutheran family, although my parents were not very religious. Going to church was not important for them, but the Lutheran confession was nonetheless part of their identity.

I gradually became very skeptic of Christian religion and religions in general. I came to the conclusion in Germany religion is financed and promoted by the state to an extent that cannot be justified.

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

**Hartmann:** I have a university degree in Informatics, and I am interested in natural sciences, but also in history, politics etc.

I used to read books about these topics (which I still do to some degree), and, of course, I use the internet to expand my knowledge. In my view, it is important to have a solid foundation in order not to fall for pseudo-science.

**Jacobsen:** What is death with dignity? How does this phrasing differ but also relate to the right to die, euthanasia, and medical assistance in dying?

**Hartmann:** The primary thing is self-determination. With respect to dying this means that one has to right decide when to die. The well-considered decision for one's own death has to be respected. This also applies if someone needs the help of another person for her/his own death.

**Jacobsen:** As the Chairman of the Internationaler Bund der Konfessionslosen und Atheisten, what tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

**Hartmann:** As chairman and member of the executive committee I oversee the activities of IBKA. My responsibilities are media and international contacts. I am also the newsletter editor and in charge of the website and social media.

**Jacobsen:** What are the core goals of Internationaler Bund der Konfessionslosen und Atheisten? How are these going to be articulated and worked on in 2019?

**Hartmann:** Our primary goal is to promote Human Rights, in particular, the freedom of thought and religion and the separation of church and state. We advocate for individual self-determination, promote rational thinking and inform about the social role of religion.

Our activities include media (press releases as well as online media), but also political lobbying and events.

**Jacobsen: Most movements and organization work in spite of counter-movements and counter-organizations. Who tends to be opposed to the existence and operations of Internationaler Bund der Konfessionslosen und Atheisten?**

**Hartmann:** In Germany, the churches enjoy many privileges. If you dare to say that these privileges are not justified, that makes you an outsider.

The problem is not so much certain organizations or movements that are against us (although these surely exist) but the fact that there is a lot of ignorance regarding church-state separation and related issues.

**Jacobsen: In the title of atheist, this seems more straightforward. Non-religious tends to have a more nuanced interpretation depending on the context.**

**What is the definition of non-religious for Internationaler Bund der Konfessionslosen und Atheisten? How does this impact its scope of operations?**

**Hartmann:** We accept people as members who are not member of any religious organization, so that's the central criteria for us.

However, we pursue goals many of which (like state-church separation) could also be pursued by moderately religious people. We pursue them from a non-religious standpoint.

The term atheists and atheism are not essential for us, but we don't avoid them either (as many organisations do, which prefer to call themselves humanist)

**Jacobsen: What have been some historic successes and honest failures in the work for the advancement of scientific freedom, secularism, rationalism, human rights, and euthanasia? How can other organizations learn from you?**

**Hartmann:** I would mention our conferences, from the first post-war atheist conference in Germany 1990 in Fulda, to our international conferences 2012 and 2015.

I consider it important that we focus on working for political and social change. To us, this is more important than establishing atheism as a sort of anti-religion.

Criticism of religion has its place in our organization, but it's only one of several things we are doing. I would say this approach worked well for us.

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

**Hartmann:** We are an association, so the standard way of being involved is to become a member. However, our focus is on the German-speaking countries. People who want to join and take some position are always welcome.

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

**Hartmann:** Secularism is not an easy area of work, and one can easily get frustrated about the low speed of progress. I want to encourage anyone working in this field to keep up the work as it's really important.

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

**Hartmann:** Thank you.

# Interview with Dave Helgager – President, Humanists of Sarasota Bay

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 3, 2019

**Dave Helgager is the President of the Humanists of Sarasota Bay. Here we talk about 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?**

**Dave Helgager:** I was born and reared in the midwestern town of Hurley, SD., population 400 and predominately an agricultural community. I grew up Lutheran.

My mother was very religious, but my Dad never really exhibited much spirituality though he attended church faithfully with our family. I was very active in my church and in high school served as president of the Luther League.

My mother was very much the driving force for the family and church. I worked with my father in his grocery store until I left for college. We never discussed religion or politics much.

In fact, I lived a very apolitical life. I graduated in 1963 with a BA in English and history from the Scandinavian run Augustana University, Sioux Falls, SD with a minor in education and Christianity.

I started my career teaching English and history but ultimately in 1980 when we moved to Sarasota, FL, moved into financial planning and investing, and advising.

After moving to Springfield, Il, in 1968, I began to become disillusioned with religion and all its related trappings. We asked the pastor of our Lutheran church if we could put on a discussion about feminism and were rejected.

At that point, my wife and I began to look around for a church that met our needs. We ended up in the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship of Springfield which I mark as my beginning of moving toward Humanism.

In 1973, we moved to Charleston, WV where we were active in the UU Church. There I was given a copy of the American Humanist Association's magazine and it really helped moved me even more away from Christianity and toward the tenets of the Unitarian group.

My transition to a fully Humanist lifestyle began in 1980 when we moved to Sarasota, FL. There my wife and I joined the UU Church of Sarasota, but I gradually became less interested in the UU "way" with its hymns, sermons, etc.

In early 2000, I found out about the Humanists of Sarasota Bay which was a newly formed organization founded in 1999. I left the UU Church of Sarasota when the new minister walked into the sanctuary in robes and the words like prayer began to surface.

Ultimately, my wife and I became fully involved with the Humanists of Sarasota Bay, and I served on the Board for a number of years before becoming president.

I have a brother who converted to Catholicism and a brother who is an atheist. Overall, I had a very good life in the small town and enjoyed my relatives, many who lived around me. I remember that my grandfather had very little use for church and never went.

My wife, who is a social worker, influence me tremendously in regards to social issues, though I was further “educated” thanks to the American Humanist Association.

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

**Helgager:** Earning my degree and completing some graduate work. I have always read several newspapers, magazines and kept up with current developments in Humanism.

I would say that my knowledge of Humanism is pretty much self-taught though I attend workshops in Florida and attend national conferences when I can.

**Jacobsen: As the President of the Humanists of Sarasota Bay, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?**

**Helgager:** I lead the Board who along with me develop our programs and policies. I oversee lectures during the year, including our Darwin Day Celebration.

Make sure our weekly luncheons and workshops run smoothly as well. We also have a scholarship program which I implemented a few years ago.

I give presentations as requested, write letters to the editor and serve as the face of Humanism in Sarasota. Our website, [husbay.org](http://husbay.org) is a good source of our activities. I am proud of the fact that under my leadership the organization has grown from seven to 136 in about 7 years.

**Jacobsen: If we look at the ways in which humanism slowly formed over time in Sarasota Bay, how did it get its start? How were the Humanists of Sarasota Bay?**

**Helgager:** In 1999, a group of seven Humanists developed our bylaws and established the organization. Since then it has grown to 136 members.

**Jacobsen: What are the usual and unusual topics discussed on the 4th Wednesday of each month in the Current Affairs Discussion Group?**

**Helgager:** Current politics in general. Members generate topics and a leader runs the discussion. The members pretty much address the present day issues in our country.

**Jacobsen: For those active religious fundamentalist propagandists, what do they think or assert the Founding Fathers of America stated? What did the Founding Fathers, in fact, really say in contradistinction to the aforementioned assertions?**

**Helgager:** The fundamentalists assert that we are Christian nation. In fact, our Founding Fathers strongly support separation of church and state.

**Jacobsen: What are some of the relevant and important activist efforts of the Humanists of Sarasota Bay, in the past or as we move into 2019?**

**Helgager:** Our organization is composed of retirees and probably has an average age of 80. I am considered a young member in my seventy's. As a result, we have to be creative with our activism.



Since we are very well funded, we give out a scholarship of \$2000 to a deserving Humanist/atheist college student and donate to various organizations such as the local food bank.

We have a cleanup project at one of our parks. Our members join protests in the local community and contribute time at various community organizations.

Our members are more interested in lectures, luncheon meetings and doing things that allow them to be with like minded people. A survey of our organization indicated that the reason for joining us is to meet with like minded people.

**Jacobsen: For students with a secular orientation and a humanistic set of values, how can scholarship funds become an important support for their educational endeavors?**

**How can this show goodwill and support for the next generations on the part of the humanist communities?**

**Helgager:** These students need our financial support. It's something our members can do with a minimum amount of effort. We support the Secular Student Alliance with this scholarship. They realize the older generation is with them.

**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?**

**Helgager:** Find or form a local or state Humanist organization. Join the American Humanist Association.

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

**Helgager:** I am a Humanist/atheist. I believe strongly that we need the separation of church and state in the USA and our membership is very focused on that issue.

In addition, I like to think of equal rights as the overriding goal as it does encompass everything from feminism to racism to separation of church and state.

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

**Helgager:** Happy to do it, Scott.

# Interview with Jeanne Arthur – President, Dying with Dignity ACT

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 10, 2019

*Jeanne Arthur is the President of Dying With Dignity ACT. 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?

**Jeanne Arthur:** I was born in Darwin Australia. My father was in the Australian Air Force at the time following his participation in World War II but we returned to my parents' home city of Adelaide when I was three.

I grew up in a nuclear family with two brothers and a sister. My parents maintained a fairly close relationship with their mothers and siblings so I knew my aunts and uncles and some cousins.

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

**Arthur:** I attended a local public primary school and a privately run Presbyterian Secondary school. I then attended Flinders University from which I graduated with an Honours degree in Drama. When my son was born I moved to Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and have lived here ever since. I have recently discovered from investigating my DNA that I am by heritage 69.5 percent English, 17.8 percent Scandinavian, 11 percent Irish, Scottish and Welsh and 1.7 percent West Asian so a DNA mix like most people. On my father's side we were first settlers in Adelaide coming from Cornwall, Wales and south eastern England in 1837. The family on my mother's side arrived in Adelaide in the 1920s.

I grew up going occasionally to Sunday school and attended a religious secondary school so I gained a smattering of knowledge about Christianity. However, once I began working I basically forgot about religion because I was too busy to include it in my life.

The turning point in my views about religion came when I retired. I began reading and educating myself in science and I became a member of the Atheist Foundation of Australia. From that time on I became increasingly concerned about the damage religious views are doing both to individuals and also to the planet. Many religious views are stupidly cruel and intolerant and have been responsible for the persecution of groups who hold religious views different from the main cultural group. This is contributing to the world wide movement of people away from their countries of origin. Religions also persecute individuals whose behaviour does not fit in with religious doctrine about how sexual relationships should be conducted, who should have sex with whom and the management of fertility. Religious dogma that insists that reproduction should not be controlled or managed is also responsible for the overpopulation and poverty of many countries. This of course is having a direct impact on climate change. Religious doctrine and laws that governments enact are often consistent or mutually supportive. This has been the case for many centuries in relation to sex roles, sexual relationships, war, fertility and the provision of assistance to die.

**Jacobsen: As the President of Dying with Dignity ACT, what are some of the more important parts of the job? What are some of the pluses and minuses of the associated tasks and responsibilities coming with the position?**

**Arthur:** The most important part of the job is to provide a human face for the organization i.e. to represent a group of people who hold an unpopular view or one that people want to avoid thinking about. Death is not something most people think about until they reach a certain age or become unwell. Because the current law or some version of it has been in place for thousands of years it is accepted as 'natural' by most people. It has become generally accepted that we must keep on living until we die of disease. If we want to die before that most people assume that hanging, gassing or shooting oneself is the way ending one's life has to occur. People don't realize that the reason for the way we die is law devised by people who hold beliefs that they wish to maintain. They do this in democratic countries by getting themselves into positions of power in parliaments in sufficient numbers to ensure that these beliefs will be maintained. Thinking about this issue and challenging this thinking (especially its deceptive appearance of 'naturalness') is the most important part of the job.

In fact, the way we die now is completely consistent with the overall cruelty of religious doctrine. The idea that only God can take a life is euphemistic mythology for the acceptance of suffering that the religious view of life is all about. Dying of disease is thought to be part of that suffering that we must all endure. Law that criminalizes anyone who assists someone to die is a clever way of maintaining religious views that perpetuate the idea that life is all about suffering and that those who end their own lives are self murderers who should be punished for their actions. Forcing them to have no other option but to die cruel deaths and punish themselves in order to end their lives is consistent with this view. It has nothing to do with so-called 'suicide prevention'. That is just what religious hypocrites want us to believe.

The minus associated with the job is that change is so slow. On the other hand, the years it has taken to argue for change have given me a lot of time to think about the issue and deepened my understanding, for example, of the relationship between religion, religious people in political parties and the maintenance of the current law which I was completely naïve about when I began my involvement with this movement.

**Jacobsen: Now, to the main topic, what is elective death? How is this change in terminology important for properly framing the subject?**

**Arthur:** Dying with Dignity ACT was set up to reform the law. Section 16 of the ACT Crimes Act states that: *The rule of law that it is an offence to commit, or to attempt to commit, suicide is abolished.*

The consequence of this law is that ending one's own life is a lawful act. However, the word 'suicide' means self-murder. To continue to call ending one's own life 'suicide' is to describe the act wrongly from the point of view of 1) the law and 2) the correct attribution of the meaning of the word to a now lawful act.

The continued use of the word demeans those people who lawfully choose to end their own lives. It puts them in the position of having to keep their feelings secret and to undertake a lawful act in a violent, underhand way.

It also seems to give governments an excuse for not making proper provision for those people who inevitably will want to end their lives before disease comes along to end it for them. In my

view governments have shirked their duty to this group of people in a shameful manner that is a clear abuse of their human rights. I describe them as a group of people because statistics have been collected for a long time in every country that identify that some people everywhere across the world will choose to end their lives rather than wait for disease to do it. Just because they don't act together to stand up for their own interests does not mean that this is not a group. Governments seem to have assumed that once it was made legal they could wash their hands of genuine care for those who want to end their lives. So-called 'suicide prevention' strategies that governments like to fund have been put in place by citizen organizations but they clearly do not work. The statistics all over the world show this.

I have therefore proposed that the act of ending one's own life should be called an 'elective death'. This would recognize the act as the lawful choice it is that requires governments to provide facilities to support people making the choice of an elective death.

In Dying with Dignity ACT's model for an elective death there would be two groups who would access Elective Death Units which would be attached to hospitals. One group would be those who were already dying who had discussed their prognosis with a doctor. The doctor would on request give them a referral to the Elective Death Unit. The other group would be those with no illness who do not want to continue to live. Both groups could access counselling through the Elective Death Unit but those who are not ill would be required to access it. However, both would have a peaceful death available to them without judgement if that is what they decide. Please see the attachment that describes the Elective Death proposal more fully.

**Jacobsen: How does Dying with Dignity ACT work to improve secular access to right to die technologies, methodologies, and, indeed, rights?**

**Arthur:** The most important thing regarding the matter of secular access to right to die technologies is for us all to acknowledge how religious and long held cultural beliefs affect the way death is dealt with in our societies. Religious and cultural beliefs that death must occur as a result of disease because that is what God or other cultural beliefs want is useful to all governments. It helps to maintain control over people as individuals and perpetuates the belief that we belong to governments whose laws we should respect whether they are good or not.

In democratic countries infiltration and control of political parties by people who hold these beliefs, whether they are religious or not, is what prevents change in the laws about how we die. Right to die technologies, methodologies and our rights will not change or be developed properly until we find a way to effectively counter those who are blocking the change to these laws.

**Jacobsen: For those unsure as to the rights status of someone who wants euthanasia or medical assistance in dying, what human rights link to euthanasia safe and equitable access? How is the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* important for this?**

**Arthur:** The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is fundamental to my understanding of the status of our right to die. The ACT has a Human Rights Act based on the UN Human Rights Declarations which I read and compared with its Crimes Act. The human rights that are inconsistent with the Crimes Act law are as follows.

Section 8 Recognition before the law

Everyone has the right to enjoy his or her human rights without distinction or discrimination of any kind.

Human Right: Everyone has the right not to have his reputation unlawfully attacked.

Human Right: Protection from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment

1 b) No-one may be treated or punished in a cruel, inhuman or degrading way.

Human Right: Right to Liberty and Security of person; 1) Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person.

Human Right: Every person has the right to life and has the right not to be arbitrarily deprived of life.

Human Right: Human rights may be limited

1. Human rights may be subject only to reasonable limits set by territory laws that can be demonstratively justified in a free and democratic society.

ACT Human Rights Act; Application of human rights to Territory laws

Section 30 Interpretation of laws and human rights

So far as it is possible to do so consistently with its purpose, a Territory law must be interpreted in a way that is compatible with human rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Human Right: Every person has the right not to be arbitrarily deprived of their property.

This last right may be seen as requiring further explanation. Section 17 (1) of the Crimes Act arbitrarily deprives people of their right to their most precious property, their bodies. They cannot dispose of their property (their bodies) as they see fit due to the exclusion by law of methods of death other than disease. Due to being required to die by disease they lose the ability to manage and dispose of their bodies themselves. Their bodies then become the property of others due to illness that is the inevitable consequence of the law.

**Jacobsen: How does an elective idea relate to the notion of a peaceful death, regardless of age, and the right to make, arguably, the most important decision will one make in their life – when and how to die?**

**Arthur:** An elective death respects the right of individuals to make their own choices about when they die and gives them the right to die peacefully. No-one asks to be born but we are expected to act as responsible adults once we leave childhood except when it comes to our deaths which are surrounded by myths about suffering, our bodies belonging to God and criminality.

Deciding whether we want to continue to live is a decision for responsible adults to make. I have no doubt that because we are all basically animals programmed to survive most people will not make this choice until they see that it is the one that is correct for them. I am absolutely certain that giving people the freedom to make this choice for themselves will not lead to a breakout of mass deaths. Those who are religious will not make the choice unless they are part of some cult but those who are not religious will be free to exercise the last right human beings currently do not have. And they will do it responsibly taking all the facts and circumstances of their lives into account in the same way as they have done everything else in their lives.

**Jacobsen: How will the repealing of sections 17 and 18 of *The Crimes Act 1900* help advance the legislative and regulatory reform necessary here?**

**Arthur:** Sections 17 and 18 of *The Crimes Act 1900* are as follows:

Suicide – aiding etc

1. A person who aids or abets the suicide or attempted suicide of another person is guilty of an offence punishable, on conviction, by imprisonment for 10 years.

Section 18 Prevention of Suicide

It is lawful for a person to use the force that is reasonable to prevent the suicide of another person or any act that the person believes on reasonable grounds would, if committed, result in the suicide of another person.

No-one asks to be born. Human life is imposed on us by our parents. While it is right to expect that we should not be arbitrarily deprived of life by other human beings, given that it is not a crime to end one's life, neither should we be forced to arbitrarily live until we die of disease as we are forced to do as a consequence of the current laws S17 & S18 that have been made by human beings, not God.

Once the ACT Legislative Assembly considers the true implications of Section 16 of the Crimes Act 1900 it must see how inadequate Sections 17 and 18 are as responses to people's desire to end their own lives however that desire comes about. Penalizing someone who assists someone to die and encouraging people to use force to prevent someone from dying are completely unsatisfactory legal responses to a complex human reaction to life. This law was intended to prevent people who were well from dying early but it also covers people who are dying of a disease so it is poorly constructed law. Another reason it should be repealed is the poor use of terminology that I have already mentioned. Repeal will force politicians to construct better law that actually meets people's needs rather than being law based on ideology.

**Jacobsen: Why should the federal government repeal the 1997 Euthanasia Laws Act?**

**Arthur:** The 1997 Euthanasia Laws Act is embedded in the ACT Self Government Act.

*Australian Capital Territory (Self Government) Act 1988*

Part IV Powers of the Legislative Assembly

Section 23 Matters excluded from power to make laws

(1A) The Assembly has no power to make laws permitting or having the effect of permitting (whether subject to conditions or not) the form of intentional killing of another called euthanasia (which includes mercy killing) or the assisting of a person to terminate his or her life.

The intervention of the Australian Federal Parliament in the ACT Assembly's legal processes by the imposition of this law is legal according to the Australian Constitution. It has prevented the Assembly from taking any action on euthanasia since the law was passed in 1997. The main argument given for repealing it is that it makes citizens in the ACT second class citizens by imposing a further layer of law on them that people who live in the states don't have. In the Australian states law about assistance to die is state law not federal law so citizens living in the states who want reform only have to debate the reform they want with the state government. In the ACT we have to reform this federal law as well as the territory law.

Another argument could also be made that the Federal Parliament already has clear evidence that Australians do not believe that the Federal government has the right to control their bodies and

send them to their deaths. In 1916 and 1917 two referendums about conscription in WWI were held asking the public if they were in favour of the government conscripting men for the war. Both referendums were lost. The implication of this is that Australians believe that their bodies belong to them and they don't give the government the right to arbitrarily send them off to war with a strong possibility that they will die or be injured. The principle is the same for Sections 17 and 18 of The Crimes Act 1900 which require us as an act of law to either 1) live until we die of disease or 2) to hang, gas, shoot ourselves or break the law to end our lives even though it is lawful to end our lives. In denying the Assembly the right to reform these laws in the ACT the Federal Government has exploited the powers given to it in the Constitution to control the bodies of territory citizens and the way they die contrary to the clear denial given to it by the referendums one hundred years ago.

Although the legal advice DWDACT has received is that this law is directed only as an instruction to the Assembly the reasons given for its imposition were religious and acknowledged to be so by those who voted for it. The Australian Constitution states that the Federal Parliament may not make law to impose religious observances. Dying of disease and punishing those who choose to end their own lives are all part of the religious observances required by Christian churches. Although we can find no lawyer to support our view that this law breaches the Constitution by imposing religious observances we believe that it does and this is another reason it should be repealed.

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

**Arthur:** I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to reach a larger audience about the new idea of an elective death. I think the great struggle Canadians made to change the law to allow assisted death for those suffering a terminal illness was truly admirable. Despite that enormous struggle the Canadian Parliament has still limited their access to an assisted death so I hope that the idea of an elective death might be helpful to them in pursuing their legal rights further.

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

**Appendices**

Appendix No. 1

Conscription referendums, 1916 and 1917 – Fact sheet 161

Australian voters were asked in October 1916, and again in December 1917, to vote on the issue of conscription. Universal military training for Australian men aged 18 to 60 had been compulsory since 1911. The referendums, if carried, would have extended this requirement to service overseas.

The 1916 referendum

Australian troops fighting overseas in World War I enlisted voluntarily. As the enormity of Australian casualties on the Western Front became known in Australia and no quick end to the war seemed likely the number of men volunteering fell steadily. There was sustained British pressure on the Australian Government to ensure that its divisions were not depleted: in 1916 it was argued that Australia needed to provide reinforcements of 5500 men per month to maintain its forces overseas at operational level. With advertising campaigns not achieving recruiting targets, Prime Minister Hughes decided to ask the people in a referendum if they would agree to

a proposal requiring men undergoing compulsory training to serve overseas. The referendum of 28 October 1916 asked Australians:

*Are you in favour of the Government having, in this grave emergency, the same compulsory powers over citizens in regard to requiring their military service, for the term of this War, outside the Commonwealth, as it now has in regard to military service within the Commonwealth?*

The referendum was defeated with 1,087,557 in favour and 1,160,033 against.

The 1917 referendum

In 1917 Britain sought a sixth Australian division for active service. Australia had to provide 7000 men per month to meet this request. Volunteer recruitment continued to lag and on 20 December 1917 Prime Minister Hughes put a second referendum to the Australian people. The referendum asked:

*Are you in favour of the proposal of the Commonwealth Government for reinforcing the Commonwealth Forces overseas?'*

Hughes' proposal was that voluntary enlistment should continue, but that any shortfall would be met by compulsory reinforcements of single men, widowers, and divorcees without dependents between 20 and 44 years, who would be called up by ballot. The referendum was defeated with 1,015,159 in favour and 1,181,747 against.

The conscription referenda were divisive politically, socially and within religious circles. Newspapers and magazines of the time demonstrate the concerns, arguments, and the passion of Australians in debating this issue. The decisive defeat of the second referendum closed the issue of conscription for the remainder of the war.

Appendix No. 2

## AN ELECTIVE DEATH

An Elective Death is based on the following principles

- It is the responsibility of government to ensure that everyone dies with dignity.
- A good health system should be able to guarantee a good death.
- An elective death is a peaceful, pain free and quick death.
- A civilized society respects the rights of its citizens to die at the time of their choice.
- To elect death is a legitimate goal that some people have for themselves. Like birth, death is a matter of individual choice and in the same way it should be supported by the state.
- Elective death is defined as a voluntary decision to shorten one's own life.

An Elective Death Unit

1. An Elective Death unit would be well-publicized in or linked to a local hospital. The most effective medication would be purchased by the hospital and managed safely like all other medications in hospitals. It would be made available to the EDU staff as required.
2. The Elective Death Unit would have a) a 24 hour a day service with the resources to make professional personal, financial, and relationship counselling available to clients as well as



immediate access to police, the coroner, organ donation and funeral services; b) an education facility designed for all members of the community and targeted for specific age groups and their particular stage of life needs to educate and inform people about death; to assist people to let go of life, to understand what death is and to prepare themselves for death; c) rooms with the facilities to assist those wanting an elective death to die comfortably in the presence of people they select; d) provision of the facilities to enable a peaceful, pain free and quick death to be undertaken in most cases independently without the help of other people.

3. The Elective Death Unit would provide any adult ACT citizen with an elective death following a) provision of a reason for the wish for death, b) offers of help through counselling or other assistance as needed, c) a cooling off period negotiated with the person wanting to die. The decision to die would be respected as would the decision to live.
4. On diagnosis of a terminal illness or a protracted chronic disease that brought unbearable suffering, those people diagnosed may request a referral from their doctors to the Elective Death unit for an elective death at the time of their choice. Accessing the counselling services of the Elective Death Unit would be a matter for them.
5. The Elective Death unit would be required to maintain records of the reasons for people requesting an elective death and report regularly to the Assembly on their findings.
6. The ACT Government would co-ordinate public and private health systems to link into the Elective Death unit so that they can refer clients to it.

#### Death by Disease

#### An Elective Death

#### Suicide

#### Elective Death

People die by hanging, gassing, drowning shooting, jumping etc

People receive counselling and if they still want death they are provided with a peaceful death.

Doctors who assist death are criminals.

Doctors refer patients to the elective death unit.

People die without assistance in a variety of places as a result of their diseases.

People take a referral from their doctors to the elective death unit to die there. Alternatively elective death unit staff would go where they were required to go to assist a death.

Medical staff are required by law to make people as comfortable as they can but have to watch while people die.

Staff are trained to assist people to die. They would not have to have a medical background. The skills needed for this role do not require high level medical training. Training in counselling and in administration of drugs are all that is required.

#### Appendix No. 3

<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resources/life-and-family/euthanasia-and-assisted-suicide/vatican-document-on-euthanasia/>

## SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH DECLARATION ON EUTHANASIA

### INTRODUCTION

The rights and values pertaining to the human person occupy an important place among the questions discussed today. In this regard, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council solemnly reaffirmed the lofty dignity of the human person, and in a special way his or her right to life. The Council therefore condemned crimes against life “such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful suicide” (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 27). More recently, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has reminded all the faithful of Catholic teaching on procured abortion. [1] The Congregation now considers it opportune to set forth the Church’s teaching on euthanasia. It is indeed true that, in this sphere of teaching, the recent Popes have explained the principles, and these retain their full force [2]; but the progress of medical science in recent years has brought to the fore new aspects of the question of euthanasia, and these aspects call for further elucidation on the ethical level. In modern society, in which even the fundamental values of human life are often called into question, cultural change exercises an influence upon the way of looking at suffering and death; moreover, medicine has increased its capacity to cure and to prolong life in particular circumstances, which sometime give rise to moral problems. Thus people living in this situation experience no little anxiety about the meaning of advanced old age and death. They also begin to wonder whether they have the right to obtain for themselves or their fellowmen an “easy death,” which would shorten suffering and which seems to them more in harmony with human dignity. A number of Episcopal Conferences have raised questions on this subject with the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Congregation, having sought the opinion of experts on the various aspects of euthanasia, now wishes to respond to the Bishops’ questions with the present Declaration, in order to help them to give correct teaching to the faithful entrusted to their care, and to offer them elements for reflection that they can present to the civil authorities with regard to this very serious matter. The considerations set forth in the present document concern in the first place all those who place their faith and hope in Christ, who, through His life, death and resurrection, has given a new meaning to existence and especially to the death of the Christian, as St. Paul says: “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord” (Rom. 14:8; cf. Phil. 1:20). As for those who profess other religions, many will agree with us that faith in God the Creator, Provider and Lord of life – if they share this belief – confers a lofty dignity upon every human person and guarantees respect for him or her. It is hoped that this Declaration will meet with the approval of many people of good will, who, philosophical or ideological differences notwithstanding, have nevertheless a lively awareness of the rights of the human person. These rights have often, in fact, been proclaimed in recent years through declarations issued by International Congresses [3]; and since it is a question here of fundamental rights inherent in every human person, it is obviously wrong to have recourse to arguments from political pluralism or religious freedom in order to deny the universal value of those rights.

### I. THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE

Human life is the basis of all goods, and is the necessary source and condition of every human activity and of all society. Most people regard life as something sacred and hold that no one may dispose of it at will, but believers see in life something greater, namely, a gift of God’s love, which they are called upon to preserve and make fruitful. And it is this latter consideration that gives rise to the following consequences:

1. No one can make an attempt on the life of an innocent person without opposing God's love for that person, without violating a fundamental right, and therefore without committing a crime of the utmost gravity. [4]
2. Everyone has the duty to lead his or her life in accordance with God's plan. That life is entrusted to the individual as a good that must bear fruit already here on earth, but that finds its full perfection only in eternal life.
3. Intentionally causing one's own death, or suicide, is therefore equally as wrong as murder; such an action on the part of a person is to be considered as a rejection of God's sovereignty and loving plan. Furthermore, suicide is also often a refusal of love for self, the denial of a natural instinct to live, a flight from the duties of justice and charity owed to one's neighbor, to various communities or to the whole of society – although, as is generally recognized, at times there are psychological factors present that can diminish responsibility or even completely remove it. However, one must clearly distinguish suicide from that sacrifice of one's life whereby for a higher cause, such as God's glory, the salvation of souls or the service of one's brethren, a person offers his or her own life or puts it in danger (cf. Jn. 15:14).

## II. EUTHANASIA

In order that the question of euthanasia can be properly dealt with, it is first necessary to define the words used. Etymologically speaking, in ancient times Euthanasia meant an easy death without severe suffering. Today one no longer thinks of this original meaning of the word, but rather of some intervention of medicine whereby the suffering of sickness or of the final agony are reduced, sometimes also with the danger of suppressing life prematurely. Ultimately, the word Euthanasia is used in a more particular sense to mean "mercy killing," for the purpose of putting an end to extreme suffering, or having abnormal babies, the mentally ill or the incurably sick from the prolongation, perhaps for many years of a miserable life, which could impose too heavy a burden on their families or on society. It is, therefore, necessary to state clearly in what sense the word is used in the present document. By euthanasia is understood an action or an omission which of itself or by intention causes death, in order that all suffering may in this way be eliminated. Euthanasia's terms of reference, therefore, are to be found in the intention of the will and in the methods used. It is necessary to state firmly once more that nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying. Furthermore, no one is permitted to ask for this act of killing, either for himself or herself or for another person entrusted to his or her care, nor can he or she consent to it, either explicitly or implicitly. nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action. For it is a question of the violation of the divine law, an offense against the dignity of the human person, a crime against life, and an attack on humanity. It may happen that, by reason of prolonged and barely tolerable pain, for deeply personal or other reasons, people may be led to believe that they can legitimately ask for death or obtain it for others. Although in these cases the guilt of the individual may be reduced or completely absent, nevertheless the error of judgment into which the conscience falls, perhaps in good faith, does not change the nature of this act of killing, which will always be in itself something to be rejected. The pleas of gravely ill people who sometimes ask for death are not to be understood as implying a true desire for euthanasia; in fact, it is almost always a case of an anguished plea for help and love. What a sick person needs, besides medical care, is love, the human and supernatural warmth with which the sick person can

and ought to be surrounded by all those close to him or her, parents and children, doctors and nurses.

### III. THE MEANING OF SUFFERING FOR CHRISTIANS AND THE USE OF PAINKILLERS

Death does not always come in dramatic circumstances after barely tolerable sufferings. Nor do we have to think only of extreme cases. Numerous testimonies which confirm one another lead one to the conclusion that nature itself has made provision to render more bearable at the moment of death separations that would be terribly painful to a person in full health. Hence it is that a prolonged illness, advanced old age, or a state of loneliness or neglect can bring about psychological conditions that facilitate the acceptance of death. Nevertheless the fact remains that death, often preceded or accompanied by severe and prolonged suffering, is something which naturally causes people anguish. Physical suffering is certainly an unavoidable element of the human condition; on the biological level, it constitutes a warning of which no one denies the usefulness; but, since it affects the human psychological makeup, it often exceeds its own biological usefulness and so can become so severe as to cause the desire to remove it at any cost. According to Christian teaching, however, suffering, especially suffering during the last moments of life, has a special place in God's saving plan; it is in fact a sharing in Christ's passion and a union with the redeeming sacrifice which He offered in obedience to the Father's will. Therefore, one must not be surprised if some Christians prefer to moderate their use of painkillers, in order to accept voluntarily at least a part of their sufferings and thus associate themselves in a conscious way with the sufferings of Christ crucified (cf. Mt. 27:34). Nevertheless it would be imprudent to impose a heroic way of acting as a general rule. On the contrary, human and Christian prudence suggest for the majority of sick people the use of medicines capable of alleviating or suppressing pain, even though these may cause as a secondary effect semi-consciousness and reduced lucidity. As for those who are not in a state to express themselves, one can reasonably presume that they wish to take these painkillers, and have them administered according to the doctor's advice. But the intensive use of painkillers is not without difficulties, because the phenomenon of habituation generally makes it necessary to increase their dosage in order to maintain their efficacy. At this point it is fitting to recall a declaration by Pius XII, which retains its full force; in answer to a group of doctors who had put the question: "Is the suppression of pain and consciousness by the use of narcotics ... permitted by religion and morality to the doctor and the patient (even at the approach of death and if one foresees that the use of narcotics will shorten life)?" the Pope said: "If no other means exist, and if, in the given circumstances, this does not prevent the carrying out of other religious and moral duties: Yes." [5] In this case, of course, death is in no way intended or sought, even if the risk of it is reasonably taken; the intention is simply to relieve pain effectively, using for this purpose painkillers available to medicine. However, painkillers that cause unconsciousness need special consideration. For a person not only has to be able to satisfy his or her moral duties and family obligations; he or she also has to prepare himself or herself with full consciousness for meeting Christ. Thus Pius XII warns: "It is not right to deprive the dying person of consciousness without a serious reason." [6]

### IV. DUE PROPORTION IN THE USE OF REMEDIES

Today it is very important to protect, at the moment of death, both the dignity of the human person and the Christian concept of life, against a technological attitude that threatens to become an abuse. Thus some people speak of a "right to die," which is an expression that does not mean the right to procure death either by one's own hand or by means of someone else, as one pleases,

but rather the right to die peacefully with human and Christian dignity. From this point of view, the use of therapeutic means can sometimes pose problems. In numerous cases, the complexity of the situation can be such as to cause doubts about the way ethical principles should be applied. In the final analysis, it pertains to the conscience either of the sick person, or of those qualified to speak in the sick person's name, or of the doctors, to decide, in the light of moral obligations and of the various aspects of the case. Everyone has the duty to care for his or her own health or to seek such care from others. Those whose task it is to care for the sick must do so conscientiously and administer the remedies that seem necessary or useful. However, is it necessary in all circumstances to have recourse to all possible remedies? In the past, moralists replied that one is never obliged to use "extraordinary" means. This reply, which as a principle still holds good, is perhaps less clear today, by reason of the imprecision of the term and the rapid progress made in the treatment of sickness. Thus some people prefer to speak of "proportionate" and "disproportionate" means. In any case, it will be possible to make a correct judgment as to the means by studying the type of treatment to be used, its degree of complexity or risk, its cost and the possibilities of using it, and comparing these elements with the result that can be expected, taking into account the state of the sick person and his or her physical and moral resources. In order to facilitate the application of these general principles, the following clarifications can be added: – If there are no other sufficient remedies, it is permitted, with the patient's consent, to have recourse to the means provided by the most advanced medical techniques, even if these means are still at the experimental stage and are not without a certain risk. By accepting them, the patient can even show generosity in the service of humanity. – It is also permitted, with the patient's consent, to interrupt these means, where the results fall short of expectations. But for such a decision to be made, account will have to be taken of the reasonable wishes of the patient and the patient's family, as also of the advice of the doctors who are specially competent in the matter. The latter may in particular judge that the investment in instruments and personnel is disproportionate to the results foreseen; they may also judge that the techniques applied impose on the patient strain or suffering out of proportion with the benefits which he or she may gain from such techniques. – It is also permissible to make do with the normal means that medicine can offer. Therefore one cannot impose on anyone the obligation to have recourse to a technique which is already in use but which carries a risk or is burdensome. Such a refusal is not the equivalent of suicide; on the contrary, it should be considered as an acceptance of the human condition, or a wish to avoid the application of a medical procedure disproportionate to the results that can be expected, or a desire not to impose excessive expense on the family or the community. – When inevitable death is imminent in spite of the means used, it is permitted in conscience to take the decision to refuse forms of treatment that would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted. In such circumstances the doctor has no reason to reproach himself with failing to help the person in danger.

## CONCLUSION

The norms contained in the present Declaration are inspired by a profound desire to service people in accordance with the plan of the Creator. Life is a gift of God, and on the other hand death is unavoidable; it is necessary, therefore, that we, without in any way hastening the hour of death, should be able to accept it with full responsibility and dignity. It is true that death marks the end of our earthly existence, but at the same time it opens the door to immortal life. Therefore, all must prepare themselves for this event in the light of human values, and Christians even more so in the light of faith. As for those who work in the medical profession, they ought to

neglect no means of making all their skill available to the sick and dying; but they should also remember how much more necessary it is to provide them with the comfort of boundless kindness and heartfelt charity. Such service to people is also service to Christ the Lord, who said: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40).

At the audience granted prefect, His Holiness Pope John Paul II approved this declaration, adopted at the ordinary meeting of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and ordered its publication.

Rome, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, May 5, 1980.

Franjo Cardinal Seper  
Prefect

Jerome Hamer, O.P.  
Secretary

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[3] One thinks especially of Recommendation 779 (1976) on the rights of the sick and dying, of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe at its XXVIIth Ordinary Session; cf. Sipeca, no. 1, March 1977, pp. 14-15.

[4] We leave aside completely the problems of the death penalty and of war, which involve specific considerations that do not concern the present subject.

[5] Pius XII, ADDRESS of February 24, 1957: AAS 49 (1957), p. 147.

[6] Pius XII, Ibid., p. 145; cf. ADDRESS of September 9, 1958: AAS 50 (1958), p. 694.

## Ask Mandisa 18 – Mandisatory Leadership: Meeting People Where They Are

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 10, 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 leadership and meeting people where they're at.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** You started the year off with a bang. What happened?

**Mandisa Thomas:** Yes, this year HAS started off with a bang. Most recently, I was in the Washington, D.C. area. I presented with the American Humanist Association as part of their speakers' series.

I also had the opportunity to visit the Pew Research Center. They are in the process of creating a new poll in a research study regarding blacks and religion, and they wanted to get our input on how they can be more inclusive of the black atheist demographic to get more participation.

In recent studies, they've found that Black millennials in particular are leaving traditional beliefs behind. In the church, the numbers are dropping. So, they really want to expand the scope to include atheism within the black community because when they do their initial research, we are still vastly underrepresented.

I also was in town for the annual Secular Leadership Summit, which was a two-day event for the national leaders of the secular organizations. It was there that also co-presented a workshop on improving diversity within the movement.

And last but not least, I had the opportunity to visit Capitol Hill and do some lobbying, in partnership with the Secular Coalition for America. We spoke with some of the representatives who are part of the Congressional Freethought Caucus.

We spoke about our organizations, and we thanked them for being in our corner, and ensuring our rights are protected on Capitol Hill.

As a result of this, I am hoping to have meetings with representatives from the Congressional Black Caucus to talk about Black Nonbelievers and the growing number of blacks who are nonreligious. Specifically how this represents changing voting patterns and why it matters.

**Jacobsen:** For those who are looking for becoming more involved in giving speeches, informing some of the demographic research, approached in some way, what would be the recommendations for them, in terms of them further informing the research and providing insightful presentations on the unique experiences of the community?

**Thomas:** My first recommendation is to show up to different events, and start speaking up and letting people know where they stand. People won't know unless you say something.

We hope that by working with Pew Research, there may be opportunities for focus group sessions with people from the organization. It will be important for our members and others to show up and participate. This adds to the research as well as being beneficial overall.

**Jacobsen: What was the feedback on the presentations by you?**

**Thomas:** The feedback was pretty good. My talk was on how to effectively manage secular organizations. Sometimes, that means managing people and managing leadership.

Considering the climate of the movement, it is important. The talk with the American Humanist Association was their most well attended in the series to date. That was good to know.

We received some great responses from the diversity and inclusion workshop as well. It was for the leaders in the movement. There are some general best practices that we try to learn from other speakers. Apparently that went over well.

**Jacobsen: If someone in your position of leadership is invited to present at an organization or for a group that is not necessarily non-believing, how should they approach that opportunity? What might be a bridging presentation on the topic as well?**

**Thomas:** I try to get as much background information as possible. Recently, I was a guest on a Christian radio station in Indiana, which turned out better than expected. The host was very fair and objective, and assured me that insults would no be tolerated from callers.

I tend to have a hard time turning down an opportunities like that. I like to discuss Black Nonbelievers as an organization: what we do and why we're here.

I think it is important for these audiences to understand why it is hard to openly identify as an atheist, especially if you're black. Christian audiences need to hear this too.

I also like to present on historic black humanists and freethinkers so the community is reminded of our presence and that we have always been here.

There are some major accomplishments in history on behalf of blacks who challenged the institution of the church. These types of presentations are often very helpful.

I find that when we come from an educational and a relatable stance, it tends to go over better.

Something that affects our community in its entirety tends to be more understandable than something that would only affect black atheists, though they need to understand what areas affect us more.

Certainly with the subject of religion, we can convey that we are all affected by it.

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

**Thomas:** Thank you.



## Interview with Randy Best – Leader (Minister), Northern Virginia Ethical Society (NoVES)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 11, 2019

*Randy Best is the Leader (Minister) of the Northern Virginia Ethical Society (NoVES). Here we talk about 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?

**Randy Best:** I grew up in a humanist/atheist family in St. Louis. My parents were from the midwest with non-ethnic (not Irish, Italian, German, etc.), white middle class. My father moved to St. Louis to become a Social Worker after being blacklisted from executive corporate work for political activities in the early 1950's.

My mother was a school librarian, originally from rural Nebraska. I have an older sister. My parents were active in the Congress for Racial Equality, a civil rights organization that was open to those on the far political left. I grew up attending the Ethical Society of St. Louis, a humanist congregation.

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

**Best:** I have a BA from Grinnell College and a MA from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Much later in life I attended the Humanist Institute and studied to become certified as an Ethical Culture Leader. I am an avid reader of both fiction and non-fiction.

Jacobsen: Leader/Humanist Minister for the Northern Virginia Ethical Society (NoVES) is an important community role. It is different than simply an association. I observe the need to build trust, maintain camaraderie and a sense of community solidarity. How do you do it?

**Best:** I work to promote ethical relationships in our humanist congregation. I give inspirational talks on diverse topics, teach humanist-related courses, and lead discussion groups. One of our Ethical Society sayings is Act to bring out the best in others and thereby bring out the best in yourself. I try to promote this attitude in our congregation.

**Jacobsen:** What are some of the unexpected difficulties of the position? What are some of the unexpected benefits of the position?

**Best:** My position is part-time. This necessarily limits my engagement with the congregation. I am not always around. The benefit is to become more deeply involved in my humanist beliefs and personal ethical development.

**Jacobsen:** What are the demographics of the Northern Virginia Ethical Society? How does this influence in-community social activities?

**Best:** We are a largely white congregation divided mostly between parents with children and older adults. We attend meetings and celebrations and some of the parents have become friends outside of the congregation. Some of our older members are long-term friends too.

**Jacobsen: What is a service like for the Northern Virginia Ethical Society? How long does each service or presentation take to prepare for the Northern Virginia community?**

**Best:** We open with live music, followed by opening words, more music, a statement about who we are and a chance to greet each other. This is followed by a children's story, and another musical piece, after which the children leave for Sunday school.

At this point the speaker is introduced and they give their address. Music follows. Then there is a time for the audience to share reflections/resonances about the presentation (questions are not asked to the speaker). Then come announcements.

After announcements the formal meeting is ended and members stay for refreshments and conversation. I speak once a month. If I am talking about Ethical Humanism (a subject that I know lots about) it may take me a few days to prepare.

Speaking on other topics may take longer with research, etc., maybe a week or two. Most of our invited speakers are giving an address that they have given before. They are often directors of organizations, etc. Our speaker committee works hard to identify and schedule high quality outside speakers.

**Jacobsen: If you could gather some other organizations together for some activist activities, what would you want to work on with them?**

**Best:** Climate Change, Racial Justice, White privilege, Women's Reproductive Rights, Civility in Political Discourse, Prison Reform.

Jacobsen: What are your fears and hopes for humanism and secularism in American as we move into 2019 more?

**Best:** I think that American Democracy is more vulnerable than I imagined before the 2016 election. If American politics continues to turn to the right, it will bode ill for humanism and secularism. None-the-less, humanism and secularism are on the rise and may continue to do so if politics succeed in turning to the left.

**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?**

**Best:** Since the Northern Virginia Ethical Society is a humanist congregation, the primary mode of engagement is personal, by attending our activities and becoming a member. At this time we do not fund raise outside of our group. We do welcome contributions through our webpage [www.noves.org](http://www.noves.org).

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

**Best:** I encourage you to visit an Ethical Society to learn more directly what we do and who we are. You can find our congregations listed at [www.aeu.org](http://www.aeu.org).

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

**Best:** You are most welcome. Please feel free to follow up with additional questions if you wish.

# Interview with Jos Helmich – Board Member, EXITUS ry

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 12, 2019

*Jos Helmich is a Board Member of EXITUS ry. Here we talk about 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?

**Jos Helmich:** I come from the Netherlands. I grew up in a family of teachers. My parents were both active in the labour union. They were also members of the “society for public education”. I am not sure this the right term (it does not contrast with private). To explain it I need to explain something else first.

In the Netherlands, we had when I grew up something called Dutch tolerance. This didn’t mean that you respected anyone’s beliefs. Rather it meant that Socialists, Catholics, and Protestants had their own communities and didn’t step much outside their boundaries. We called those the pillars of society.

The Liberals where open to everyone, but since the others shunned their institutions they became a pillar themselves. Every pillar had its own parties, schools, newspapers, and broadcasters. So, when my parents joined this “society for public education” they joined the liberal pillar in effect.

They did it because they believed that education should be open to everyone, not just to those who believed in god. So, when possible my brother and I were sent to “public schools” (liberal) or when not available to “neutral schools” (not part of a pillar).

Secularization has slowly brought down the pillars. They still exist in rudimentary form, but they have merged and taken the shape of political entities more than religious entities.

I think part of social trouble the Netherlands is facing with people that come from other countries is that we don’t know how to relate to them. The pillars that protected the communities are gone.

Now you have to confront that stranger and it is scary. As for myself. I think it is a matter of maturity if you can confront a stranger with an open mind. I believe in cultural blending. Take the best of both worlds is my motto.

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

**Helmich:** I have epilepsy. I have a brain, but it sometimes stops to function. In the past, the medication and knowledge about it were not so good. I was sent to special schools for children with learning disabilities.

I started my education at the lowest level, then I went a step higher and then another step until I got a master’s degree in Econometrics. I have to thank my parents. They always believed in me and fought the educational and medical institutions when necessary.

**Jacobsen:** What is a living will? Why is it important? What are the differences in the euthanasia provisions in Holland and Finland? I ask this as you’re a Dutchie in Finland.

**Helmich:** A living will (A literal translation from Levenstestament in Dutch) is an expression of your free will when your body is not capable of delivering the message any more. As long as you can speak for yourself or express yourself in any other way, it is not valid.

The first living wills were templates designed by the Dutch association for voluntary euthanasia (NVVE, founded in 1973). They had no legal status at the time. They were a kind of letter that you gave to your GP making your wishes known. When they were introduced it caused some uproar in the press.

Which was also more or less the point when they were introduced. Here in Finland, I am advocating a similar tactic. In Finland, only passive euthanasia is allowed, but what happens in practice is anyone's guess.

As for practical use of the living will, I have one. Same with my mother. My mother has also made my brother and I sign a statement that we respect her will if/when the time comes.

She also made sure her GP has a copy of those statements and that he will execute her wishes. As for myself. I have discussed the matter with my wife. She is religious and to her it is no small matter, but I think she will respect my wishes as I will respect hers (not to do euthanasia in any circumstance).

I think it is a matter of trusting one another. One small advantage I have is that I am not a Finnish citizen. I could be returned to the Netherlands when active euthanasia cannot be applied here.

**Jacobsen: What are the legal differences, and so the activist efforts' emphases too, between the Netherlands and Finland? What are some of the cultural allowances and barriers to euthanasia in either country?**

**Helmich:** The Netherlands was the first in the world to adopt a euthanasia law. In the Netherlands euthanasia is already an accepted practice. There are some religious pockets of resistance, but they barely count. That doesn't mean we take it lightly.

Due process still must be followed, and emotional stress on the family and the GP (which you have often a very personal relationship with) must be taken in account. But it functions well. Note that it took the Netherlands 30 years of talking and a bit more than a decade of practice to get to this point.

Finland has not made the transition yet. The Lutheran church is here still influential, and the leader of the populist movement counts himself devout Catholic. However, there is hope things will change, because I don't see basic cultural roadblocks. Just a delay in development.

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

**Helmich:** I am an experienced computer specialist. I have often been webmaster or editor when I support a social or cultural organization.

The technical parts are easy for me. It is hard to keep the information flowing. To do so you need a group of active people who produce articles and engage others in discussions.

Also recruiting others is important. The lifetime of an active participant is about two or three years. You usually find people among those who are engaged in discussions. It shows that they are interested in the subject and willing to do something.

**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?

**Helmich:** I just joined the club, so I am so not so familiar with the politics of this, but independence is good in the sense that we are not part of anyone's agenda, but our own.

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

**Helmich:** I am hoping from some support from NVVE. It is a big organization nowadays. As for the rest. I don't know myself yet. I think we need some out of the box thinking here and explore alternative ways to cooperate with others.

**Jacobsen:** What further reading, individuals, and organizations should be kept in mind for efforts to advance euthanasia legality and sociocultural acceptance issues, especially activist ones?

**Helmich:** Not sure. But what I learned from half a life time of discussions in the Netherlands is that we need the Medical Doctors on our side. They need to see the value of regulation. When euthanasia happens in the grey area of medical practice the MD's are open game for criminal prosecution.

The Doctors need to be sure that they don't go to prison when they follow a properly defined process. As for other organizations. The IHEU is an obvious one. Open society might help. It is something to explore.

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

**Helmich:** I am wondering why atheism is still a thing. It should be a natural state of being. I sometimes wonder that people can "believe" in atomic theory, but not in evolution. Don't they realize that our idea of how old the earth is, is based on the rules of atomic decay?

I personally felt inspired by the sci-fi book "Speaker for the dead". It felt right that someone told at your funeral the truth and nothing but the truth. And told the audience about your intentions. About how you meant to live your life. That's an idea that I could connect with.

I understand that "Orson Scott Card" (the writer of the book) changed his views to something much more conservative later, but I value this book. I guess it's good. I did take the best part of him, but I did not find a new messiah. I guess that's how it should be.

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

**Helmich:** PS: Some links you might be interested in. Those on finlanded are columns I wrote some years ago. You can publish them as long as you mention the Author (me) and source (link)

<http://finlandned.org/index.php/society/43-dutch-tolerance>

<http://finlandned.org/index.php/society/23-the-size-of-god>

This one is not mine, but interesting:

<https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledgebase/315-the-dutch-myth-of-tolerance>

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