



SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

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Collection IV

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Humanist Voices: Collection IV</i>	3
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	7
1 Humanist Voices	8
a Question with Patricia Grell, B.Sc., M.Div.: Trustee, Edmonton Catholic School Board (Ward 71)	9
b Chiedozie Uwakwe on lack of faith in Nigerian youth	11
c Moninuola Komolafe on irreligion, politics, and the Nigerian Youth	12
d Bayo Opadeyi on irreligious youth culture in Nigeria	13
e An Interview with Jason Droboth — President, The Secular Humanists of MRU	14
f Chat with Imam Soharwardy — Founder, Islamic Supreme Council of Canada	17
g An Interview with Steven Shapiro — Previous Secretary, University of West Florida Secular Student Alliance — Part 1	19
h Conversation on the separate publicly-funded Catholic school system in Canada with Renton Patterson — President, Civil Rights in Public Education	21
i An Interview with Steven Shapiro — Previous Secretary, University of West Florida Secular Student Alliance — Part 2	24
j An Interview with Shawn Polson — President, Secular Students and Skeptics Society at University of Colorado, Boulder — Part 1	26
k An Interview with Shawn Polson — President, Secular Students and Skeptics Society at University of Colorado, Boulder — Part 2	28
l An Interview with Shawn Polson — President, Secular Students and Skeptics Society at University of Colorado, Boulder — Part 3	30
m Reva Landau of Open Public Education Now on the religious separate school system in Canada	33
n An Interview with Valérie Dubé — Board Member, Humanist Association of Ottawa	36
o An Interview with Robert Magara — Executive Director, Kanunga Humanist Association	38
p Interview with Lucille V. Hoersten	39
q An Interview with Alvin John Ballares — Member, HAPI	40
r An Interview with J.P. Westlund — President, Humanist Association of Ottawa	41
s An Interview with Warren Alan Tidwell — Volunteer, Humanist Services Corps	44
t An Interview with Scott Janis — Previous Officer, University of Wisconsin Whitewater's Secular Student Alliance	47
u An Interview with DeAngelos Williams	50
v Interview with Lee Sakura — Administrator, Atheist Republic Manila Consulate	52
w Kathy Dawson — Board Member, Alberta Pro-Choice Coalition and Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada	55
x In Conversation with Lee Moore — Former Executive Director, The Atheist Conference (TAC)	58
y An Interview with Andy Uyboco	59
z Call from the HAPI Mothership	61
aa Conversation with Vidya Bhushan Rawat	62

bb	Notes on young people from speaking around the world by Faisal Saeed Al Mutar — Founder, Global Secular Humanist Movement	67
cc	Conversation with Scott Davies — Editor and Writer at Conatus News	69
dd	In Conversation with Susan Nambejja — Director, Malcolm Childrens’ Foundation (Humanist Charity)	70
ee	Interview with Dave McKee on Secular Schools — Leader, Communist Party of Canada (Ontario) ...	72
ff	In Conversation with Rustam Singh — Editor-in-Chief, Secular World	75
gg	Conversation with Hanne Stinson — Former CEO, British Humanist Association.....	77
hh	An Interview with Jesus Falcis — Full-Time Lecturer, Far Eastern University	80
ii	An upcoming gathering of humanists in Owerri, Imo State, Southern Nigeria.....	82
jj	Author Peter Gajdics on Conversion Therapy.....	84
kk	A Compendium of Crimes and Criminals of the Eastern Orthodox Church — Part 3.....	87
ll	Chat with Neil Bera — Member, SMART Recovery	90
mm	Chat with Steve Bergier— Facilitator, SMART Recovery	92
nn	Interview with Bruce Gleason — Director, LogiCal-LA	94
oo	Shaykh Uthman Khan on Dialogue — Academic Dean/Director of Research, Critical Loyalty	97
pp	Interview with Leslea Mair — Co-Director, Losing Our Religion	99
	License and Copyright.....	102

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Scott

Humanist Voices

Question with Patricia Grell, B.Sc., M.Div.: Trustee, Edmonton Catholic School Board (Ward 71)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: For young people transitioning out of a faith or a strong adherence to a faith based on a traumatic experience or a disenchantment with it or simply it's not for them anymore, as you have experienced as an adult; what kind of advice can you give for younger people aged under 35 who may or may not have figured themselves out yet but are still going through similar experience?

Patricia Grell: I don't think I figured myself out yet either! Do we ever? [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Grell: I think our whole lives we're trying to figure ourselves out and maybe on our deathbed we'll say, "Yeah, I think I got it now," [Laughing]. But I would suggest that these young people find someone like a confidant or someone that they can talk to work it through.

I found someone who had gone through the same experience and was a great support to me. This person used to be a Mormon. I thought of him as a midwife, a psychic midwife helping me be born out of this previous life and this previous way of existing and thinking. He helped me along by saying "It's okay. Your feelings are perfectly natural and normal. I felt the same way and it's going to take time. You're not going to just wake up one day and feel great. It's going to take time, and so be patient. I am here with you. I'm journeying with you. We'll just get through these labor pains together. Don't be hard on yourself".

So, that's the core of advice that I would give a young person — try to find someone who's been there, gone through that. It might be an older person; it might be a person who is the same age, but who's come out the other side feeling really good, someone who's made the journey and come to a certain point.

They are a great resource for you. As I say, look for that psychic midwife to help you through it because I really do think this is a psychic evolutionary process. Some people have the privilege of experiencing it in their lives. That really is a privilege. I think some people unfortunately will never get there, will never experience freedom.

If you're experiencing it, then think of it as a privilege, even though, it's very difficult. It's very emotional. It's the right thing and trust yourself. Trust your inner being, that you're on the right track because it does need to happen if you want to evolve as a person and become your true self. It's meant to happen if you're facing that. It's meant to happen; don't go back.

You might be tempted to go back because it feels so painful. I experienced that too. A lot of feelings like "Maybe, I should go back. Maybe, it's not too late. It would be so much better and easier to just go back." But with the help of this psychic midwife- friend, I was able to stay on the path to my authentic self.

It's shedding all of that inauthenticity that we get from religion. We learn not to listen to ourselves, we learn not to accept ourselves, and we get split off from ourselves. So, what I've

been experiencing is sort of a reunification of myself with myself because we all remember what it was like to be little kids and happy with who we are.

Then we started learning, “Oh! We’re not really that great. We’re sinful. We’re not clean and up to snuff, and we’re not making the mark,” so then we have all that hanging over us. But as we journey away from that way of thinking, we get back to that feeling we had about ourselves when we were young, when we felt good about ourselves. That’s what I am experiencing lately — getting in touch with the wonderfulness of myself prior to getting indoctrinated by a religion focused on sin.

So I would suggest to young people to find a mentor who has made this transition and be open to being reunited with their true selves. I would encourage them to stay hopeful even though it can be extremely difficult to go through this transition.

Jacobsen: One question, one comprehensive answer; I like that one. Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Patricia.

Chiedozie Uwakwe on lack of faith in Nigerian youth

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I want to explore the youth irreligious culture. How is it where you live? Is it lively? Or is it more repressed by the state authorities and the parental culture?

Chiedozie Uwakwe: I would say the irreligious culture in Nigeria is not lively at all. Nigeria is a very religious country, including the traditional religions before the arrival of Christianity and Islam, the concept of someone being irreligious is foreign to them, it's a taboo. Because of this, the irreligious are treated badly with a lot of discrimination by family members and friends, leading to so many irreligious people hiding their lack of belief or "staying in the closet". Being irreligious in Nigeria has been compared to being gay in Saudi Arabia. It is that bad. But due to increased social campaigns, the future looks bright for us.

Jacobsen: What is it like there for youth who lack a formal religion? Are there support networks and communities for them?

Uwakwe: It can get lonely for the irreligious youth in Nigeria because, you don't know how tolerant your immediate neighbours are to your views, so a lot of opinions aren't voiced for fear of verbal or physical attacks. Recently, support networks have been springing up, on twitter, whatsapp and Telegram groups, internet forums. We also have organizations like the Atheist Society of Nigeria and Humanist Assemblies. They help out when they can to support the growing number of the irreligious.

Jacobsen: If a youth leaves the religion of their family, how does the family and also the wider society see them?

Uwakwe: It depends on how religious the family is and if the youth is financially dependent on the family. Largely, it leads to a lot of angry words and emotional blackmail. The family and the society see them as rascals and good-for-nothing individuals. Dredges of the society as it were. They can disown the youth because the family wouldn't want to have anything to do with a social outcast.

Jacobsen: What are the broader implications for the society of the erosion of religion, even on the fringes of youth culture?

Uwakwe: I think the erosion of religion would lead to people finally taking responsibility for their lives, knowing that they alone are largely responsible for whatever they make out of their lives and not giving themselves a sense of false hope that religion offers.

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

Moninuola Komolafe on irreligion, politics, and the Nigerian Youth

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is the state of young people's irreligion where you live?

Moninuola Komolafe: Growing but largely closeted because the consequences can be severe for some. I have a number of young unbelievers who are feigning faith so they can have a roof over their heads or continue to enjoy their parent's financial support. However, with online communities, both the openly irreligious and the anonymous ones have a breathing space.

Jacobsen: Is there a big divide between the religiosity of the older generations and the younger generations?

Komolafe: Yes, there is. Although it seems as though the irreligious are still a minority, social media discussions have shown me that young people are asking questions and that they are not swallowing bible stories or consider religious topics sacred. It is not uncommon to find young people who are just cultural Christians and I think that if it wasn't for the backlash or fear of hell for some, we would have more young people shedding faith

Jacobsen: How does the religion influence politics and social affairs, and the political process such as elections there?

Komolafe: Religion is infused into almost every aspect of the Nigerian society and has been a hindrance in fighting issues such as inequality. How do you make laws that establish equality between the sexes when the lawmakers believe that women are not equal to men because their religious books teach that the man is the head and the woman is to submit to the man? How do you protect young girls from underage marriage when you have Muslim lawmakers who can wave their religious books and claim divine permission for such? Gay marriage is also forbidden on the same grounds.

With regards to elections, all a politician needs is to get the support of a major church leader and he can secure their votes. The question of his competency or suitability is discarded because a certain general overseer has approved him. Religion is everywhere and it is a menace that needs to be checked.

Jacobsen: What can the younger generations do to join together to reduce the level of religiosity in the country, increase the level of reason, and secularize the nation in general?

Komolafe: We need to bring up more discussions about religion both online and offline, establish forums where religion is questioned. I am part of a Whatsapp group called Believers and Skeptics where we have members invite religious people and skeptics alike to 'defend' their beliefs. We have had a few religious people leave their faiths based on group discussions. I believe that having similar groups spring up will definitely play some role in reducing religiosity.

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

Bayo Opadeyi on irreligious youth culture in Nigeria

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How robust is the irreligious youth culture where you live?

Bayo Opadeyi: Irreligious youth culture basically exists on social media. Being irreligious is synonymous with betraying your family and friends at best, and can be met with quite dire sometimes fatal consequences at worst. So most young people who have given up religion depend on the anonymity of the internet to express themselves, while attending their family religious services especially if they are economically dependent. That said, there are many online and offline groups of atheists/agnostics/skeptics. Also with the growing number of atheist/humanist societies we get to see more and more people willing to identify as irreligious, going as far as to organize meet-ups and conferences. But it is still far from being normal here.

Jacobsen: What are the common narratives of youth who leave the religion of their family and community? How does the wider culture and their own family treat them now? How does society treat those who lack a formal religion, generally?

Opadeyi: Youth who leave religion and are assertive about it frequently meet with a lot of resistance from family. In the northern muslim-majority areas, people fear for their lives sometimes and often their livelihood. In the south it is rare to find families willing to go so far as to threaten the lives of their children/wards over religion, but they can get ostracized by family members and they find themselves left to struggle through education. So most irreligious youth I know stay in the closet till they are financially independent. Urban areas are more tolerant of a lack of religion, and you find more people willing to discuss ideas instead of using force. But the smaller the community, and the more monolithic the religious environment, the more likely some form of coercion or force would be used on people who identify as irreligious. Especially if they are vocal about it.

Jacobsen: What are some effective ways of mobilization for the irreligious youth into a bloc for the change in social and cultural life, as in to normalize and make acceptable lack of religious faith — or at least doubt in it?

Opadeyi: I think a great first step will be getting more and more discussions out there with public debates/discussions (safest in urban areas in the south), blogs, podcasts, social media posts to get a lot of young people confident enough to come out of the closet. Also, periodic “coming out” campaigns should help.

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

An Interview with Jason Droboth — President, The Secular Humanists of MRU

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 26, 2017

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

Jason Droboth: Assuming you're asking me about 'my' family background, I come from a devout Jehovah's Witness family. My parents allowed the Jehovah's Witness organization, known as the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, to shape everything about them from their personal religious beliefs to the way they dressed. They were likewise heavily influenced by the organization in their parenting methods and perspectives. So it's fair to say, that the Watchtower organization and my experiences as a Jehovah's Witness in my formative years up until my early 20s were by far the most consequential in my development and current perspectives. Everything I am today is because of, and now in spite of, that organization.

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

Droboth: Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a very literal interpretation of the Bible and are quick to boil things down to absolutes. God is ONLY good, Satan is ONLY evil, Jehovah's Witnesses are the ONLY true religion, all other ideologies other than theirs are ONLY false, Genesis is a literal account of historical events, etc. This was my belief structure built on such absolutes and certainties, structured as a so-called house of cards that could only stand if no outside influences were introduced. The funny thing is that Jehovah's Witnesses are required to approach people in the streets and at their front doors in a recruiting effort, which means that people with different beliefs are given the chance to challenge your belief system. This is what happened to me. I remember preaching to people trying to convince them that, among other things, the biblical story of Noah's flood was a historical fact and there was evidence to prove such. But I could not present that evidence and each person who challenged my claims continued to inflict irreversible damage to my belief system. This continued happening for a few years when finally, I accepted, to my horror, that there was no evidence to even mildly support the literal interpretation of the account of Noah. This was really the first card that fell and within a couple months the entire house of cards collapsed. I no longer believed that Jehovah's Witnesses possess "The Truth", that the Bible was inspired by God, or that the God of Israel even existed. I sought some sort of validation that I was not evil nor crazy because of my newfound atheism. So I borrowed 'The God Delusion' from the library, replaced the dust jacket with something less blasphemous, and just to be sure I would not get caught, I would sneak away to isolated parks and urban forests to read it. This book obviously changed my life and sparked an insatiable curiosity for knowledge. It's been around 6 years since I last sought comfort and knowledge through prayer. Secularism has really dominated my life ever since.

Jacobsen: You are the president of The Secular Humanists of Mount Royal University. What tasks and responsibilities come with the presidential position? Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Droboth: As president I try to focus on fostering a positive culture and space for people to explore their beliefs as they relate to secularism. I am responsible for our leadership team, our membership, and our representation to the public.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Droboth: I actually created this club for myself because I needed a space to explore and develop my beliefs. I really lost my entire community once I renounced my faith and needed a new community to form new bonds. Now that I have my own communities and friendships I try to focus on giving others the chance to develop their beliefs and find a community. I really love supporting people when they are dealing with the challenges that come with transitioning beliefs.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more valuable tips for campus secularist activism? Also, you have unique things on campus. Those being, the difficulties in finding good leadership and the development of a succession plan. How are you managing those issues? What should others learn from you?

Droboth: Time is very limited! Students may have a real desire to be a part of your club either in a leadership position or not, but their other commitments are going to begin consuming more and more of their time as the semester progresses. This means that support for the club may diminish causing you to become disheartened or worse, you'll take on too much responsibility and see your grades and/or mental health decline. This is what happened to me, as others became more preoccupied with other commitments I took on too much and began resenting the time I spent on developing the club. Now we're regrouping and bringing it back to basics, no longer focusing on hosting 300 person events and the like, but on having small weekly meet ups where people can just chat and explore ideas.

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

Droboth: Our club has not concerned itself much with bringing to light any violations of the principals of secularism on campus probably because there have not been any gross examples that we are aware of in recent memory. We merely try to provide a community for students to explore secular ideals and principals. If we existed in another place, like the Southern U.S., I'm sure we would have different priorities.

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

Droboth: I've noticed that many religious groups on campus foster close knit communities where members feel a real sense of belonging. This may result from a uniform belief system, the more uniform their beliefs, the more they get along. Non-academic clubs like those based on a sport or hobby, often do not concern themselves with discussing controversial or sensitive topics and thus have fewer heated disagreements. Secularists, however, find themselves in a different boat. Secularists are usually independent thinkers, tend to embrace topics that are controversial, and are not quick to just accept something without thoroughly directing it. This means that disagreements on sensitive topics are an inevitable reality which can tend to hinder personal bonds from developing amongst secularists. Its thus highly important for secularists to continue discussing sensitive topics and challenging or disagreeing with each other, but at the same time learning how to form healthy constructive bonds with those same people.

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

Droboth: As with other clubs I'm sure, we are concerned that our group will cease to exist once our core group of founders are gone. I don't mind if the group dissolves, as long as something else pops up to replace it. I want to see new students come in and create a secular community for themselves and their fellow students on their own terms to address the issues and concerns that are relevant for their time.

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

Droboth: Secularism is not comfortable or easy. It begs the hard questions, demands the hard evidence, and searches for answers that are often hard to hear. I hope that students continue to see the value in and search out the uncomfortable feelings that come with secularism.

I'm also concerned that secularism may push some to dismiss the genuine personal spiritual experiences or beliefs of those who call themselves religious. It's important that secularism holds all claims to the same standards of evidence and that secularists not allow tactics of intimidation and accusations of bigotry stop them from questioning claims. However, I hope that secular communities continue nurturing their empathy for those of faith and try to understand why it is that people hold these beliefs and what it means for them personally.

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

Droboth: Every year we try to focus on slightly different causes and methods. This coming year we will be focusing on the experience of changing beliefs and the challenges that result. We will be focusing on more intimate meet ups geared towards those who are in the process of the major ideological shift from faith to secularism. Hopefully we can help to lessen the sacrifices and/or fears that come with such a shift.

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

Droboth: Students can search our club name online to find our contact information. They can also look out for our advertising on campus or contact the student's association club coordinator for more information. If anyone is ever interested in a leadership position they should contact us and let us know as we would love some more help!

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Droboth: Creating and leading this club was one of the most memorable and beneficial things I have ever done during my degree. I encourage all students to not just join a secular club, but to create one, shape one, take one into your own hands and experience how it feels to introduce people to new ideas and ways of thinking. You can't even begin to imagine how much you will learn and what vast positive experiences you may create for your fellow students!

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Jason.

Chat with Imam Soharwardy — Founder, Islamic Supreme Council of Canada

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 27, 2017

Prof. Imam Soharwardy is the founder of Muslims Against Terrorism (MAT). He founded MAT in Calgary in January 1998. He is also the founder of Islamic Supreme Council of Canada (ISCC).

Imam Soharwardy is the founder of the first ever Dar-ul-Aloom in Calgary, Alberta where he teaches Islamic studies. Prof. Soharwardy is the Head Imam at the Al Madinah Calgary Islamic Centre. Imam Soharwardy is a strong advocate of Islamic Tasawuf (Sufism). and believes that the world will be a better place for everyone if we follow what the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (Peace be upon him) has said, "You will not have faith unless you like for others what you like for yourself." He believes that spiritual weakness in humans causes all kinds of problems.

Mr. Soharwardy can be contacted at soharwardy@shaw.ca OR Phone (403)-831-6330.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: For those in an international context who are in a younger generation, how can we bring about not only a greater interfaith dialogue, but also an interbelief dialogue from those who not only lack a formal religion to the entire suite of religions that the world offers?

Imam Syed Soharwardy: What is common among all of us is that we have a common humanity, interfaith dialogue is helpful because of the teachings of faith, regardless of the faith. Then you can make your arguments and suggestions, and discuss issues, based upon the interpretation of the scriptures.

From a humanist perspective, definitely, there are certain values and understandings that have been practiced and believed by all human beings of all faiths and no faith. For example, the killing of an innocent person is a very bad and very inhuman act.

It has been condemned by faith and non-faith groups. Life is sacred and holy. In all of our groups, whether faith-based or not, those values which are human values have been endorsed by faiths as well as by people of individual beliefs or groups of non-religious beliefs.

We can still have interfaith dialogue or dialogue with the people who have no belief, but being human beings and understanding the values of a human being. The precious value of human life, telling the truth, not killing children, women, or innocent people.

Violence is bad. Those are common values among human beings; no matter who the group of people are. We can still have an argument and a convincing argument based on common sense and on human behavior. Regardless of whether the belief is determined by religion or not.

Jacobsen: In terms of Canadian organizations, what ones would recommend for people to look into that are facilitating the interbelief dialogue?

Soharwardy: Community organizations, the most important thing is the community needs to be involved in the discussions. They should not be at a leadership level, or imam or priest level. It should be at the level of common people.

That is why the work is different than other faith groups. I work at the grassroots level. I am an imam along with pastors, rabbis, and other leaders of the community are involved, but also women, children, and others in the community are involved. We attend the synagogue. We go to the mosque.

We do this conversational exchange. Churches come to our mosque too. That's why ours is different. They have a dialogue with everyone having a question and answer.

Ours include dialogue with the imam and priest level, but also with children and others, ad women, to break down the barriers. Especially for a new immigrant who comes to Canada, many women do not even speak English.

They come from underdeveloped countries. Children who are new in Canada. They have difficulty in communication too. That's where the barriers are broken. We have food together and children are playing together. So, that's what we do. That's very, very helpful.

You can ask the faith groups. They can testify to the importance of the congregation visits to various places of worship.

Jacobsen: When it comes to older generations compared younger generations, do you think they have a greater ability to adapt to that interbelief dialogue? I see many elders putting their hope in the young to bridge that group.

Soharwardy: Absolutely, the older generations develop firm positions in their beliefs or on problems. But younger generations from what I have seen in all faith groups is that they are very adaptive and outgoing, and they don't hesitate to express, honestly, their opinion.

Older generations sometimes are diplomatic and not as honest as they should be [Laughing]. But the younger generation, absolutely, they are better at expressing themselves and having dialogue and are outgoing and initiating discussion and most importantly, they are adaptive and flexible in listening as well as accepting other people's point of view if they belong to another faith group.

Younger people if it makes sense they will accept it. Older generations may have strong positions, regardless, at times. I am optimistic with the younger generations, especially the younger Muslim generation. I think when they come to leadership roles that we will have a much better situation than today.

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

An Interview with Steven Shapiro — Previous Secretary, University of West Florida Secular Student Alliance — Part 1

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 4, 2017

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

Steven Shapiro: Concerning my family background, I am half Italian on my mother's side, and Polish on my father's. Also, my father's family background is rich in Jewish culture (Shapiro as well being a traditionally Jewish last name). So I consider myself Jewish, apart from the actual religion. If that makes sense. My family was never religious per-se, instead my parents advocated for my two sisters and I to believe whatever we wanted to believe. Both of my sisters believe in a higher power, but are not a part of an organized religion, whereas I am atheist altogether. I have lived in Florida my entire life, spending a majority of it (outside of my college years) in the greater Orlando area. Specifically, Kissimmee. I attended Osceola High School, as did both my sisters. I graduated with honors, finishing 14th in my overall class.

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

Shapiro: To be honest with you, I never have had any personal connection to religion in general. Nobody in my immediate family practices any organized religion, and I've never had close friends that did either. For me, growing up I was always lead to believe that anything is possible, and that I would be accepted no matter what I believed in. As a result, I grew up to be a very realistic, and non-spiritual person. I believe that my actions are mine and mine alone, rather than the work of some creator. I suppose I started realizing this in middle school. I remember thinking critically about the world, and my relation to it. Never once do I remember considering "God" could be behind all of this. It just never made sense to me. I don't specifically remember any event that occurred that made me lean one way or the other, rather it was just a collection of things I saw and heard that made me feel the way I am today. I've always been one to question things, and play "devil's advocate" when I felt others blindly followed. I suppose it makes sense that I am a Journalism major.

Jacobsen: You were the secretary of University of West Florida Secular Student Alliance. What tasks and responsibilities came with the position? Why did you pursue this line of volunteering?

Shapiro: As the secretary for the Secular Student Alliance, I attended most if not all meetings that the organization held, as well as take "minutes" at each such meeting. Every E-Board meeting we had, as well as regular meetings, I would take notes and document what was being discussed. I would make note of any decisions we made, and later I would email those notes to each member. I also helped organize the second annual S3RC at the University of West Florida. That event took place in late April, and featured many members of the secular community speaking on topics of their choosing. Such speakers included David Suhor, as well as Lucien Greaves. As for why I pursued this position, honestly I wanted to get out of my comfort zone. For so long, I had been an

active member of several sports teams, and organizations. However, I never had held a leading position for one before. So for me, this meant taking on tasks that would be harder and more challenging. Plus, I would serve as a model of authority of some sort to others. I felt like it would test me professionally, as well personally.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Shapiro: Just knowing that I am doing my part for an organization that I love is fulfillment enough. Ever since my sophomore year, I have been a member of this organization, and hopefully I will continue to contribute long after I am graduated. When I joined SSA, I didn't have many friends, so attending weekly meetings was very important to me. It meant a lot that they accepted me and encouraged me to take part in their organization. Even though, I will not be reprising my position, I still intend to make it to meetings and take an active role in volunteering for them.

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

Shapiro: The best advice I could give to anyone is to just get involved. Nothing is going to change on our campus, unless people stand up and fight for what they believe in. I would encourage anyone that is interested in secularism to go and join SSA. The meetings would provide a "safe space" so to speak, and also make you more of aware of issues on our campus involving secularism.

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

Shapiro: I don't know of any "historic" violations, but certainly there are constant issues happening weekly. Every week, some people from different churches come to our campus to advertise. Specifically, I recall a group of Mormons that tabled outside of the Commons area. In my opinion, I don't believe people of the Christian faith should be allowed to advertise, unless all faiths are welcome to join. For instance, I have never seen any Muslim, Jewish, Satanic, Humanistic, or other faiths represented on our campus. There is also a gentleman that frequently shows up to campus and proceeds to yell belligerent and hateful things at students "in the name of God". In terms of "historic violations", that is the biggest one that I can recall. Several times I witness students protest and hold signs to show that they do not tolerate hate on our campus. That is probably the best way to combat those violations.

Conversation on the separate publicly-funded Catholic school system in Canada with Renton Patterson — President, Civil Rights in Public Education

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 8, 2017

Renton Patterson is the President of Civil Rights in Public Education (CRIPE). Here we talk about the separate school system in Canada. Another interview [here](#).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Democracy is an important international value. In Canada, we have issues. One issue relates to education: a publicly-funded separate school system (CRIPE, 2017).

How does the publicly-funded separate school system affect the general public? Potentially, how would a single publicly-funded school system improve democratic values within the country?

Renton Patterson: A publicly-funded separate school system affects the public in three different ways:

1. Social divisiveness. The governments of Canada, federal and provincial, have obviously agreed to set up two classes of persons. The lower class is penalized because of their personal and private thoughts about their Maker.

The Lower Class, because of its worthless beliefs, must not associate themselves with the Upper Class, particularly in publicly-funded schools and school buses. Playmates on the same street are divided at school age.

Children of the Upper Class attend superior school facilities where the children's priests ensure that they are indoctrinated in values approved by both the Ontario and Canadian governments, and the Supreme Court.

The one most recognizable to the parents, and children of school-age children, is the fact that the children may not be able to go to a community school because a separate school may be next door.

The students, therefore, may have to take a bus to the nearest public school, either elementary or secondary. This situation is exaggerated in rural Ontario, for example, public elementary-school students in White River, in Northern Ontario, are bused to Wawa, a distance of 93 km.

The only other option is to attend the separate school and be subject to indoctrination. (See CRIPE newsletter for Spring 2005.) At present, from around 2016, separate high-school students living in Mattawa are bused 62 km to North Bay. (See CRIPE newsletter for Fall 2009.)

Divisions, as outlined above, preclude the establishment of Community Schools. Such schools, especially in small communities, would, ideally, accommodate a library, meeting rooms, an auditorium, gymnasium, and other services that could benefit the entire community.

2. To separate the population through publicly-funded separate schools divides the population in negative ways. Small towns need co-operation among the population to achieve common community goals.

Rather than co-operation, there can be strong resentments, such as the divisions in Mattawa, Espanola, Port Dover (See CRIPE newsletter for Spring 2010) and on and on to a myriad of other communities.

With our present system of divisions based on religion, some students grow up never having made friends, or even met, with a person of “the other” religion. Separate schools mean separate busing and separate social activities.

Government-sponsored social division is unhealthy for communities — but some governments obviously believe that such divisions can be used to their advantage — an ulterior motive.

3. It costs Ontario taxpayers over a billion dollars each year to support the extra Roman Catholic separate schools. Three independent sources, using different methods, remarkably, came up to very similar figures — \$1.435 billion, \$1.431 billion, and \$1.320 billion. (See CRIPE newsletter for Spring 2013.)

And then the provincial government admitted it costs an extra \$billion to support the many underutilized schools across the province. This makes a one-time gas-plant cancellation scandal look like small potatoes.

These same extra dollar costs could be better used to fix school infrastructure, build living accommodation for the homeless, build or supply hospitals with modern equipment — and the list goes on. The separate schools, based on religion, provide no social benefit whatever to Ontario’s general population.

Jacobsen: Most of the Ontario public opposes the separate, publicly-funded, Roman Catholic school system, at 54%, while only 39% supported the public funding for the Catholic education system in Canada (Ibid.).

If this system exists, and if most of the Ontario citizenry oppose its funding, how does this also seemingly impact democratic values in Ontario?

Patterson: The most recent poll in Ontario is that conducted by “The Vector Poll™ on Public Opinion in Ontario” released in May of 2017. See attached. This poll found that 70% of the total population, 70% of Liberal voters, 69% of PC voters, and 51% of Roman Catholic school parents supported “a single public school system”.

Since a democracy is defined as “...equality of rights and opportunities and the rule of the majority” (Gage Canadian Dictionary) Ontario, on both counts, does not have a democratic government.

The Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that Canada should not be a democracy either through its decision in “Reference re Bill 30”. It declared on June 25th, 1987 that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not apply to education in Ontario, thus approving a desire of the Ontario government to engage in a two-tier citizenship policy.

The federal government refused to use its power of disallowance (section 56 of the Constitution Act, 1867) to throw out the offensive Bill 30. Both the Ontario and Canadian governments refuse to honour democratic values.

Reported in the Ottawa Citizen on November 7th, is an article which states that: The University of Ottawa is getting provincial money to help schools fight discrimination, Education Minister Mitzie Hunter announced Monday.

They're calling it an Equity Knowledge Network, which is "intended to bring together educators, school and system leaders, and community partners to work on identifying and removing all forms of discrimination and systemic barriers from schools and classrooms, and uphold diversity, equity, inclusion, and human rights."

<http://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/reevely-u-of-o-gets-grant-to-fight-discrimination-in-schools-though-not-the-most-obvious-kind>

Jacobsen: For younger people who live in countries with publicly-funded separate school systems based on religious preference, how can they combat it? What have been effective examples of educational, social, and political activism to reverse it, to even move towards a single educational system?

Patterson: Some time ago I read that there were, at that time, only seven countries that had some kind of religious preference as government policy. I know of no example of educational, social, or political activism that has reversed any policy of religious preference.

In the case of Manitoba, Quebec, and Newfoundland & Labrador, it was the government bodies of those jurisdictions that had the courage to "do the right thing" and get rid of any religious preference. This is the way it should be. In the case of Ontario, it will be an appeal to the court through OPEN. For more details on OPEN, go to www.cripeweb.org and click on OPEN.

An Interview with Steven Shapiro — Previous Secretary, University of West Florida Secular Student Alliance — Part 2

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 11, 2017

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

Steven Shapiro: You can never have enough people involved on campus for your organization. If there is any area that needs improvement, it is that. I don't believe that SSA has reached out nearly enough of what it can. More people need to be informed, and more people need to take an active role to combat other strong organizations, such as BCM (Baptist Collegiate Ministry). There is a church right next to campus, so obviously more people are exposed to their advertising, as opposed to ours. Our main goal isn't to eradicate faithful organizations, on the contrary, we would actually like to get along and be able to co-exist equally on campus. However, we need more people to understand our side and take an active role in that belief for it to work.

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

Shapiro: Obviously my main concern is that our organization won't be as strong as it used to be. It does seem as if more and more people are reaching out to us, however you can never have enough support. Hopefully one day SSA will be one of the most strong, and present organizations on campus. My concern isn't too heavy however, because there are more students standing up, speaking their mind and voicing their concerns. I am actually very proud of the progression that I have seen in just the last four years.

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

Shapiro: The current biggest threats would have to be the radical people that show up to our campus. The man that I mentioned earlier, or those that show up week after week to spread their message. I don't take issue with those that are spiritual, but it becomes a problem when you start forcing your belief down other people's throats. Too often do those instances occur where people get yelled at "in the name of God". Those are some major issues we currently face.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Shapiro: Obviously some lasting threats would be the huge presence of Christianity on our campus. Being that we have two or more strong religious organizations on campus, two church's in a five-mile radius, and of course Pensacola Christian College ten minutes away, it certainly does an overbearing effect on people. Given that Pensacola is a big area in the "Bible belt", religion is present wherever you go. I would like to see more balance in the area altogether. There needs to be more people on each side, rather than a more lop-sided equation. These are the issues we have been facing for a very long time, and probably to continue to face in the years to come.

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

Shapiro: There is the Secular Student Alliance, several science related organizations, as well as the philosophy club, which was ran by our former president Janelle Gormley. We also support clubs that advocate for women's rights, as well as members of the LGBTQ community. Our current president, Carla Rodriguez also took part in the women's march in downtown Pensacola, as well as the March for Science in Washington D.C.

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

Shapiro: The main event that we put on this year was S3RC. As discussed earlier, it was an event where members of the secular community were asked to come to our campus and speak on such issues. We also hold weekly meetings, and frequently attend county board meetings to allow our voices to be heard. We also do fundraisers from time to time, such as a bake sale, selling merchandise, and an event where students got to throw water balloons at us (in the name of science of course). Topics of discussion can range from serious political matters, to more light hearted things such secularism in film. We often discussed several science related matters as well. Usually in the beginning of the year, we allow our new members to speak about themselves and how they became secular. Any topic could be up for discussion, so long as it pertains to secularism. Often times, we would also watch a documentary, or watch videos on YouTube pertaining to our topic and discuss what we watched.

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

Shapiro: Students may get involved by simply showing up to our meetings! We hold weekly meetings, and based on the schedules of all the E-Board members it could be any day, at any time. However, it is always in the Commons in one of the conference rooms upstairs. As the semester draws closer, it will be easier to tell when meetings will be held. Also, students may find more information about the organization by finding us on campus where we are tabling! We also frequently use chalk to write on the sidewalks of campus to spread our message. Students should have no problem learning more about our organization.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Shapiro: I just want to say that I am truly honored to be a part of this organization, and am very proud to call myself a secular human being. I don't wish for everyone to think the same way I do, as nothing could ever get accomplished. All joking aside, I would love for people to form their opinions on their own accord. People shouldn't follow simply because they think it's the right thing to do. They should believe what they want to believe. They should want to strive to be more inclusive with people of all faiths, or lack thereof. That is what this all about. We want to unite people together, despite our differences. We don't want to shut out, we want to include people. It's diversity and differences of opinion that makes humanity move forward. If we always think the same way all the time, nothing will progress. That's all I have to say, hopefully it all makes sense.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Steven.

Shapiro: You're welcome, thank you for interviewing me. It was my pleasure to give you my thoughts on these issues.

An Interview with Shawn Polson — President, Secular Students and Skeptics Society at University of Colorado, Boulder — Part 1

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 18, 2017

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

Shawn Polson: Hey Scott, thanks for asking me to talk! I'm from Tulsa, Oklahoma and most people I know live in Oklahoma. We all speak the language I'm using and since you're asking, they are perfectly nice people! I haven't studied southern culture formally, so I won't try to make that impression, but my family is like a great many people in what's colloquially known as the "buckle" of the Bible Belt. They like tradition, they're warm hearted, and maybe a little old-fashioned, but I love them. They're generally well-educated and plugged into their communities. I've got an uncle who's a retired architect, one that works on computers, one is a priest, and I have an aunt who's in medicine. My mom is a supervising accountant for one of the largest gas companies in the country, and even my grandma holds some high position in her neighborhood association.

Most of my family members have college degrees, but that wasn't the case for most of the generations above my grandparents. My dad was like his dad and never needed to finish college. He just got a job and stuck to it. It worked for them. I am hoping college education stays trendier though, you know. I'll try to keep that up.

My family is widely Christian, which is not super shocking in Oklahoma. We prayed before meals, went to church, did the whole thing you do. They found a lot of community in their churches, and — if I can digress for a second — I remember those churches having top of the line Sunday schools to boot. We went to one mega-church that had, I kid you not, rock climbing walls, billiards tables, all the video games, extravagant events, so much. I truthfully liked it as a kid.

So, they wear it on their sleeves a little, but that's largely life there. About irreligion, my folks wish I was a believer with them, understandable given their backgrounds, but they tolerate and/or ignore my disbelief well enough. Because you ask, asking skeptical questions like why dinosaur bones were supposed to be 6,000 years old did distance me from my family some. People treat religion differently in Boulder.

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

Polson: Well, I was raised a solid believer, but that stopped around seventh grade for me (shout out to my irreligious stepbrother from Australia). Actually, I can almost say I started my first secular club in high school. I remember Jenks High having a club, "Trojans for Christ," and they were integral to the school in many ways. I had more angst back then, and I let my friends talk me into going through the process of starting a club named "Trojans for Reason." We never held a meeting or anything, but we did have a faculty advisor on file. It made a statement, and that's all it really was. We were uncomfortable with classes being shortened for worship and funds going to breakfast prayer banquets when teachers were buying tissue boxes and writing supplies with

money raised by students' parents. Back then we just felt validated seeing posters reading "Trojans for Reason" hanging next to "Trojans for Christ." I happened to be in a band at the time, so it turns out that we had a pretty good poster guy for that.

I really got involved with secularism in college though, in Oklahoma State University's secular club. I met the "Oklahoma State Secular Organization" (OSSO for short) during my first week on campus at one of their tables, and they were tiny back then. I ended up handing out flyers with them that first day because they needed help, and over two years that grew into me being their vice president. I worked with the most intelligent and hard-working group of five people running OSSO, and all their work brought them from a floundering club of maybe four members to a thriving organization of hundreds. To this day, they host creative secular demonstrations on campus, debates, hold biweekly social outings, and all sorts of awesome stuff.

OSSO was really very different from what I do now. Religion is so deeply ingrained in that campus that OSSO almost existed just as a counterbalance to the lunacy that occurred unfortunately often. I'm so used to living in Boulder now that it's strange to recall, but there would be older men waving giant banners on OSU's campus literally yelling at students to drop out of college and pursue lives with Jesus, there were monthly anti-evolution demonstrations, orthodox men displaying signs like "Good women are submissive," just loads of ugliness. OSSO did its part to promote real scientific education, equality, etc., but they're still so far out-resourced that it's hard not to be drowned out.

It was incredible to hear the stories of students, especially transfer students from the Middle East, who escaped real persecution for their beliefs, and you could see in their eyes how important it was to have the culture of like-minded people that OSSO offered. I met 18-year-olds who had narrowly escaped death sentences in their home countries by transferring to an American school, and it was life-affirming for me to be able to offer them such social support when their "cowboy" peers wouldn't.

An Interview with Shawn Polson — President, Secular Students and Skeptics Society at University of Colorado, Boulder — Part 2

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are the president of the Secular Students and Skeptics Society at University of Colorado, Boulder. What tasks and responsibilities come with the position? Why do you pursue this line of volunteering?

Shawn Polson: As I said earlier, SSaSS (our abbreviation) is very different than OSSO. You don't see the same amount of ostracizing here at CU Boulder. In fact, there is almost none; I can barely recall a time when anyone at CU had an issue with a group of atheists doing anything. This means that we really get to focus on science-based issues without having to "combat" anything, which is a welcome change of pace for me.

My tasks and responsibilities are to essentially just do everything. It's a strange situation where I'm actually offered way more university resources, money especially, by CU than I ever got with OSSO, but regardless, SSaSS is notably smaller. It may or may not be surprising that I don't have a bona fide officer team. It's only me, my wonderful girlfriend Dana (who already graduated with a linguistics degree), and our good friend Scott (who happens to teach for Science Discovery at CU). I'm the only student.

Our members are brilliant though, and many of them study great geeky subjects or have simply picked up wonderful info throughout their lives. We leverage that at SSaSS by encouraging student members to give the talks that our biweekly meetings typically center around. We're all friends, and it's a neat atmosphere where everyone can get together and learn from each other's ideas. My job is largely to facilitate them having the best time possible; we are registered as a social club, after all.

To avoid being a stuffy group of academics (in case that's not your thing), I keep things fun by hosting off-campus events like trivia at a bar or dinner at a Mexican joint, you know, stuff to keep things exciting. I also organize at least one large event each semester using the resources CU provides me. A year ago, we brought head of the Satanic Temple Lucien Greaves to speak at CU, and SSaSS got to go out to Dark Horse bar with him afterwards — which was indeed as cool as it sounds. The semester after that I hosted a panel that discussed the arguments for and against humans having free will.

I do it because A) I think it's an important cause and it's fun for me, but more importantly B) it's rewarding to spread scientific understanding and critical thinking, and to be the person behind the scenes organizing the events that people enjoy attending.

Jacobsen: What personal fulfillment comes from it?

Polson: That's really the personal fulfillment right there: spreading science and giving people fun and thought-provoking events to attend. And getting to know everybody.

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

Polson: It's difficult to say how best to activize because it depends on the social climate of the campus, of course, but the approach I use is to focus on the positives of science rather than droning about the negatives of religion. It's not my goal to end religion or to evangelize atheism. I want to see critical thinking skills advanced in the classroom, and I want to instill respect for the scientific process in everyone. I'd like to see a day where scientific consensus carries the weight it ought to so that, when discussing topics like climate change, evolution, homeopathy, human origins, you name it, we can all look to the science instead of our beliefs. In general, I think it's most important to lead people to information and to allow them to take ownership of it (stealing Neil deGrasse Tysons's phrasing), so that no one has to appeal to an authority for their information.

Besides that, broad approach, it never hurts to remember some basic psychology when talking to people. The backfire effect is one I always keep in mind. That's the idea that arguing with people often tends to "backfire": challenging someone's position often leads to them doubling down on that position (it's not always fun to admit you're wrong, after all), so it's easy to start an argument, and then have the two participants walk away from it more polarized than when they started. It's also helpful to remember that we're all susceptible to cognitive bias — tending to accept ideas that fit our beliefs while ignoring those that challenge them — and we could all benefit from being proven wrong more often.

Tabling frequently helps too!

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

Polson: I have to think about that one because, at CU, nothing really comes to mind. But I guess I've got one reasonably successful thing I can mention!

CU has a popular "free speech zone" by a fountain outside the big student center, which is the go-to place for any kind of demonstration. Occasionally you'll get religious people that are so far out there that even other religious campus groups can't stand them. On some of those days, SSaSS likes to play "preacher bingo!" That's our cheeky, perhaps a little immature, version of bingo where the numbers are replaced by offensive things those people consistently say.

The result is that you have a crowd of people holding cards listening to this person rant, and they're going on about "homosexuals are sinners," "you're going to hell," "*(scientific concept)* is only a 'theory'." But then suddenly, "you can't prove god doesn't exist..."

"Bingo!"

Someone gets five in a row and SSaSS has a drop-off location where people can trade in their winning cards for candy. We want to protect free speech and peoples' rights to say whatever, but that doesn't mean we can't ridicule their ideas a little — no idea should be above ridicule.

An Interview with Shawn Polson — President, Secular Students and Skeptics Society at University of Colorado, Boulder — Part 3

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 20, 2017

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

Shawn Polson: I think the main need is to have a community to be a part of. Most secularists I've met have dealt with some pushback for their beliefs, usually from family or friends, and I think it helps to have a space to feel included where they're treated like rational people. It's also not super easy to meet new people and make new friends in a new environment like college, so secular clubs like mine can offer younger students a place to make those first connections.

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

Polson: The main concern with secularism on campus is probably always going to be finding future leadership. By nature, groups like SSaSS are operated by students who will only be on their campuses for a handful of years. From what I understand, a secular group in the US is doing well if it has 10–20 active members in it (and really, I think that holds true for most campus groups). It's easy to attend meetings, have fun, and passively participate in events, but it takes a little more to step up and make it all happen. Lots of groups go through short times of crisis where the current leadership is graduating and they have to find new students to take the reins. I know my time with SSaSS was preceded by that.

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

Polson: I actually wouldn't be so dramatic as to say there are any *threats* to secularism at CU Boulder. Everyone is generally onboard with separating church and state, teaching evolution in the classroom, atheists existing, all the good stuff. I'd say apathy is the closest thing to a threat I can think of. We're already such a secular and liberal school to begin with that it's easy to lose the drive to get out there and work to advance the secular movement.

Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism on campus?

Polson: I'm too new to the university to be an authority on perennial threats, but I must imagine that apathy would've still been the only issue. For all intents and purposes, SSaSS is the voice of the secular movement at CU Boulder. And judging from conversations I've had with past leadership, that voice has been quieter at times.

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

Polson: SSaSS is the only explicitly secular group here. Our university has lots of great science-based clubs, however, and we usually have a couple members who are involved with some. "CU Stars" is a great one; they're the astronomy club on campus. What secularist doesn't love gazing at and pondering the cosmos? If politics is your thing, CU's got you covered too. Republican and

Democrats alike have thriving groups, and they offer tons of opportunities to get involved with the political process. I've done phone banking on campus a couple times, for example.

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

Polson: Oh, so many different things. I'll start with the discussion topics. There is no set of topics that our biweekly meetings center around, so the best I can do is give past examples, although they do tend to be science-themed. Ten examples of presentations I can remember students giving are:

- The Search for Life in the Universe
- Boko Haram
- Free Will
- Quantum Computers (I did that one)
- The Historical Jesus
- Linguistics for Noobs (that was Dana)
- Astrology
- Arguments *for* God's existence
- Secular Morality
- Futurism

We have a smaller set of events that we've done since I took over, and I can list those in their entirety. Our biggest events were Lucien Greaves's talk on campus and the free will panel I hosted. I haven't decided our biggest event for the upcoming semester yet, but I know SSaSS is going to host a stop in the "Ex-Muslims of North America Tour," so people hearing this can look forward to that in late September/early October.

We have more regular things that we do around campus to keep ourselves visible including tabling in the UMC, "Ask-an-Atheist" day, "Graveyard of the Gods" (setting up paper tombstones of all the many gods that most of the modern world no longer believes in), the preacher bingo I mentioned earlier, and this semester we're hoping to run "Fiction for Fiction," which is where we let students bring us their unwanted Bibles and exchange them for cooler fiction books like Harry Potter or Star Trek.

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

Polson: (cough cough) Join us! The Secular Student Alliance is the larger national organization that SSaSS works under, so we're the people who maintain those ties. I mentioned this earlier, but we're a social group on paper which means that there are zero hoops to jump through. We don't charge membership dues; all one must do is join our Facebook page ([Facebook.com/groups/SSaSSatCU](https://www.facebook.com/groups/SSaSSatCU)) and show up to any of our meetings or events! Our regular meetings are every other Thursday at 6pm in CU's Eaton Humanities building. I make a Facebook event for every meeting or event we hold, so if you can see that page, you'll know what we are up to.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Polson: Concluding thoughts? I think you're a swell guy, Scott. And thanks for having me on. Keep up the good work with Humanist Voices.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Shawn. That was fun.

Reva Landau of Open Public Education Now on the religious separate school system in Canada

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 21, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: OPEN is a coalition that is crowdfunding for a “constitutional challenge our courts to limit the public funding of the duplicate Catholic separate school system” and to pursue this vigorously. Why was this formed? Who formed it?

Reva Landau: Ontario currently funds the Catholic separate school system at the same or a greater level than the public non-denominational system, but does not fund the educational system of any other religion or philosophy (including atheism, etc.) OPEN (One Public Education Now) was formed because the three major political parties in Ontario continue to insist that the public funding of the separate school system is a “constitutional issue” which is not under their control to change. They ignore that Quebec, a Canadian province, governed by exactly the same constitutional legislation, abolished public funding for separate schools in 1997. As all three major parties refuse to do anything, crowdfunding for a legal challenge under s.15(1) of the Canadian *Charter of Rights* seemed the only alternative that would force the provincial government to stop this discriminatory and wasteful funding and create one public non-denominational two-language school system for Ontario.

The coalition includes CRIPE (Civil Rights in Public Education), the Canadian Secular Alliance, and several individuals including our plaintiffs (see more below), and myself. I initiated my own legal action in 2012 but I was refused leave to continue because I was not considered to have “standing” to pursue this legal case because I was not a student, parent, or teacher. Our current plaintiffs should not have that issue. As a result of the response to my own court case, I realized there was a lot of support among Ontario residents for stopping the public funding of the separate school system.

Jacobsen: What is its progress? What are its short and long-term targeted objectives?

Landau: Our short-term goal is to raise enough (an estimated \$100,000) to hire a lawyer to prepare and file the application under the *Charter of Rights* and launch the court case. We have raised over \$15,000 so far. We also want to make more people aware that not only is it obviously unfair to fund one religious system, but it is a waste of public funds. It has been estimated in a study by the Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods of Ontario that up to 1.6 billion dollars could be saved yearly by having one public non-denominational two-language school system.

Our long-term goal is to continue raising funds to provide for various legal contingencies, and to either win our legal case or through the publicity around the legal case put such pressure on the Ontario government that they will finally “do the right thing”. Columnists in papers such as the *Globe and Mail*, radio broadcasts such as the CBC 180 and people such as Charles Pascal, the former Deputy Minister of Education, all support our position. Our webpage,

<https://open.cripeweb.org/aboutOpen.html> has links to these and other supporters.

Jacobsen: One plaintiff in a legal case is a high school teacher that is unable to qualify for a position in 1/3 of the publicly funded teaching positions because she is non-Catholic, which amounts to a functional prejudice in the system against non-Catholics regarding teaching

positions. Furthermore, public money is going to Catholic schools, but only Catholic school teachers can educate at them. What is the progress of this? What can other countries learn about activism to reverse the prejudice?

Landau: The right of the Catholic separate school system to discriminate against non-Catholics for teaching positions was upheld in an Ontario Court of Appeal decision in 1999. It shows that even in a multicultural country like Canada with a *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* that supposedly outlaws discrimination on account of religion, historical injustices continue to exist and citizens must organize against them.

The Ontario situation shows what happens when people just accept that privileged treatment for one group (in Ontario, Catholics) existed in the past and therefore should continue to exist without questioning whether in a province where only 31% are Catholic, 23% describe themselves as “no religious affiliation”, and all the others are non-Catholic Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Muslims, etc., and in a country and province which now describes itself as “multicultural”, this privilege should continue to exist.

Jacobsen: Another plaintiff is a parent of two children that want to go to French schools or Francophone schools. It is a 20-minute drive away. But the children have bus 55 minutes because of the only publicly-funded French school being a Catholic separate school farther away. The parent wants their children to have a public education. How common is the story?

Landau: To clarify, the closest Francophone school is a separate Catholic school a 20-minute drive away. The closest public Francophone schools is a 55-minute drive away. I know of other examples. Someone who lives in a small town outside of Ottawa has children who were bused about 40 minutes each way every day to a public (English-speaking) high school. His small town has a publicly-funded English-speaking high school within walking distance of his house, but the publicly-funded high school is separate Catholic and he wanted his children to have a public education. Similarly, Catholic children were bused into his town to go to the separate school from their own towns. If all publicly-funded schools were public, every year millions of dollars on unnecessary busing would be saved because students would go to the closest community school.

Jacobsen: You have a constitutional challenge ongoing through the organization. This is using the *Canadian Charter*. In section 15, it guarantees equal benefit and protection of the law for all Canadian citizens. Quebec abolished separate school systems in 1997. The same could happen in Ontario and throughout the country. There is desire across much of the country. How can individual Canadian citizens become active in this movement? How can we raise awareness? How can they donate time, skills, money, and connections to OPEN and similar organizations?

Landau: OPEN encourages all Canadians who want one publicly-funded school system in Ontario to donate to OPEN at

<https://open.criweb.org/aboutOpen.html>. We have documentation on our website under the Documents hyperlink which they can read for themselves and send to other individuals and organizations who they think would be interested in donating and spreading information about the costly nature of our discriminatory system. Of course, if any lawyers with experience in *Charter of Rights* equality issues want to take on our case pro bono (or only for out-of-pocket costs), we would welcome their expertise.

The only other provinces that have separate school funding are Alberta and Saskatchewan, and they also fund schools all religions (or schools of no religions) at a lesser level. The other provinces either fund only a non-denominational public school system (which is the model I prefer because all children study together and monies are not wasted on duplicate systems) or fund a non-denominational public school system at the highest rate, and fund all private schools (religious or non-religious) that meet educational standards at a lesser rate. Both these last two examples are non-discriminatory though I prefer the one public non-denominational model.

Jacobsen: How can this set an example for other countries?

Landau: Will let you know once we have had a successful result.

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

An Interview with Valérie Dubé — Board Member, Humanist Association of Ottawa

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 27, 2017

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

Valérie Dubé: Not really. My parents were raised by Catholics in rural Quebec. My mom has a high school degree, she is religious and believes in angels, heaven, etc. My dad has a higher level of education (university degree, formerly “normal school”) and, as far as I can tell, never believed in the supernatural — despite reluctantly following some religious rituals, sometimes. My parents raised me as Catholic. I don’t remember when I stopped believing, it happened gradually. I always loved science (my dad encouraged it) and it made more sense to me than religion. I have been non-religious for over two decades. I learned about humanism a couple years ago and I now identify as a secular humanist.

Jacobsen: What is the Ottawa culture regarding religion? Why is the case?

Dubé: Ottawa is a multicultural city, with people from all around the world and all walks of life, a highly educated workforce and a low crime rate. There are many worship centres/buildings of different faiths throughout the city. The predominant religious affiliation would be Christianity. The percentage of residents with no religious affiliation is significant (somewhere between 20–25% if I’m not mistaken). The residents seem very accepting of diversity, and are inclusive and tolerant. But I’m saying that with the bias of being an atheist Caucasian.

Jacobsen: As a board member for the Humanist Association of Ottawa, what tasks and responsibilities come with a member at large position? Why pursue this volunteering?

Dubé: As a board member at large for the HAO, I attend monthly meetings and help organize a few events throughout the year. I am in charge of keeping an eye on our Facebook page and I recently took the initiative to translate in French our brochure and some of our website pages (not yet online). My interest in volunteering for the HAO is to help promote and support human rights, tolerance, inclusiveness, a secular rule of law and secular education for everyone, and a healthy planet.

Jacobsen: What is the importance of humanist public service, especially with so few of them?

Dubé: I think it is important to raise awareness about and promote humanism. It is not a well-known, widely-recognized movement/concept yet. Many of my atheist friends did not know about humanism until very recently when I started talking about it. There are many religious lobbying groups everywhere, and few humanists or atheists lobbyist groups in comparison. I think that promoting humanism is important to gathering a critical mass and raising a stronger voice to push for the respect of human rights and secular institutions informed by science for everyone, everywhere.

Jacobsen: What seems like, in interaction with others, the international issues for humanists?

Dubé: The main international issue, in my opinion, is human rights abuses in parts of the world. There are numerous issues for humanists worldwide, they vary by country/region and are too numerous to list them all, but I think human rights is our priority internationally.

Jacobsen: What are the core values, and virtues, even vices, of humanism?

Dubé: As humanists, we value reason, compassion, critical thinking, science, justice, integrity, equality, and tolerance, and we strive to promote education, understanding and development of ethical principles, practices and culture associated with these values. We understand that it is up to us to choose the lives we want to live and the kind of society we want to live in, and that the only justice available is that which we make for ourselves by defining and defending human rights. One vice that I think some of us may have is a superiority complex, thinking that humanism is better than other world views.

Jacobsen: Does Canada seem to tacitly endorse humanist values across even the religious spectrum of the population, which is most of the population?

Dubé: I think so. The fact that our laws and jurisprudence are mostly secular (section 296 and paragraph 319(3)(b) of the *Criminal Code* have not been repelled yet) demonstrates that endorsement.

Jacobsen: What are some issues and concerns around religious influence in political and law, and social life? How can we solve them? Why is this important to tackle right away?

Dubé: One obvious issue around religious influence in politics and law can be found in section 296 and paragraph 319(3)(b) of the *Criminal Code* pertaining respectively to blasphemous libel and defending wilful promotion of hatred based on belief in a religious text. An important issue in social life is discrimination and intolerance towards certain groups of people, such as LGBTQ2, aboriginals, blacks and middle-eastern communities.

Jacobsen: What are the future initiatives planned for the Humanists Association of Ottawa?

Dubé: One initiative we want to undertake this year is reach out to humanist celebrants in the Ottawa area and discuss how we can work together to promote secular ceremonies and increase awareness about humanism. We also will focus our lobbying to the cause “one school system” in Ontario.

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

Dubé: I think that humanism has very solid grounding as a source of optimism that positive social change is possible with human collaboration and also a motivation for action, by acknowledging that it is up to us humans to improve the condition of ourselves and our environment. I’m optimistic that humanism will spread and drive political and societal changes that will benefit the entire world. It makes me happy and I find it very encouraging that the IHEU provides a humanist voice and promotes humanist values on the international scene; the world needs a secular humanist influence on international laws and treaties. Thank you!

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Valérie.

An Interview with Robert Magara — Executive Director, Kanunga Humanist Association

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

December 4, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have a deeper experience working in humanist organizations. What are some of the lessons you've learned working with the organizations?

Robert Magara: The lessons I have learnt working with humanist organisations, are that humanism is usually very individualistic, seeing each person as important in his or her own right, regardless of the needs of the community.

For a humanist, all human beings are born with moral value, and have a responsibility to help one another live better lives.

Jacobsen: How is the humanist movement in Uganda? Is it healthy and vibrant, and big, or forced to be quieter and on the periphery of society?

Magara: The humanist movement in Uganda is doing very great and healthy, very many people accept to put humanity at the center of everything.

Jacobsen: As the executive director of Kanunga Humanist Association, what are your tasks and responsibilities as the executive director? What are your main social, educational, even political, initiatives to advance the humanist movement in Uganda?

Magara: Yes, this is great. As the executive director of Kanungu Humanists Association, my tasks and responsibilities are entirely planning, coordinating, and networking with all my initiatives (Kanungu Humanist primary school, Kayungwe women's empowerment centre, Bugaari Rwanika progressive women's group etc and make more other proposals) in partnership with Brighter Brains Institute.

Jacobsen: What are some honest failures and successes in Uganda for the humanist movement through the various humanist associations, groups, and organizations there?

Magara: I have not observed or heard any failures in Uganda in any of our associations or groups. only that people still lack the knowledge about humanism's values. Humanism works!

Jacobsen: How can other countries' humanist associations, groups, and organizations learn from these failures and build on successes?

Magara: We need to start sharing humanism. there is room in the humanist tent for theists, secularists, agnostics, and atheists. Anyone who subscribes to most of the Kanungu Humanists Association commitments and Humanism and its aspirations is a person I believe I could like.

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

Magara: With the success of every group or association or an individual, I can say, "If we think happy thoughts, we will be happy. If we think miserable thoughts, we will be miserable," that is about attitude.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Robert.

Magara: Thank you for your time too. We aspire to the greater good of humanity.

Interview with Lucille V. Hoersten

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

December 16, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are on the international council for HAPI, and in Germany as its representative. How did you find HAPI? Why did you think it was important to join the organization?

Lucille V. Hoersten: Good evening too. I neither found nor joined HAPI. I was incidentally added into the fb group. I also did not apply for any position, I got assigned, of which task I try to do as good as I can. I do not find it important to join the group.

Jacobsen: How important is it, and in what ways is it, for humanists to come together under a unified banner within a single country for international outreach?

Hoersten: It is not important, but it does feel good to know one is not alone, that there are humanists/atheists too. It is then like home. Just like I do not need religion to be able to help & function. But I make it a habit to help once I feel I am needed.

Jacobsen: What have been some of our initiatives with HAPI, or some of the general projects of HAPI, that you're proud of in their success?

Hoersten: I find all projects beneficial & I am profoundly grateful for everyone trying to contribute & help. And I am deeply happy that there is this atheist union that awakens critical thinking/rationalism, & gradually eradicates the acceptance of superstition & handed over dogma.

Jacobsen: What have been some honest failures? How can the next set of humanist leaders learn from these?

Hoersten: There are indeed existing failures. But that is a matter I find best discussed & solved internally. Life is a learning process & so we try to learn a little bit more every day. I hope we will be able to widely promote critical thinking.

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for the humanist movement in the Philippines in the coming years?

Hoersten: I hope we get to help more less fortunate people. I hope we learn to be grateful to each other & to really love each other, so much that it eradicates power greed in the union, so that we can all fully focus on altruistically providing humanitarian aid. To live our lives for a cause.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Lucille.

An Interview with Alvin John Ballares — Member, HAPI

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

December 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What do you see, and experience, as some of the main difficulties for freethinkers and humanists and formal irreligious in the Philippines?

Alvin John Ballares: For the first question, I always get misunderstood by people especially in the workplace. That I think is the consensus amongst us freethinkers and humanists in our workplaces. My long time GF broke up with me when she found out about my Atheism. I was frowned upon for countless times already by my colleagues when I told them about my atheism

Jacobsen: How did you find HAPI, and why did you join it?

Ballares: I found HAPI through a friend who was a practicing Wiccan. (He's now dead). I joined HAPI basically for that sense of community; people who share the same worldviews.

Jacobsen: What do you think are some of the bigger bigotries against irreligious people in the Philippines in law, in culture, and in social life?

Ballares: Biggest bigotry is on the moral side. Reproductive health issues, like church, discourage the use of condoms which is, by the way, one of our strongest advocacies in HAPI Bacolod. Irreligious people are tagged to be the ones promoting Reproductive Health. There's this one time that we had to move away from the place where we were distributing condoms. People were sent to us by the local parish to fend us off.

Sex/sexuality is avoided like plague by the majority of people in this country. Most Filipinos are wired to think that it's immoral to talk about sex. LGBT is quite of an issue up until now. We still don't have same-sex marriage for the reason of immorality- say the pedophile priests.

The Philippine law doesn't give us protection from persecution. We don't get that privilege to express our secularism openly. It is often welcomed with sarcasm and curses from Hell.

Jacobsen: What seems like some of the activities and initiatives that are moving the dial forward towards more equality for humanists, freethinkers, and similar others in the Philippines?

Ballares: Basic activities would include building more platforms for the promotion of the arts: visual, poetry, etc. We initiated this event we call Rekindle to promote humanism through arts (modeled after the Renaissance). Whenever we gather as a group of atheists and promote secularism, people listen to us. We do it subtly.

Jacobsen: What are you hoping to do in the near-future on the activist front?

Ballares: I'm hoping to do more of what we do in Rekindle. We would like to promote Rekindle nationwide, to our chapters.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time.

An Interview with J.P. Westlund — President, Humanist Association of Ottawa

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 1, 2018

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

J.P. Westlund: Not at all, I was raised in a family of believers. They weren't too strict about it, we went to the united church, and I remember my father would question aspects of Christianity. However, they all believed in the existence of the supernatural, each according to their taste, and I was the only one who would become an atheist.

Jacobsen: What is the Ottawa culture regarding religion? Why is the case?

Westlund: I think that the believers keep their views beneath the surface, and they don't think about them much, but they are afraid to abandon them. They've lost much of the connection they used to have with the world of faith, but that world persists because it's institutionalized and people still rely on the church to bless them or add meaning to major life events like marriages and funerals. This is the case because religion over the last few centuries has, in the West, lost its explanatory power and to some extent its moral power.

Jacobsen: As the president for the Humanist Association of Ottawa, what tasks and responsibilities come with the presidential position? Why pursue this volunteering?

Westlund: I volunteer because I believe in building a Humanist community. I remember the first few meetings I attended, around ten years ago, and the relief of being able to speak openly about religion, knowing I was in a group of non-religious people. That's something that the religious have that we don't, the community. Not to the same extent. Can we build it without the illusory foundation? I hope so. Also, I love to argue, and I've got a contrarian streak in me. The members tend to be on the cerebral side and not afraid of airing different ideas, so you can get into some interesting conversations that probably wouldn't happen elsewhere. As the president I set the initial agenda for board meetings, I talk to the media when needed, and there is a sense that the buck stops here, so to speak. But our board is very democratic. One person, one vote. When we disagree we try to come to consensus first though.

Jacobsen: What is the importance of humanist public service, especially with so few of them?

Westlund: The officiants can be the way we get religion out of the important social moments of our lives like marriages and funerals. People need to know there's another option other than having a religious figure sanctioning it. Right now I think that's the biggest difference we can make. Many aren't really believers but they go with the flow because the other options just aren't as well known. We need to keep working on changing that.

Jacobsen: What seems like, in interaction with others, the international issues for humanists?

Westlund: I think one thing we can all agree on is getting rid of blasphemy laws, and supporting peoples' freedom of speech worldwide. That isn't easy because you're dealing with other states. We can protest at embassies but I think we need to keep the focus on supporting freedom of speech here in Canada as well. Also, the world is overpopulated and yet religious powers are

limiting women's access to contraception. In the Philippines for example, very overpopulated, and very Catholic, they wrote up a reproductive health bill in 2012 but the Supreme Court is putting a hold on it and Duterte had to issue an executive order to finally get it through.

Jacobsen: What are the core values, and virtues, even vices, of humanism?

Westlund: You can look up the values of different humanist groups. Fundamentally, behind those, I think the value and virtue we all share is the belief that we are responsible. There is no ethereal, omniscient judge watching over us. We don't cast off the burden of existence to dive into a fantasy realm. When there is no idea of a transcendental authority, we have to work it out for ourselves. That's where I think the vices have the opportunity to come in. It takes intelligence to reject the religious outlook but it also takes strength. You're going against the grain in this world when you do that, and it's noble. So when you get a humanist group together, you're getting several sharp people who aren't afraid to be bold when they speak. I love nothing more than a good argument but not everybody feels the same. Sometimes the arguments divide us, and the impulse to prove yourself right trumps the need to smooth things out in a group, and try to reach some consensus. I think that's a mistake, and if we're going to build this humanist community, we're going to have to get better at celebrating what we have in common, even while we talk through our differences.

Jacobsen: Does Canada seem to tacitly endorse humanist values across even the religious spectrum of the population, which is most of the population?

Westlund: That's a tough question. Overall I'd say we don't. It depends who you mean by "Canada". If it's the government, they spend a lot more effort and money on multiculturalism, which implies celebrating religion in many forms, than they do on, say, giving us a better democracy. Look at what Trudeau did to the electoral reform initiative. When the Liberals didn't get the ranked ballot system they were trying to push, they shut the whole thing down. Ontario has a separate Catholic school board, which was officially considered discriminatory by the United Nations. So we've got a long way to go, before we get to the point where Canada is overtly endorsing humanist values.

Jacobsen: What are some issues and concerns around religious influence in political and law, and social life? How can we solve them? Why is this important to tackle right away?

Westlund: In addition to what I mentioned above, on the social side, there's the widespread and insidious idea that belief in a god or gods or ghosts or energy (fictional energy, that our best scientific minds and instruments have never detected) is a good thing. Even if many people have abandoned Christianity, a lot of them still hold on to the idea that connecting with the spirit world is tantamount to goodness. Imagine the colossal amount of time, money, and effort put into mind-worlds like homeopathy or angel therapy, or unlocking the mysteries of god's will. I like to think this time could be put to better use. As for the religious influence in politics, I think we can only solve this once we've got a strong community, one that can attract not just the types of humanists I mentioned above, but even people who aren't interested in arguing, for instance. Once we become a default option, then we start having a shot at political change. As a bunch of isolated individuals, even if we do make up say 20% of Canada, we don't. I wish I knew the best way to make this happen.

Jacobsen: Does Canada seem to be more humanist than not? If so, why so? If not, why not?

Westlund: I'd say no. I think Canada values politeness over the truth, and I don't think most humanists are like that.

Jacobsen: What are the main forms of disadvantage the irreligious have in Canada compared to the religious? What is the evidence for this claim?

Westlund: I think the main ones are political. You can't be openly atheist and run for office (at least outside of Quebec), but when Calgary elected a Muslim (Shia, Ismaili) mayor, it was celebrated by many. If you're part of a religion, you have that huge community and money behind you. The churches get tax exemptions.

Jacobsen: Who are your favourite humanists, books and authors?

Westlund: Henry Morgentaler, A. C. Grayling, and Christopher Hitchens come to mind. Favourite books? Hard to choose but I'd say Thus Spoke Zarathustra had a decisive influence on me, and led to me becoming a humanist. I'm into Michel Houellebecq but I take him in small doses. Also American poetry; Wallace Stevens.

Jacobsen: What are the future initiatives planned for the Humanists Association of Ottawa?

Westlund: To work more closely with the humanist officiants, to work towards abolishing the Catholic school board in Ontario, and to have more fun.

Jacobsen: What could nullify the influence, social and political and legal, of religion in Canadian society? How can we do it? How could we expedite that process, youth and the able-bodied?

Westlund: Step one is to build the community while maintaining our freedom of speech. If we lose that, we lose everything, fast. To foster the community on a long term basis we need more officiants in marriages. We can denormalize religion in Ontario by getting rid of the Catholic school board. As for the youth, they have to get involved by joining a group and making a real social connection. Not just online, though that is a piece of the puzzle.

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

Westlund: This wasn't a discussion, but an emailed list of questions. However, I enjoyed answering them and I'd welcome a real discussion in the future.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, J.P.

An Interview with Warren Alan Tidwell — Volunteer, Humanist Services Corps

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 4, 2018

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

Warren Alan Tidwell: Not really. My father wasn't really anything, but my mother was and is a devout Christian. I was raised in the Missionary Baptist Church and the rest of my family is Pentecostal.

My mother really stressed caring for others and helping people and encouraged me to think critically. While she can compartmentalize her Christianity, I cannot and have settled on Secular Humanism as my vehicle for interacting with the world around me.

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

Tidwell: It's kind of funny. I saw an interview with a local child here in Auburn, Alabama on *Nickelodeon*. He was the nonbeliever among a group of religious children. I tracked his father down and we met up and we have all been friends ever since.

I settled on humanism as it expands on atheism, which, of course, only says, "I reject the idea of a god."

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

Tidwell: I think there's two reasons for this, especially where I come from in the South. It's a way of saying you're a nonbeliever without saying I'm an atheist. It's sad but "humanist" generally flies over people's heads here when you use it and you're rarely pressed for more information.

Atheist is a four-letter word in the world and you're seen as an anti-religion person who wants nothing more than to tear down their god. It's also a way to find like minded atheists who want to work to help each other. Atheist as a descriptor doesn't go far enough.

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

Tidwell: As a young child, I knew I truly didn't believe. Accepting that most of the world is filled with functionally delusional people came early on as well.

It was nice and reassuring, but my nonbelief is such a small part of my daily thinking that I was just happy to meet some caring, nice people who didn't expect me to be a Christian to do humanitarian work. All I've ever really wanted to do is help others without any prerequisites.

Jacobsen: You write for Patheos and volunteer through the Humanist Services Corps. What do you write about, mainly?

Tidwell: I haven't written enough on the Patheos blog lately, but when I do I write about Secular Humanism from the perspective of a lifelong southerner. I am currently spending most all my time working on my book about my year in Ghana with the Humanist Service Corps. I returned to the US in July 2017.

Jacobsen: What tasks and responsibilities come with this Humanist Services Corps position?

Tidwell: I was told early on it is what you make it. I have a history of organizing and working disaster relief projects, so I know the situation was going to be different from what I expected. I focused on building relationships in the community in between visits to villages with my Ghanaian teammates.

There we would work to reintegrate women who had been banished from their homes due to witchcraft allegations. While Ghana is a wonderful country filled with brilliant people, there are still areas that believe strongly in the traditional African belief system and believe witchcraft is real.

My work was to compile data to choose who we would target as a likely candidate for reintegration. My Ghanaian teammates worked as mediators with the local chieftaincy leadership and the families of those who were accused.

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

Tidwell: Humanism to me is simple. We are all in this together and we need to take care of each other and work to develop a better, more reasonable, and caring world. I often say I have an atheist mind and a humanist heart.

My humanism is how I choose to interact with the world around me. The exemplar of humanist thought, to me, is someone I truly admire and attempt to emulate, Dale McGowan. He has published many books and founded the Foundation Beyond Belief that oversees the Humanist Service Corps.

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

Tidwell: I think efforts like the Humanist Service Corps are key. It never failed to make me happy when someone in Ghana would ask me, after receiving some sort of support, what did I want from them. I would say tell me about your family, your culture.

They have grown so accustomed to people coming in and expecting something in return for any sort of help that they were often taken aback but happy with my response. We treated them as the equals they are, and I don't think that has happened in many cases.

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

Tidwell: Wow, that's a good question. I see both negatives and positives of religion. While it does tear families apart when, let's say, someone comes out as a homosexual it also provides structure and community where a lot of good gets done as well.

I still truly think that living good and decent lives as humanists will grow the number of humanists in the world as they see us as an example. I no longer hide from the atheist label, but I do clarify that my humanism means so much more to me and live as an example for others when I can. That and writing about it is all I know how to do.

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

Tidwell: THIS BOOK. Ha-ha. I've spent the morning researching inter and intra ethnic conflicts in Northern Ghana, but I must finish it, so I can get back on the front lines where I love to be.

This is an important work that humanizes a region and a people for westerners and one that will hopefully allow me to continue work in Ghana to fight the stigmatization of witchcraft allegations and work to assist the women who already live in the refugee camps there.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Tidwell: Thank you for allowing me to talk about HSC and Ghana! Like I tell everyone I meet if I can ever be of assistance in any way please let me know!

An Interview with Scott Janis — Previous Officer, University of Wisconsin Whitewater's Secular Student Alliance

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 7, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was there a family background in secularism and activism for it?

Scott Janis: There was not much background in secularism or secular activism in my family that I know of. Strictly speaking I was raised Christian, but religion was never a commanding influence on my life. My parents believed that I should be able to come to my own conclusions about religion, but I had read the Bible and even helped to teach Bible Study.

Jacobsen: What was your official position in the University of Wisconsin Whitewater's Secular Student Alliance?

Janis: I was the president of UW Whitewater's SSA chapter from the winter of 2014 to the summer of 2015.

Jacobsen: What tasks and responsibilities came with the position?

Janis: My official responsibilities were to lead meetings, reserve space for events, keep the officer team organized, maintain connections to possible speakers and activist groups, and to present justification for continued funding from SUFAC. It was also important however to make sure that everyone had a place and a voice in the group. That meant keeping up with members and their perspectives.

Jacobsen: What are your concerns for secularism on campuses now?

Janis: The big challenge for secular activism on college campuses is in my experience that active interest in groups SSA can be ephemeral on smaller campuses UW Whitewater. Even though there are plenty of people who believe in secularism, devoting an evening 2–4 times per month to focusing on secular activism is usually not enough to motivate students. For most active students, there are other groups with more visible missions that are also secular that compete for their time. The students that tend to be drawn to the SSA tend to be young people who have been brought up in families whose foundations are based in strict religious adherence. There seem to have been fewer students with that background on campus. I consider those to be points of evidence that college secularism is doing fine.

Jacobsen: What about in society at large (concerns for secularism)?

Janis: If you asked me this last year, I would say that I am not terribly concerned. Now I am becoming more concerned as I see more religious fundamentalism in positions of power and in no ambiguous terms focusing on instituting policy either to emulate or enable mandatory religious adherence on the grounds of some American spiritual identity. On the other side, I am concerned that secularism is becoming more of a peripheral issue to other causes. The example that comes to mind is Atheism+. However noble it may have been, it created division amongst secular activists that did not actually need to be there by packaging secularism with other causes and philosophies that a substantial portion of the movement either disagreed with or did not understand sufficiently

to be confident in. This has created multiple in-group/out-group relationships between activists that previously worked together very effectively. When groups have tried to incorporate these initiatives at the same time, it excludes those who are unwilling to disagree as friends and dilutes the potency of any one event or group to the point that it becomes white noise to the people we are trying to reach. I do not see us making any impact until we drop the politics of activism and focus on coming together for whatever we can all agree on at the time.

Jacobsen: What were some, at the time of your tenure, activities run through the Secular Student Alliance at University of Wisconsin Whitewater?

Janis: During my time as the president of UWW SSA we had Robert Price as a speaker, participated in Ask an Atheist Day, and did an event for Easter where we handed out secular philosophy quotes in Easter Eggs. There was a debate with Dan Barker who appeared on behalf of the SSA, but that was run through the UWW Philosophy Club.

Jacobsen: What is the importance of building those mentor and mentee relationships for intergenerational ties among secular activists?

Janis: The reason that mentor and mentee relationships are so important is not the guidance through old challenges, but to provide a context for where we are today. Many of the people who have mentored me had developed under far more hostile conditions to atheism than I experience today. It has helped me to appreciate how far we have come as well as why it is so important to protect that progress. The most useful mentorship that I received though came from my predecessor. It is difficult to come into a new group of people and attempt to lead them. When affiliation renewal and SUFAC budget forms started showing up, having the former president to walk me through it all made a world of difference.

Jacobsen: What are some possible future initiatives for the SSA at University of Wisconsin Whitewater?

Janis: I have kept in touch with a few people and have left the channels open for anyone looking for advice in the future. I left the group in the hands of a very capable student who has already demonstrated her ability to plan events and maintain regular meeting times. I have not heard of any plans for future events since graduating however.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Janis: There are two points that I can think of.

In a United States that has seen a tremendous advancement of secularism and scientific acceptance, it is important that we do not give into prejudice against those whose perspectives seem irreconcilable to our own. Free thinkers thrive best where we are encouraged to consider any idea without fearing ridicule or shunning. While it may seem fun to pull a “got you moment” on someone, these are ideas that go to the core of who we are. To force someone to defend a belief to protect their own identity is cruel and counterintuitive.

Lastly, I have some advice to anyone who may be considering joining an SSA chapter: it is a team effort. Officers can do the research and correspondence necessary to plan events and create opportunities to create real change to help people who may not have the privilege to spend an evening with fellow atheists, agnostics, and sceptics. To those trying to start or lead an SSA chapter: it is a challenge that takes a lot of work to rise to, but even when it doesn’t go perfectly it is still worth it. You are asking people that you do not know to have confidence in your leadership

and your ability to enrich their lives. The needs and interests of your members should inform your priorities as a leader. It is your job to find a way to meet those needs and advance along those interests together. Remember that your job isn't done because you weren't re-elected, or you graduated. Make sure that your successor knows that you are a resource for guidance, and be mindful to step back and let them lead.

An Interview with DeAngelos Williams

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 10, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So was there a family background in non-belief?

DeAngelos Williams: No, my family comes from Christian backgrounds.

Jacobsen: What about your personal background. When did you, you know, come to non belief?

Williams: Actually, my first year being in college I became more agnostic. By the end of December, I became an atheist. I was lost. I was searching for Jesus. I started learning more about religion. I learned about science and religion, and drifted from Christianity.

Jacobsen: What do you see as some of the threats to secularism now?

Williams: It depends on your part of the world, but, with America, I think it's religious fundamentalists in America because there's people that think evolution is untrue. They talk about anti-science, like they'll be against science. Christian fundamentalists keep their thought against it, which is a problem to any society. I see that as being a big problem for secularism.

Jacobsen: What do you see as issues of secularism on campus?

Williams: I'd say on my campus the biggest issue is that students, even secularist students I met, won't be involved with secular related issues, e.g. being part of the club. It is important. I see that, especially people who are atheist, they are very much anti-group to begin with.

Being an atheist or secularist group, it's hard to convince them to be part of that group, especially being involved. I think that's a big issue. It is convincing people to be involved with the clubs and being involved with those issues to begin with.

Jacobsen: What are some of the activities of the organization — social and political activism, educational projects?

Williams: My organization in the past had things like debate and speakers.

Jacobsen: Have you invited any speakers?

Williams: Yes, we have invited speakers to debates, which is inviting a speaker for a debate. Various non-believers have been invited to campus. My club in the past had Richard Dawkins, Ryan Bill, and Greg Austin come. It depends on the semester.

We also have other events. Sometimes, we do things with other clubs on campus. For example, we did Free Expression Day, where we teamed up with college libertarians to tell people about the first amendment and what free expression means in American culture

Jacobsen: Who is a personal hero or heroine for you?

Williams: As far as top of my head, I'd say probably Gretta Vosper, to me. She is a pastor, who was preaching while he an atheist, openly. I wish more people understood that to me religion is more a divider between people and what should be important should be unity and understanding.

Jacobsen: What do you see as a positive of religion?

Williams: Religion has many things that are positive, so it has community outreach. Also, religious organizations give people a sense of community. But in my personal opinion, I guess you can call me somewhat of an anti-theist in the sense that I think there's really nothing that religion could do possibly to how I think secularism can do better because I'm a secular humanist.

I see most religion is positive, but it carries the extra baggage of religion. So I think most things can be done better secularly than religiously.

Jacobsen: Based on the conversation today, do you have any final thoughts or feelings?

Williams: Final thoughts or feelings, nothing that I can think of right now.

I always had a natural BS detector. When I got to college, I can tell they were making logical fallacies. I had over thirty logical fallacies. The atheist made more sense than the Christian, when I was a Christian. There is not a good argument for God that science doesn't already allow. It's because it doesn't make any sense — and you're too caught up with the Christian in my perspective.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for your time, DeAngelo.

Williams: Have a good rest of the day. Hope your interviews go well.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much. You take care.

Interview with Lee Sakura — Administrator, Atheist Republic Manila Consulate

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 11, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was there a background in atheism, familially? How was the culture growing up in Manila? How is it now regarding religion and irreligion?

Lee Sakura: None both of my parents and grandparents are Roman Catholics. The culture here in the Philippines has a majority with conservative Catholics, but Catholics here are tolerant. The other Christian sects here; they are the ones who are so annoying.

I mean typical Catholics here do not read the Bible, unlike another sect who had been poison by the word of the Bible. They are more oppressive than Catholics, the majority of those sects are the ones who teach their faith in school, e.g. creationism instead of science and history.

Catholics also do that if you are in a Catholic school.

If you watched TV here in the Philippines, the morning ‘till evening the word “God” will be mentioned at least 100 times, in all programs, even if it is a science program or medical program.

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Atheism here in the past years has been taboo, even me becoming an atheist. I did not know the word atheism. But now, I see people nowadays are aware of atheism. Thanks to the internet and Mark Zuckerberg. :)

Of course, there are always misconceptions about atheism, like we worship Satan. We are evil. We think ourselves all knowledgeable, etc., but there are also people here who understand atheists are the irreligious/secularist minority, but at least the Philippines are not like Islamic nations with a Sharia law persecuting atheists.

Jacobsen: Within that family background, was there a surrounding culture that brought forth a critical mindset towards religion? If so, how? If not, why not?

Sakura: Yes, there is a culture. My parents are typical devoted Catholics, but not religious. I am skeptics since child, growing up my father taught me to be open minded, to always listen to the point of view of others.

The reason why, my father does not stop me questioning or wondering about things that I thought are not right. My parents even criticize the Catholic religion. I can say that they are faithful secularists.

Jacobsen: Through these threads of family and surrounding culture, what made for the pivotal moments in development as an atheist?

Sakura: The pivotal point, since childhood science has been my favorite subject. I even come to a point that the Bible is obviously contradictory with modern science. That is where I started questioning myself: Is there really a God? Or is it just a product of human imagination just like ghosts?

Jacobsen: Also, “a-” as a prefix in atheism means many things because it is both denial and affirmation. What is affirmed there to you? What is denied to you?

Sakura: I'm kinda lost with that "a" prefix'; all I can say is atheism is the disbelief in God/gods existence. It does not give an affirmative answer that God does not exist for God existence is under Gnosticism or agnosticism. I am a gnostic atheist by the way; I can prove that God does not exist at least at this test of time. :)

Jacobsen: How did you find the Atheist Republic? What do you do for them? What are your tasks and responsibilities for the Metro Manila consulate?

Sakura: If you are talking about the page, an atheist friend recommended it to me; but if you are talking about ARMMC, a Filipino atheist which I encountered in the AR page added me in Metro Manila consulate.

I am a moderator.

Jacobsen: How does an Atheist Republic consulate work? What are its daily operations? How do you make sure the operations function smoothly?

Sakura: Along with the other administrators, I am filtering who would like to join the group. The group is exclusively for atheists only, removing a member if the member does not follow the rules, they receive warning by the way :) and observing the status of the group.

It's an online group, the main objective of every consulate is to build a community of atheism, to have a discussion not only in atheism, but a discussion between atheist so communication is very important without it there would be no bonds there would be no successful meet ups.

Jacobsen: How does the political situation influence the potential spread of non-religious stances and belief systems in Manila and the surrounding area?

Sakura: Ah, because the Philippines has a separation of church and state, at least, there is a freedom of religion, where the believers are free to get out of their religion unlike Islamic countries. Those countries where the government will hunt you, just like has been currently happening now in Malaysia.

Jacobsen: Why volunteer for them? What meaning comes from it?

Sakura: Because I like AR more than other atheist groups, where you can only talk about atheism or you have to be intelligent. But that doesn't mean I do not like other atheist groups; it's just that I am comfortable with AR's rules, where we can have talked everything under the sun, I can really feel the freedom of expression.

Jacobsen: How does Atheist Republic, in your own experience and in conversing with others, give back to the atheist community and provide a platform for them — even to simply vent from social and political conventions that hold them either in contempt or in begrudging silence for fear of loss of life quality?

Sakura: Atheist Republic gives a safe haven for atheists and closet atheist here. In the consulate of AR, we are also aware atheists are not alone. The AR page also reminded us that we atheist should not hate religious people. The islamophobia is another case; although some butthurt ex-Muslims do not know the difference between disrespecting a belief and disrespecting people are different.

Jacobsen: What do you hope for the future of atheism? What are the movements next steps?

Sakura: I do hope that atheism is no longer given a stigma. I hope the world would become just like other European countries or Japan.

In AR Manila consulates, we are supporting other atheist organizations like HAPI and PATAS to urge our members to join their project. Last month, the LGBTQ+ community invited us to join the parade. We did join, the manila consulates will support any movement that are connected to the path of secularism or humanitarian purpose.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Sakura: My only conclusion is the more we atheist exposed ourselves the more people could understand us, I mean, it's a human nature to be afraid of something you do not know. Atheists and LGBTQ+ are just like cousins in a way because they feel the same discrimination.

Although, the LGBT are more acceptable than now, we atheist should learned how LGBT become accepted or tolerated in the world. we should learn their tactics.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Lee.

Sakura: Thank you too, Mr. Scott Jacobsen. :)

Kathy Dawson — Board Member, Alberta Pro-Choice Coalition and Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Off-tape, we were discussing some more nuances with regards to pro-choice in Alberta through the Alberta Pro-Choice Coalition and aspects of law that are regarding the idea of personhood, and the way this impacts abortion and pro-choice. Could you extrapolate on that or explain a little for us?

Dawson: Anti-choice have tried to introduce personhood laws in Canada to recognize the fetus as a person. This is about reducing rights for women and trans men because rights for fetuses can't coexist with rights for the pregnant person. The impact of fetal personhood can be found in the States. Pregnant people have been jailed for seeking help with addictions while pregnant, forced to have C-sections and more because of personhood:

<https://read.dukeupress.edu/jhpl/article/38/2/299/13533/Arrests-of-and-Forced-Interventions-on-Pregnant>

Section 7 of the Charter Rights and Freedoms guarantees that women, trans men, non-binary people still don't lose their rights when they get pregnant. <http://www.nafcanada.org/legal-abortion-ca.html>

1988 R v. Morgentaler

In 1988, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down Canada's abortion law as unconstitutional. The law was found to violate Section 7 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms because it infringed upon a woman's right to "life, liberty and security of person."

Chief Justice Brian Dickson wrote: "Forcing a woman, by threat of criminal sanction to carry a foetus to term unless she meets certain criteria unrelated to her own priorities and aspirations, is a profound interference with a woman's body and thus a violation of her security of the person."

Jacobsen: Are there other documents that are like that? That younger people should know about for themselves.

Dawson: I was pointing back to the *Charter Rights and Freedoms*. That's core to our rights, as people that could get pregnant.

Jacobsen: So, do these become attacks on a woman's right to choose, become attacks on human rights in general — whether nationally based or internationally based?

Dawson: I'm not sure what you mean by that.

Jacobsen: If someone is saying that it is my right via Section 7 as a pregnant person to make an independent choice whether I have an abortion or not based on the *Charter Rights and Freedom* in Canada, or with regards to reproductive health rights as noted in Human Rights Watch about abortion being first and foremost a fundamental human right; if those are the stances of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as well as Human Rights Watch and very likely bodies or the organs of the UN as well, then it seems to me that attacks on the ability

for them to make an informed safe decision about abortion or not become attacks on a pregnant woman's human rights?

Dawson: Oh, absolutely! Any drive to grant personhood to a fetus is removing rights from women, trans men, and non-binary people.

Jacobsen: What do you foresee as the upcoming battles for the youth demographic in Alberta?

Dawson: Upcoming battles? Well, we have quite limited access in Alberta, although the recent announcements of coverage for mifegymiso may help. There's two abortion clinics; one in Calgary, one in Edmonton, and there's a hospital in Calgary. Abortion services are available in Grande Prairie.

It's hard to get information on access in some communities. So, unless you live in or near one of these centers, you're going to have to take time off work, find child care for your children, make travel arrangements including hotels. Some people are having to travel significant distances. There's a real concern with access, for example, if you live in Fort McMurray, you can't go to the Fort McMurray Hospital and obtain an abortion there.

From the youth perspective, the obstacles are greater. Missing school, absence from home, transportation and accommodation are increased obstacles for youth.

Youth must also be concerned because anti-choice groups are in the school actively undermining sexual health education when they are brought in to teach abstinence or sexual risk avoidance. Their presentations may be legitimized by their presence in the school. Youth need to know that these presentations are not evidence based nor supported by experts in the field of human sexuality. Information on these presentations can be found at the SIECUS Community Action Kit online. The link to their Fact

Sheet: <http://www.communityactionkit.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewPage&pageId=923>

My daughter and I sat in one of those classes and it was awful what they were doing to the kids. They told the girls to watch what they're wearing because the boys had no control. It was so offensive to both boys and girls. They totally excluded the LGBT kids and would not answer questions relating to LGBT relationships. They presented sex and gender as the same and only spoke about binary identities. They misrepresented contraception and protection. They shamed the kids. The presenter said, "If you find yourself pregnant and you come into our pregnancy care center, we're going to ask what happened with your abstinence program. Were you lying there, and he fell on top of you?"

We contacted the school board, started a petition, raised awareness and collaborated with local activists. The school board removed the anti-choice group and updated their sexual health education policies to prevent the group from returning. However, other school boards have not taken action to respect youth rights to comprehensive sexual health education free from agendas and misinformation despite parent advocacy.

Parents had a difficult time getting them out of one school district. It took them a couple of years to get them out and then they come back in. I understand that these groups have even included a candy game where they pass out unwrapped candies, tell the kids to keep a certain colour and pass the other colors around. At the end of the game, after candies have been passed around all around the kids, they would ask: "Now, do you want to eat these candies?" The moral of their game: people that have sex are dirty.

These groups in classrooms are a public health issue and it is difficult and risky to expose them and have them removed.

West Virginia teen, Katelyn Campbell, exposed this type of education at her school and she said the principal threatened to block her from going to Wellesley College. <https://thinkprogress.org/katelyn-campbell-receives-outpouring-of-support-after-protesting-high-school-abstinence-assembly-9c8479af3dda/>

My own daughter came forward. I was very uncomfortable for her that next year because she was in the same class as that teacher. We waited until grad was over to go public.

There's been a student that videotaped an anti-choice presentation in Red Deer that had anti-Semitism. They talked about how it was a Holocaust and accused women of murder. The superintendent of school division apologized to the presenter! There has been no update on the outcome for the student.

Sexual health education is a huge concern and, to be fair to many schools, these groups claim to be medically accurate, inclusive and follow all the guidelines for sexual health education. They do not post the Core Documents of their affiliation on their website. Their Core Documents state that they will not counsel or refer for abortifacients. It took me a couple of days on social media to get one of the pro-life organizations to admit that they defined the pill, the IUD, and emergency contraception as abortifacient. Most sexually active people use contraception at some point. People would be surprised to find out that anti-choice groups define common contraceptives as abortifacient. After all, contraception prevents pregnancy and an abortion is not possible if there is no pregnancy.

Youth also need to be concerned about graphic fetal gore displays near their schools and in their mailboxes. These displays are not an accurate representation of abortion. Alberta Pro-Choice Coalition, Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada and many municipalities are working to oppose this.

Accurate abortion statistics:

<http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/backrounders/statistics-abortion-in-canada.pdf>

Accurate abortion stock photos:

<http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/backrounders/media-photos.html>

<http://abortion-pictures.info/en/>

In Conversation with Lee Moore— Former Executive Director, The Atheist Conference (TAC)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 16, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Do humanists have to be atheists?

Lee Moore: It really depends on how you define humanists; some seem to think a rejection of a higher power is a requirement... some not so much. A better question to ask is “Why aren’t all atheists also humanists?”

Jacobsen: There are so many labels floating around about the formally non-religious or the formerly religious community. It is staggering to recount them all. Do you think that atheism has such a bad rap that people shy away from the word and so go by other terms or labels?

Moore: Well atheists are independent by nature, not a fan of going with any flow... the more someone tries to tell someone to call themselves an atheist... the more they tend to rebel against such an idea. I would say calling yourself an atheist used to have a much worse rap than it does now... these days most folks on either side of belief don’t care as much.

Jacobsen: Do you get hate mail for the things posted on A-News?

Moore: I have received a great deal of hate mail as an open atheist who worked within the godless community. Sometimes even death threats... About 5 or 6 years ago, there was a shift in it though... I stopped getting as much from religious folks and started getting it from my fellow non-believers.

Jacobsen: What makes A-News potentially distinct in the landscape of news provisions for the non-believing community?

Moore: It was set out to appeal to the non-ivory tower masses. The Atheist movement here in the States has always presented itself as arrogant, and was led by folks who have no idea what it is to be poor in this nation. We sought to change that.

Jacobsen: In the context of the atheist community and the media, does making fun of religion help interbelief dialogues? Or is this more to ‘blow off steam’?

Moore: It’s of course blowing off steam. Most of the folks I have met, myself included, have been a victim of oppression by our religious neighbors in some way. Making fun of religion helps some to heal those wounds, it even helps others see that they may have been following something they shouldn’t... for the most part though... it does little to help our relations with those religious neighbors.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Moore: The Atheist movement here in the states is mostly dead these days... yes, there are more and more folks leaving religious belief, but that has little to do with the movement. Our movement turned in on itself years ago and has been self-destructing ever since. Our groups grow smaller by the day and are receiving far less donations than in the past. We kind of already won the battle, and it’s time to move on.

An Interview with Andy Uyboco

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 18, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your relationship with HAPI? How did you find them?

Andy Uyboco: I learned of HAPI via Marissa Langseth whom I have been acquainted with for some time before she founded the organization.

Jacobsen: What is the state of humanism in the Philippines at the moment?

Uyboco: I think it's a growing movement. There is less stigma about it than when you position yourself as atheist or irreligious. I think HAPI is taking very positive steps in promoting humanism because it is not just about another group ranting against religion, but there are actual programs in place to uplift the general well-being and happiness of people.

For example, there are people in HAPI who are focused on educating poor children, there are others promoting environmental concerns, and so on.

Jacobsen: How do you see the future of humanism in the Philippines?

Uyboco: I have a bright outlook towards it. As long as people are committed to working for the good of humanity, then we can transcend the artificial wall of religious differences.

Jacobsen: What will be some of its difficulties in the near future, and even at present, in free practice in social and cultural life, and even political and legal life?

Uyboco: Present and near-future difficulties — in terms of philosophy and political views (e.g. secularism) — would still be difficult to implement because most people still adhere to a strong religious belief system. It does not help that at present, there are a number of politicians and government figures citing religion/faith as a motivation for crafting policies or procedures. (<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/863105/pacquiao-invokes-bible-to-defend-death-penalty>)

Jacobsen: Is Duterte a problem for the irreligious in the Philippines?

Uyboco: It depends. If we're talking about religious issues, I don't think it's a problem as he's been pretty liberal about dissing religion himself, and that sort of helps a bit in breaking the chains of religious fervor. However, if you talk about humanist policies, then that's where the issues will start coming in. Even though I supported him in the last elections, I will be the first to admit that he doesn't make it easy for humanists to defend him. I do not think he is an evil man, just an old man who is set in his ways — as I explained to someone before who wondered how I could support him. I look at him like an ornery old relative who likes to cuss and bully everyone around, but he's done enough good things to show that there is a heart that cares underneath that tough exterior, and I and many in Davao understand and kind of give him leeway for that, even those in my circle that are irreligious. But I know and realize that that itself creates problems as he is under international spotlight whether he likes it or not, and his careless statements here and there would be dissected and may be even interpreted as policy.

Jacobsen: Any upcoming work coming out of the school of design and arts?

Uyboco: Oh, I haven't been teaching for 7 years now since I moved back to Davao City from Manila. I've been in the pharmacy business since then, growing and expanding the family enterprise that my dad started back in the 50's.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Andy.

Call from the HAPI Mothership...

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 21, 2018

IHEU, or the International Humanist and Ethical Union, will host, alongside Humanist Alliance Philippines International (HAPI) three events. From March through April, in about a 30-day period, IHEU and HAPI will host the Café Humaniste three-part series — and in English, though title to the contrary — with the first event on March 10.

The theme for the first event will be “Humanism and Science” with speakers Nikko Dy Guaso and Arturo Alvarez. Guaso’s talk is entitled “Space, Time and Humanity.” He looks at the advancement and development of humanity’s intellect tied to a thirst for knowledge about the cosmos around us. This will connect to an exploration of the universe and humanity.

Alvarez’s speech will be called “Climate Reality: Humanism and Ecology.” The talk will look at the climate challenges faced by humanity as well as humanistic ecology with an introduction of the Climate Reality project.

The next event will happen on March 24 with Jan Erik Villa and Hermogenes Gacho speaking on “Humanism through Arts” and “Cultural Diversity and Modernization,” respectively. These are cultural looks into the world of humanism. Villa is the Rekindle PH program coordinator, who will show how art can help express ourselves and ideas we all as the use of art for the promotion of humanistic ideals.

Gacho’s speech will look into the ways that effects and impacts of cultural diversity in addition to the change to our lives from the modernization of the world. This will look further not only from the past to the present but also into the future.

The final day, April 7, will focus on Alvin John Ballares and his presentation of the HAPI book entitled *From Superstition to Reason: A Journey Towards Humanism*. This talk will focus on his transition from a theist pastor into a secular humanist.

FREE ENTRY for all events. Café Humaniste in the Philippines (1/3) Café Humaniste in the Philippines (2/3) Café Humaniste in the Philippines (3/3) Location: Tippy’s Bistro 10th Lacson St. Bacolod City, 6100 For more info, send your questions in the event page or via email to rayd.espeja@hapihumanist.org.

Conversation with Vidya Bhushan Rawat

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 22, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you originally find humanism?

Vidya Bhushan Rawat: I lost my father in early childhood so my mother and sisters remained my guardians. We hailed from the mountain regions of North India. My mother was a religious woman but not into orthodoxy. She was deeply individually who faced the pains of being a widow at early age. Since, my family was not much into a joint family system, so the entire rules and regulations at our homes were of our own. My mother never imposed religious values on us. Her only point would be to be good, remain humble. We did not have enough money to survive so we were not really deep into it. I later found that for the rural poor, it is the struggle for their daily survival more important than any god and my case was no different. Religion was just kind of a relations between 'God' and human being. I could recite a few of Sanskrit hymns which was part of my curriculum but which were more as a moral studies, knowledge about respecting elders and following the path of truth.

My struggles for life were tough. As a growing young boy, I had none to support me. At the age of 16, I started working in a private company and taking tuitions. These were difficult in India in those days for survival. A great Indian author, brought me to Delhi who claimed to be a humanist. I was the student of literature so felt that I would gain. There at his place, I came to read numerous books but was also disturbed with my own conditions. The working conditions for me were terrible like a bonded labour. My desire to study never got fulfilled in such situation because each one who tried to support me actually used me too me for their comfort.

I came to Delhi in 1991. There was no one who I could share my concern as a young boy. There was a pressure at home. I came to many literature about liberation theology. One of my friend who saw my conditions and depression, took me to church. I started going there and slowly, felt that all my pains and agonies are due to my religion. I took to Christianity classes. After many days, when I was attending the theological classes, I asked a question about why 'black is evil', as being told by a theological teacher. She was dumb stuck and faltered. In Christianity, we were told that miracle do happen. I was in love with my friend who suffered from polio. We were planning to marry. Church helped us. Attending these classes, I felt may be a miracle can help her recover. I prayed and also went to those Godmen who claimed they can do any miracle. Nothing happened. Slowly, my disappointment with Christianity started. I also came in touch with friends in Islam, felt it was better to fight against injustice but inside there, I felt that people like me who question everything including the finality of the religious text would not be able be there.

Frankly, this was the period where I was introduced to the writing of two of the greatest Indian philosopher and political revolutionaries. One was Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar and the other was EVR Periyar. Dr Ambedkar brought the silent revolution in India about how the Dalits got their rights. Reading them about various issues particularly our social order, where he said that there is nothing called finality of religious text and we must question them. Ambedkar embraced Buddha but redefined Buddhism. I follow path shown by Ambedkar, it is what I called new humanism. Periyar, never believed in any God.

By 1994, I was deep into the social movements particularly those in the left political circles and the impact of writing of M N Roy, Bhagat Singh, Rahul Sankrityayan and many others who challenged religious orthodoxy and questioned, grew on me and I became a radical humanist. In fact, when we married in 1994, it was a civil marriage without any religious orthodoxy. Religion has never been a part of my life since then, not merely mine but my family, which means my wife as well as daughter. We are absolutely comfortable with that and enjoy being without God.

Jacobsen: What defines humanism to you?

Rawat: Humanism for mean rationalism with compassion. I won't be a rationalist just for the sake of rationalism. For me, if this does not include Karuna, compassion, as Buddha says, we can't be humanist. A humanist can't be dogmatic like any other ism. They should be the best defender of human rights. For me a humanist is a person with whom a religious person too feels comfortable in talking. God is not an issue for me as I am not trying to convince but as soon as God is used for political and social purposes, i have an issue. I don't waste my time with people whether there is God or no God as there is no point as people world over have their own ideas and convictions. Secularization too have made people mechanized and too individual. While we respect individuality yet you live in society, interact with each other, show concern and hence cannot be totally detached with it. A humanist is a person who will even defend right of my religious neighbour to be religious as long as his religion does not infringe my personal liberty.

Jacobsen: Where you're at geographically, growing up, what were your major difficulties with the religious and religion's doctrines in general? I ask because humanists face so, so many prejudices and biases.

Rawat: I grew up in the mountains of Uttarakhand regions in India. It one side border with Nepal and other side with China. As I said, the place that I came from was conservative where people would go to temples and keep fasting but in my family, I never kept any. There was no imposition of any religious values on us except in marriage or any other ceremonies, we had to make a ceremonial presence or participate some time.

Since, we were a nucleus family there was not much pressure. In India, the religious norms and orthodoxies are mostly imposed in joint family system where the entire clan live together and role divided between men and women.

Our marriage was opposed by family as it was not merely between two individuals from diverse regions and cultures but also because my wife suffered from Polio. She was unwelcome. By that time, I had become ideologically too strong to challenge. It was an open challenge. I can say, that I am proud of my decision to remain lonely in the crowd for which i paid huge price as none of my relative would come to me and we are still growing in isolation.

Second incident happened when my daughter was born in 1995. We were living alone in Delhi. My mother and sisters wanted to come. We did not perform any rituals. In India after the baby is born, you have to do many rituals. When my mother and sister came to us, they asked us whether we have purified ourselves to which I responded in negative. She refused to enter the house. I was also adamant and asked her to live if she feel so. The situation was just compromised when the house owner came and said he would perform something. Which was nothing but a hog wash to satisfy my mother and she entered.

I give one example of how religious values some time dangerous. My brother in law was suffering from various ailments. He was admitted to hospital for surgery. He was wearing rings in

most of his fingers. The fingers had swollen but he continued. The day doctors wanted to operate him, asked him to put off the rings which he was not keen. The doctors then remarked that if does not do it, his fingers would have to be cut. That day, I found how dangerous are the religious faiths which can take your life too.

Jacobsen: What organizations have you been involved with for the irreligious fight against religion?

Rawat: I founded Social Development Foundation in 1998. The aim was to develop human rights defenders as well as do some community work which were deeply rooted in superstition and religious orthodoxy. In India the biggest curse in the name of religion to humanity is untouchability and caste discrimination. You are born in a particular caste and you have to do that work. So if a person is born in a community of manual scavenging then he or she has to do that kind of work cleaning the toilets of other or sewage lines. It means that your identity is birth based and your work is predicated.

I knew during that period there were a few humanist organisations but they were confined to already converted a few, more like holiday discussion groups. We felt there is no meaning in humanism if this is not a philosophy which people could enjoy, particularly those who were poor and victim of India's hidden caste apartheid. And hence in our human rights education programme and other leadership development programme, humanism became an inherent part and I can vouch that we succeeded in bringing the young humanists from those communities which were victims. In the state of Uttar Pradesh, which is over 220 million people, we organised camps, training programmes, miracle exposure programmes, awareness campaigns, marches etc to convey our point of view as why it is important to change our self, question the authority of religious scriptures and for that we used the writings, sayings of those philosophers who had spoken for humanism, human rights and human dignity. So, Dr Ambedkar, Phule, Periyar, Bhagat Singh, M N Roy, Rahul Sankrityayan like legend came handy. Many Sufi saints who were popular and respected might not be a one hundred percent humanists but their poetry and writings were also used as they talked about universal brotherhood, equality between gender and human beings, spoke against superstition even when they might have believed in one God or one power concept. Our point was religion is dangerous as it controls and it is political in nature but if we confine it to individual which does not violate rights of others, we can still work with those people.

We knew that in the people in the villages go to quacks and other godmen because there are no medical services. Our effort was to educate people and take them to medication. We organised medical camps for ailments and the result was that in many villages things started changing. When you work with most marginalized, victims of social order and caste system, you have to bring them to science and it is possible through easy access to medical system so that they can get benefit of that. Once they get easy access they would enjoy it and will reduce their dependency on religious practices.

Jacobsen: What are the pluses of religion?

Rawat: The plus point is that religion give strength to people to do something good many time. Second is, it has the strength to socialize. People who are oppressed and isolated find solace in it. I say, it is the failure of those who call themselves as humanist and secular as they do not respond to the emotions of the people. Religion's major aspect is socialization and addressing the

emotional needs of the people which the secularists and their individual tendencies does not understand.

Jacobsen: What are the negatives of religion?

Rawat: Religion is politics. I don't say religion is mere superstition. Organised religion is a power equation of power elite many of them are technocrats, scientists, industrialists and politicians. It is superstition for poor who look up to god as a miracle for his problems but for the rich and powerful it is a way that leads to power. Christianity, Islam and Hinduism have been made organised religion to attain power. In many places Buddhism too has been used which is depressing. The main part of such mobilization of religion is to convert the minorities into a villain and through their vilification enjoy the power. Entire South Asia today is victim of this majoritarianism which is the biggest threat to its democracy and human rights.

Jacobsen: How does religion influence politics in the world?

Rawat: Western World is divided between Islam and Christianity. The Eastern side has many including Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Religion used as a vehicle to ride the political power. Most of the human rights organisations are funded by the religious organisations. They are already in charities. Even the terrorist organisations have charities and calamities come handy for them. It is because of this; we had asked the humanist organisations to think of their interventions in developmental sector. There has to be a humanist response to human rights, developmental and charity sector otherwise it is in the hands of religious power. Through charities religious organisations have controlled all the human rights as well as political discourse.

Jacobsen: How does religious doctrine violate human rights?

Rawat: There are many. One is the religious scriptures are sacrosanct and you can't challenge. Now in our part of the world it is visible in everyday life. You can't marry beyond your caste and religion. If you try, you would be murdered in the name of honor. We have seen numerous killings of young couples because they belong to different castes or religions.

Religious taboos killing. Witch craft is another issue which is used to control women, her property if she has, particularly when she is alone, single, divorced or widowed. It is easier to make a character assassination and then engaged in mob violence against her.

In the past three four years, we have seen prejudices in the name of our food habits. Now, vegetarianism is being aggressively being promoted. It is not a choice but as a hate against those who eat meat particularly beef. Now state has regulated that beef eating is banned in India and there is heavy penalty and punishment if you are found eating or slaughtering it. India's cow protection laws have similarity to the blasphemy laws in Islamic societies. It is terrible and anti-minorities, anti-Dalits. The incident of mob lynching against the so called beef eaters or those who were transporting cows-or buffaloes allegedly for slaughtering is an eye opener. The fact is that India is the biggest beef exporting country of the world. Which means that government has not stopped exporting beef but then why is it encouraging people to take law unto their hand. India's anti-beef or cow protection laws are aimed at controlling its biggest minority, Muslims. They have been targeted. Rather than investigating against the culprits, in most of the cases, police and investigative agencies were researching whether the meat that the person was eating or in his freeze was beef.

We also have religious leaders dictating about women, giving them direction as what they should eat, do and wear. All of them are united in telling the women that their freedom is the biggest

danger for them. In the cases of violence against women, most of the people feel, that it is the fault of the women themselves.

Jacobsen: What do you see as the major human rights battle now?

Rawat: The biggest human rights battle today is the growing majoritarianism which is now taking fascist tendencies where every minority is being considered as an obstacle and a threat to nation. Majoritarianism and nationalism are being used in convertible and synonymous terms.

Humanists too are under the threat as they are speaking for the human rights of the people. Human rights defenders, secular activists, peace builders are being considered as anti nationals. Criticising the government is also considered as anti national. We always felt that media is the fourth pillar of democracy but now it looks crony media is becoming the biggest threat to democracy as it is spreading lies and cooking stories in the newsrooms. Media was a watch dog but here in India media is actually hunting opposition and trying to finish it. Sadly, and most importantly, India's educated class which enjoy liberal western democracy, human rights, minority rights there does not want to support secular democratic movement in the country. Many of these Non Resident Indians, the scientists and technocrats, business persons have turned highly rightwing and support the hate campaign back home. My request to all of them is that you are enjoying the best in liberal democracies so please do support values of human rights, secularism and social justice back home in India. India can only survive because of its secular democratic republican values enshrined in our constitution. Converting India into a theocracy would be violative of our constitutional values and vision that the founding fathers of our independent republic had dreamt. Saving India's secular liberal democratic values is the biggest challenge that we face today.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Vidya.

Notes on young people from speaking around the world by Faisal Saeed Al Mutar — Founder, Global Secular Humanist Movement

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 23, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When we look at the landscape of belief for young people, they tend to decline in religious affiliation as a whole as well as levels of religiosity even if they are religious. You have noted this. What other observations do you note going to speaking engagements around the world?

Faisal Saeed Al Mutar: I say that this is happening to some extent universally. When I engage with people from the Middle East, I see that this is happening there as well. It happens with the access of information more than before and the curiosity of young people, except on some occasions such as China and some parts of East Asia.

The rise of Evangelical Christianity is interesting. The Christian Church, even as they decline in the West, you can see their focus on China and East Asia, so they can keep their numbers the highest in the world. There is a decline in some parts of the world and a rise in other parts of the world.

There is a difference between the decline of religious identification with a certain religion and atheism. I think the majority where the decline does not necessarily convert to identifying as an atheist, agnostic, or a humanist.

It is mostly going to “I don’t care” or “I am spiritual but not religious,” which is a separate category from those who adhere or support *The God Delusion* and the *God Is Not Great* world. This is what I don’t see coming to the general public.

In major cities in the West, where I speak, from Vancouver to New York and Boston and L.A., yes, the decline is there, but there is an apathetic atheism. They are not engaged in these discussions.

It is not in any way deep thinking about any of these theories such as M Theory being the best theory to explain quantum theory. I think the decline of religiosity is not with them. I think it is a decline in practice, but not a change of belief.

Jacobsen: So, it is a loosening up of their lifestyle, as opposed to some argumentation or philosophical point, or empirical point.

Mutar: I spoke in Denmark, in Copenhagen. It is one of the most non-religious countries. But even with that, there is still a Christian heritage there. They start with the music and the music has God, Jesus, and Bethlehem.

Even if they don’t believe in the virgin birth or all of the supernatural things, but they still identify with a Christian heritage and background, they are one of the most atheistic or non-religious countries in the world.

I think it is more complicated than people living their religion, especially when it comes to Europe and Asia. They have built, to some extent, a foundation that eventually got challenged by the Enlightenment values and secular values.

But it is more secularism with Christian heritage.

Jacobsen: What about the replacement of religious practice or just belief around the world for 18- to 35-year-olds, of the young around the world, especially the developed world where they have access to literacy, proper nutrition, and time to burn?

You noted the heritage that still exists in some halls of Denmark culture or in other areas of the world, where Islam and Christianity they have a long history in the culture. They lost the grip, but still, have an influence on the culture through music and iconography.

I am thinking more now about transitioning to the young. Although, they have no part of formal religion in their life. They still find informal ways from which to engage in what more or less would be called religious beliefs or religious practices, though they wouldn't have those formal terms.

Mutar: Yes, with young people, some of the rise anti-globalism and "Make America Great Again." It is some young people who tend to be atheistic too. If you look at Milo and Carl Benjamin/Sargon of Akkad, many of these people, followers, are young people who are not religious but they hold like a different identity that is kind of restoring the good ol' days.

I think the young people of this century are dealing with so many questions of how they can shape their identity with the decline of formal religious institutions and the rise of new identities, so they can bring back the old religious institutions or the name of them.

I was speaking on campuses. Many young people have shifted beliefs from the SJW into the Alt-Right, and vice versa. These are difficult questions to grapple with. There is a need for every human being to identify with something.

With this globalized multicultural world that we live in, it is not easy to find yourself identifying with something. That probably would create a difficulty. That, I think, until today the humanist world has not been able to solve.

Jacobsen: I like that ending.

Mutar: [Laughing].

Conversation with Scott Davies — Editor and Writer at Conatus News

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 24, 2018

Scott Jacobsen speaks with Scott Davies, editor and writer at Conatus News, to discuss the state of progressive politics in Australia and other topics.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is the state of progressive politics in Australia? Who are the main drivers of it?

Scott Davies: Currently, there is a centre-right political party, the Liberal-National Coalition government in power federally. In a majority of the states, the centre-left Labor party holds power. Progressives and progressivism in general, after some years in the political wilderness following the 2013 Federal Election are again gaining momentum politically. This is reflected in the ongoing push for and subsequent legislation on issues such as marriage equality, as well as a renewed focus on renewable energies and other progressive issues.

Jacobsen: Who is your favourite author of Progressive politics? What are your favourite books of theirs?

Davies: My favourite liberal and left-leaning authors in recent years have been, ironically, have been authors such as Nick Cohen, Maajid Nawaz, Sam Harris and others have been critical of elements of the identitarian Left. I am a fan of their works due to their commitment to principles and ideas of secular humanism and universal values such as liberal democracy.

Jacobsen: In terms of the social implications of progressive politics, how does this influence the traditional gender roles? Because the traditional gender roles were women as home maker and man as breadwinner. The modern economy does not follow this model. What do you think are the early 21st-century gender roles? The gender roles that adapt to the modern economy, technological changes and shifts, and the implied political and social changes as well.

Davies: The modern economy, as you said, has changed gender roles significantly. A majority of households are now dual income, with both woman and man working a job, often fulltime. This has meant that domestic duties are also shared more evenly among the man and woman of the household. These changes have been further accelerated with technological changes, as well as social changes whereby these roles are expected to be fulfilled by all.

Jacobsen: How have the reactive elements of this culture, or the subculture of those who do not want any change, reacted in response to the changes in technology and generals? I mean in Australia.

Davies: Conservatives and reactionary elements within Australian society have pushed back against these elements in a variety of ways. To use a current example, they have organised the ‘No’ campaign for the upcoming marriage equality postal vote, campaigning for a traditional definition of marriage. There has also been vocal opposition to social programs which highlight LGBT issues, such as the ‘Safe Schools’ program, on the grounds that it undermines traditional family and societal values.

In Conversation with Susan Nambejja — Director, Malcolm Childrens' Foundation (Humanist Charity)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 24, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you come into the world of the non-believing community in Uganda? What were some pivotal moments if you could recall those?

Susan Nambejja: I was volunteering with Humanist Association for Leadership Equity and Accountability [HALEA] in 2008 as a secretary. A charity based in Kampala Uganda with a teens empowerment project by then which focused on helping teenagers who get pregnant through forced marriages, rape and other bad acts, we would counsel them and later they are empowered to go back to school.

This was the same time I was pursuing a Bachelor's degree at Makerere university. Being a humanist charity, I got to know much about humanism and embraced it.

Jacobsen: How does Ugandan religion influence political and socio-cultural life?

Nambejja: Religious leaders have influenced Ugandan political life since colonial times. Religious leaders have looked for different ways they can bring change in the government. While many religious leaders have actively or silently supported the incumbent regime, others took vocal public stands and fostered political action by expanding space for public debates.

In my view, I will say Religion limits people's capacity from all different socio-cultural angles to make their own decisions, people are afraid of speaking their mind out in the name of maintaining the image of what the society depending on background they are raised from.

This includes failure to make even healthy related decision to save their lives. One will not take medicine for instance if he is HIV positive but rather collect money take to a pastor as offertory to receive a miracle working prayer. In the end, they lose their lives.

Jacobsen: If you could enlighten as to the more prominent thinkers and writers, and public intellectuals, in Uganda for those that do not know, who are those that lead the way in the non-religious movement?

Nambejja: Lindsey Kakunda an Atheist writer and was journalist/radio presenter with free thought Kampala, James Onen also known as Fat boy with Sanyu Fm is a founder of free thought Kampala one of the first atheist organisations in Uganda Just to mention a few, however there are those that are non-prominent but good atheists who are now known as good writers, thinkers in the non-religious movement.

Bwambale Robert the director of Kasese Humanist Schools, and Kato Mukasa the founder and Executive Director of Humanist Association for Leadership Equity and accountability (HALEA) The two Bwambale and Kato contributed much are still fighting to their best in leading the way in the non-religious movement.

Jacobsen: What have been some of your most difficult trials and tribulations in life? How have you overcome them? Were these in any way related to religious or lack thereof?

Nambejja: The death of my only child Baby Malcolm Mutebi on 10th February 2017 is the most difficult trial in life. Malcolm was diagnosed with a rare heart condition known as Truncus arterious type 1.

This where a baby is born with one vessel coming out of their heart instead of two. It leads to breathlessness, difficulty in feeding and failure to thrive. The doctors told us that without heart surgery, Malcolm would die.

We struggled going door to door and using the medis, desperately trying to raise money. Finally, through the help of humanist friends, we found a charity willing to pay for Malcolm's operation and generous strangers across the world donated and enabled us to fly him to India. I couldn't believe it; Malcolm's life had been saved.

After a number of tests, Malcolm was taken for surgery, unfortunately the operation came too late and too much for his tiny heart to cope with. Malcolm died at 7am on 10th February 2017. Losing my son was very difficult.

Now, I have recovered from the immediate grieving process, I want to spend the rest of my life helping others. I want to help parents in their darkest hour. I Unlike in the West, children born with congenital disorders in Uganda are unable to get treatment because of poverty and a lack of medical facilities.

I set up Malcolm Childrens' Foundation which aims at helping children with congenital diseases to get access to medical treatment they need at home, and where this isn't possible, overseas. This includes heart problems like my son faced, but also helping children with sight, spinal and respiratory conditions.

In our first year of registration (2017) we managed to save lives of 8 patients. As humanists we have helped many people irrespective of where they come from, all over the world. I am concerned that if we don't get children's health right we will never have a healthy adult population in poor countries of the world. To me this is what it means to be Humanist.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with and help the non-religious movement in Uganda?

Nambejja: People should join us in promoting different causes, if Humanists continue to support our causes, more people will get to know how good humanism is and embrace humanism through the activities we do, its through these activities that people ask us different questions and we give answers.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Nambejja: I would like to appreciate each and every one who helped us during the difficult time, and as the director and programmes coordinator of Malcolm Children's Foundation, i would like to invite humanists across the world to join us in our fight to save little lives. Maybe you can offer ideas, introduce us to any contacts you may have, help us learn from others — any kind of support is warmly welcomed.

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

Nambejja: You are most welcome, Jacobsen.

Interview with Dave McKee on Secular Schools — Leader, Communist Party of Canada (Ontario)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 24, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become involved in the theory and politics of communism? What books and thinkers do you recommend?

Dave McKee: As a university student I became involved in social justice activism, beginning with a kind of left-wing Christian point of view. I was working on a wide range of issues — peace, anti-poverty, environmentalism, gender equality, and international solidarity — so I began looking for systemic critiques that could help me understand certain situations. This was during the late 1980s and early 1990s, so the overthrow of socialism in the Soviet Union was a topic of much debate and I began to think more critically about “what we were left with,” capitalism, and out of this I was increasingly drawn toward Marxist theory. I spent some time studying Latin American liberation theology which, to me, combined elements of progressive Christian thinking with Marxist politics.

I graduated during a deep economic recession, so instead of landing in a steady, lucrative job I struggled for a bit. The lyrics of Billy Bragg’s “To Have and Have Not” kind of rang true for me: “At 21 you’re on top of the scrap heap; at 16 you were top of your class.” This fueled my interest in Marxism, as a political theory that could explain economic and social dynamics, as well as my search for a movement that took a comprehensive, transformative approach to social change. By this time, I had moved away from religion and had adopted a decisively materialist outlook. After a bit of looking around, I found the Communist Party and was impressed by their long history of dynamically applying Marxist theory to the concrete conditions of any given moment. I was particularly attracted to the Party’s understanding of the need to campaign for immediate economic, social, and political reforms, as part of the sustained struggle for transformative (revolutionary) change.

Throughout this process moving toward communism, I read a lot of very useful books. Among the ones that I found most helpful early on were: *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels); *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Lenin); *Canada’s Party of Socialism: History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1921–1976* (CPC); *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour* (Abella); and *The Scalpel, the Sword: The story of Dr. Norman Bethune* (Gordon, Allan).

These books give a decent overview of the fundamental theory of communism, the history of communists in Canada, and the personal experiences of individual communists.

Jacobsen: With young people looking to institute a single secular school system with a coalition in their locale or country, by which I mean in a global context, how can they do it? What do you recommend for them?

McKee: It’s not an easy process, I must admit. Many places have some form of secular public school system, but they also have some form of religious education integrated into the public system. In Ontario, this integration takes the form of a parallel Catholic school system that is publicly funded. Changing this takes a broad, united movement.

One of the first steps toward building a campaign for a single secular school system is to identify those forces that have an interest in publicly funded religious education, and then determine why they have that interest. This second step is obvious in some cases, but it often also leads to some unexpected conclusions.

Once we have a clearer sense of the forces against secularism, we can build a strong, focused narrative to confront and oppose them. This includes developing precise arguments for the necessity of a single secular system, within our specific conditions, that can be supported by data and research. We can use these arguments, as well as the process for developing them, to build strong and active connections with a broad range of communities in our respective societies.

The overall goal is to isolate those forces who favour religious education and (hopefully) overwhelm their strength through mass mobilization.

Jacobsen: Are single secular school systems cheaper in total costs than separate publicly-funded school systems?

McKee: There are some organizations that make this argument, but I don't favour it.

It is reasonable to expect some cost savings in areas like administration or governance, by moving from multiple school systems to a single one, but I think this is often overstated. For example, a single secular system in Ontario would have, by and large, the same number of students as the current dual system. This means that a single secular system will require a similar number of facilities and workers, including administration, as the current one.

Perhaps more significantly, total education funding in Ontario is desperately low and this has produced a general crisis in the public school system. Since 1990, 2000 schools have been closed and hundreds are currently threatened with closure and sale; there is a \$16 billion backlog in school repairs across the province; school shortages and overcrowding mean that children have to be bussed out of their neighborhoods to find a school that can accommodate them; and reduced staff has meant that violence in schools is increasing. So, the parameters of the debate on education funding need to be less about cost savings (targeted or overall) and much more about increasing the budget to properly fund student, worker, and community needs.

If our approach to public institutions is guided by a cost savings argument, we will quickly find ourselves on a slippery slope to diminished quality and delivery of services. A much stronger argument for a single secular school system is that it provides the best and most consistent method for ensuring universality, accessibility, quality, democracy, and accountability in public education.

Jacobsen: What advice do you have for secular youth who want to become politically active and activists in general for a more secular world?

McKee: One important consideration is to not counterpose secularism to the democratic right of individuals to practice their religions or to have none. This is, perhaps, a subtle distinction but it is one that is easily overlooked. For me, state secularism means that public institutions must display neutrality toward religions — to be universally accessible, their structure and delivery must not be contingent on a specific religion, or on religious belief and practice in general.

This is different from persecution or coercion of religious people. For example, a public institution can be secular without prohibiting its employees from wearing religious symbols.

Persecution tends to heighten interest in religion, strengthen religious conviction, and open the door to reactionary or extremist articulations of the particular religion.

I mentioned earlier in this interview that my entry into social justice activism was through the progressive wing of the church. Even though the outlook of that movement was a religious one, the vast majority of people with whom I worked were defenders and promoters of state secularism. I am an atheist now, and have been for some time, but my early experience taught me that there is a very broad basis of unity for building a secular society. As activists, we must appeal to that basis and build that unity.

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

McKee: Thank you!

In Conversation with Rustam Singh — Editor-in-Chief, Secular World

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you grow up? Was religion a big part of life? How did you come to find the non-religious community?

Rustam Singh: I was raised in a humble Punjabi Sikh family in north India. Religion was a huge part of my life growing up, and since Sikhism is more visible (thanks to the turban) than Hinduism, that affected my perception of myself well into high school. As a Sikh boy growing up, I was obligated to never cut my hair, which meant tying a turban whenever I stepped out of my home. I hated wearing the turban with extreme spite. It restricted my vision, gave me a debilitating headache constantly, restricted my movements, and made me feel extremely cautious of myself. I felt like just because I'm wearing a turban I'm obligated to represent the entire Sikh community — thus restricting my otherwise outspoken personality.

While I studied in a Christian convent school and barely attended the Gurudwara (Sikh temple) once or twice a week, I began to feel progressively more detached with the concept of religion because no matter what I prayed for, things just seemed to happen as they would have if I didn't pray. The stories started making no sense, and I felt like I've been tricked into a huge scam all my life. The internet answered several deep life questions I could ask, and for once, they had demonstrated proof instead of expecting me to just believe. And I've never looked back.

Jacobsen: How do you view the world now? What seems best to explain the world in theory and practice? What ethic, for action in the world with others, seems to make the most sense to you?

Singh: In theory we are literally at the peak of scientific progress we have ever been, leading much longer, happier and fulfilled lives largely free from mass epidemics and world wars. In practice, religious hate hasn't diminished; it has just evolved and neither has their hateful regressive beliefs. The gap between the privileged and the underprivileged is wider than ever before.

I believe a society which keeps religion strictly inside homes alone, refusing to allow it to step into culture, education, public spaces and practices will naturally be more rational and scientific, thus ensuring maximum inclusion of all individuals. Rationalism and a science based lifestyle makes most sense to me.

Jacobsen: What is your current involvement with the international or simply local non-religious community? What do you get out of it?

Singh: I work with Atheist Alliance International (AAI) as the editor in chief for their quarterly magazine, Secular World, since 2014. I finally feel like I'm not alone in seeing through the obvious pseudoscience and inequality so visibly rampant and normalized in Indian society around me. This sense of inclusion and the existence of a support system to battle social inequalities/restrictions on freedoms and render a voice to rational individuals and communities gives me an immense sense of pride.

Jacobsen: If you could take any piece of advice or quote from people living or dead in the non-religious community, what would be that advice or quote?

Singh: Carl Sagan's famous Pale Blue Dot imagery along with the passionate speech embarking the fragility of our species in the infinite cosmos is the most inspiring quote for me. "The aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilizations, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every hopeful child, every mother and father, every inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species, lived there on a mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam."

The concluding line, where Sagan talks about how alone we are in the universe, and it is our responsibility to rise above hate to preserve and cherish the only home we have ever known is humbling and motivating.

Jacobsen: How do you hope the non-religious community comes together and forms just that, a community, of like-minded people founded in sympathy and decency of conduct?

Singh: I hope the non-religious community strives to take their activism beyond Facebook and into our law books. Let us be active members of the law making process, education systems, and vocalized opposition to religious dogma. From casual bar talks to enunciated debates and from letters to our representatives to voicing an opposition protest to bigotry- let's strive for a rational tomorrow.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Singh: I would hope the international humanist community does not neglect third world nations such as India where religious persecutions not just result in loss of lives, but millions of unaccounted children growing up never hearing the voice of reason as well.

These are the communities we must include in our struggle for a rational world. Reaching out to adults is much harder `because of decades of religious indoctrination and inherit biases. Instead of spending our limited resources to tap each other's backs, let us at a privileged position help empower small and localized communities to take action promoting critical thinking skills, scientific temperament and humanism without religion.

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

Conversation with Hanne Stinson — Former CEO, British Humanist Association

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you first become a humanist? Did this coincide with an atheism?

Hanne Stinson: I was brought up without any religious beliefs, but also encouraged by my parents to respect other people with various religions and to explore different religions and make up my own mind. That was probably partly because my parents had a mixed religious heritage. My father had a Jewish father and Catholic mother, while my mother was brought up as a Protestant Christian, but they had both become either atheist or agnostic before they met or had their children. As a child I was always interested in — and quite puzzled by — religion, but never tempted by any of them. I would have called myself an atheist from a very young age, but only came across the concept and the term ‘humanism’ in my late teens. As I had never felt really happy defining myself by a negative — by the god or gods I did not believe in — I welcomed humanism, and the positive beliefs it seemed to encompass, with open arms.

Jacobsen: What is the biggest umbrella that humanist, as a term and worldview and ethical stance, and humanism can encompass?

Hanne: Like every ‘ism’, it all depends how you define it. While working with and for a humanist organisation, I was sometimes irritated by the way that some religions, not least the Catholic Church, tried to claim humanism as their own. They, of course, had a different definition involving caring for humanity, but within their religious beliefs.

I have always seen humanism as encompassing a very broad range of approaches, but I think the common factors are a rejection of religion and superstitious beliefs, a rational and evidence-based approach, and a commitment to working with others to make the world a better and happier place. I also recognise that people don’t need to describe themselves as humanist to fit within those concepts.

Jacobsen: What are some of the major perennial issues for humanists around the world — indeed, the formal irreligious generally?

Hanne: Humanists in different countries and cultures face different issues, depending largely on the power and influence of religion and religious organisations in the society they live in. A humanist or atheist living in a country where atheism is punishable in law, clearly faces different problems to a person living in a more secular state, where the main issues may be about discrimination and a lack of respect for humanism as a legitimate set of personal beliefs. For many humanists, one of the most difficult issues on a personal level may be rejection by their own families or their community, and I think that the common assumption that morality is based on religion can also make life difficult for some.

Jacobsen: What are some of the prejudices against humanists in law, in culture, in social interactions, even in work and economic contexts?

Hanne: I have already mentioned the assumption that morality can only come from religion, and, even in a relatively free and fairly tolerant society like Britain, I was often surprised by how many people believed that. In the British Humanist Association (the BHA — but now called Humanists UK) we would sometimes get phone calls from parents genuinely concerned about how they could ensure that their children understood why they should be good, but I suppose if you have been brought up believing that a god would judge and punish you, and had then rejected your religion, a parent might feel that they are bringing their child up in a vacuum, and be looking for a bit of support from other non-religious parents, just to give them a bit of confidence that saying ‘how would you feel if someone did that to you?’ to a child may be better than threatening them with eternal damnation!

I have sometimes in discussion asked religious people whether they would go out and steal things or murder people if they lost their religion. Most people say ‘of course not’, but I have occasionally been shocked when someone answers ‘yes, if I thought I could get away with it’. Those people should probably keep their religion!

I might add that far too many people, often encouraged by religious leaders, equate a lack of religious belief with either hedonism or rampant consumerism.

When I worked at the BHA we devoted a lot of effort to trying to address inequalities under the law, many of which still exist. I find it very difficult to accept that state funded faith schools can discriminate not only in pupil admissions, but also employment, to give just one example, and I am outraged by the fact that the UK still has Church of England bishops in the House of Lords as of right. Twenty six of them. Humanist campaigners have made huge steps over recent years, but there is still a lot of work to do.

Jacobsen: In your time as one of the higher-ups in the formal humanist world, what have you found to be the truest?

Hanne: This is a difficult question. I think I would have to say that it is amazing how a very small number of people, whether staff or committed volunteers, can make a huge difference. That was certainly true in the BHA, which had a very low public profile and only some 2,500 paid up members when I became CEO, although it is much larger and more influential now, and also in the International Humanist and Ethical Union, which even has a voice in the United Nations. But it is even more true of the volunteers in countries which were and are building new humanist organisations against all the odds, whether in Africa, Asia or South America. I have enormous admiration for everything people in the many new and small organisations around the world are achieving despite having little in the way of resources and in the face of a huge amount of opposition and sometimes persecution from the established religious organisations.

Jacobsen: You were the CEO for the British Humanist Association in the past. How did you coordinate or help manage the humanists for the country?

Hanne: The first thing I would say is that I never tried to ‘manage’ the humanists in the country, apart from the staff team of course. We used to joke that organising humanists is a bit like trying to herd cats! After all, humanists are, by definition, people who think and decide for themselves. What we tried to do was to support and represent humanists, and the non-religious more broadly — whether or not they identified as humanist.

The main areas of support were in the provision of humanist funerals, weddings and baby naming ceremonies, and also education, whether providing materials on humanism for schools and

teachers, or public events. I think the education work is important because, while we never sought to convert or indoctrinate anyone, many people valued confirmation that others shared their ideas and beliefs, or opportunities to explore their existing thoughts and ideas.

As regards representation, this varied from the campaigns we ran on equality legislation and the interpretation of human rights law, to giving humanists a voice on all kinds of issues that affect them. We always knew that humanists felt they didn't have much of a voice in the public sphere (unlike organised religions) but this was really brought home to us when we launched the 'Atheist Bus' campaign in 2009. We intended to raise £5,500 to put a simple message: 'There is probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life' on a few buses in London, but we raised more than £150,000 in a few weeks, almost all of it from very small donations from a very large number of individuals. From the messages they left, we knew that what they wanted was to see their ideas on public display, and to feel — often for the first time — that they had a voice.

Jacobsen: For the youth, for the upcoming generations, especially in North America and Western Europe — who tend to be more irreligious than their parents, what is your big message for them?

Hanne: I am not sure why you are focusing on North America and Western Europe as it seems to me that, all around the world, younger people are more likely to reject religion. There are some exceptions, particularly in countries that have emerged from a repressive regime so the religions have a new found freedom, and it is also true that some young people develop more extreme or fundamentalist religious beliefs than their parents. There are of course also countries where it is very difficult to be openly non-religious.

I am also unsure that I am in any way qualified to give young people a message (they do pretty well on their own), but if I had to, I think it would be about being firm in your beliefs, looking for opportunities to explore them further, and making contact with like-minded people, while all the time respecting people with different beliefs and recognising how important those beliefs might be to them. If you can find a local organisation, or find support online, that may be helpful.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Hanne.

An Interview with Jesus Falcis — Full-Time Lecturer, Far Eastern University

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 25, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When did you find humanism and irreligiosity?

Jesus Falcis: I found irreligiosity when I was in secondary school, when I was undergoing an identity crisis for being gay vis a vis my Catholic upbringing

I thought about the different religions that existed and how none could be true if every religion said theirs is the only true and correct one

Also thought about the internal contradictions of Catholicism and so rejected religion

I found humanism later in life during postgrad when there were a lot of debates about creationism, intelligent design, and other pseudo-scientific religious theories vis a vis the rise of militant atheism

I found humanism to be more appealing as a belief system and as a political strategy than atheism because atheism is more rejectionist, it doesn't tell people what to believe instead.

Jacobsen: What have been some difficulties in espousing these beliefs publicly?

Falcis: Personally, I haven't experienced any difficulty about my humanist or irreligious belief given my progressive social circle. Most opponents or conservatives would attack me on my homosexuality, not my irreligiosity.

Jacobsen: What have been your major campaigns to advance the “frontier” — so to speak — of humanists and the irreligious?

Falcis: My advocacies or campaigns that advance humanism or irreligiosity would be the marriage equality petition before the Supreme Court and debate lectures about social constructs on sex, sexuality, and gender identity vis a vis dominant religious beliefs in the Philippines and elsewhere

Aside from that, social media posts against the Catholic Church and Iglesia ni Cristo and Manny Pacquiao when they forward establishment views and theocratic perspectives in sociolegal and political decision making.

Jacobsen: What is the main impediment to the full implementation of human rights in the Philippines?

Falcis: The main impediment to full implementation of human rights would be socioeconomic class — the dehumanization of the poor and the unfortunate uneducated ignorance of the struggling middle class leading to unprogressive beliefs on issues such as the war on drugs, sexuality, women's rights, and others

Jacobsen: Is life more restrictive for the LGBTQ+ community compared to the rest of society, in law, in culture, in social interactions, in the media, and so on? In short, in all ways?

Falcis: Definitely more restrictive. Yes, in all areas of life. LGBTs have to conform to certain stereotypes or acceptable LGBT social constructs such as the flamboyant or effeminate gay, the bisexual lipstick lesbian who caters more to the male gaze, and trans people who must be beautiful

Jacobsen: Why are you doing the work that you're doing?

Falcis: I do the work that I do because I have been discriminated and I have experienced oppression — and I wouldn't want others to go through what I've gone through and I believe no human being would want to be born in a world of discrimination and oppression.

Jacobsen: Is your life at risk?

Falcis: My life is at risk yes but only mildly — for now

Jacobsen: What is your message of hope for those in dire circumstances as humanists and he generally irreligious?

Falcis: My message of hope is that the youth right now are more progressive and irreligious than ever. Wait for them to come into power. Teach and reach more young people.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Jesus.

An upcoming gathering of humanists in Owerri, Imo State, Southern Nigeria

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 26, 2018

A forum will be coming together of a bunch of Humanists in Owerri, Imo State, Southern Nigeria. It is the capital of Imo State. The intention is to give a platform for humanists and freethinkers to have community and do what communities do: share ideas, experiences, and time together.

The goal is to galvanize the population, the local one, in Owerri to be able to found, maintain, and grow a state chapter of the Humanist Association of Nigeria or the HAN. In a marginalized community, based on demographics of belief, this could be a great opportunity to develop that sense of shared community and spirit.

As Igwe notes (2018), the dominant belief system or worldview in Imo State is Christianity. To have a community stationed and built by, and for, the non-religious, especially the proactive form of it in the humanist population, is an important step for equality, as far as I am concerned.

Igwe quips that it is the “Bible Belt” of Nigeria. In other words, Christianity is taken very, very seriously in this region, so this can, in a way, make the foundation of an outlet for those who do not adhere to the dominant faith there doubly important.

As I have found in conversation with people who know the region better than others, or those who grew up and have lived in the culture for a substantial amount of time, there is a ubiquitous admixture of Abrahamic religions and traditional beliefs and practices (or traditional Nigerian religions, as it sounds to my sensibility).

“Ritual killings frequently occur in the area. Osu caste discrimination is practiced in various parts of the state. Christian churches have a lot of influence in Imo stat,” Igwe said, “They virtually monopolize the media, local politics and the educational system.”

Caste, traditional faith, and Abrahamic religion seem like a complicated mixture for the population, especially regarding the political climate as noted by Igwe. The Roman catholic and Anglican churches hold sway and “determine who governs the state and the bills that could pass or be rejected at the local assemblies.”

As these indicate, the separation between church, or place of worship, and state is not a well-delineated phenomenon, but, rather, the obvious conclusion is the blurring of the lines and more often than not in the favour of the religious, i.e., the Christian religious (Catholics and Anglicans).

But like that line from the *Star Wars* reboots, ‘there has been an awakening...’ Igwe said, “A wave of intellectual awakening is sweeping across the region. And this humanist forum is an initiative to build on this momentum. This forum will be used to promote public education and enlightenment in the state. It will provide a platform for humanists to interact and discuss contemporary issues.”

With this gathering, there could be an improvement in the material and political conditions for the non-religious, the humanists and freethinkers and others, in Owerri. The inaugural meeting will be before the end of March...Stay tuned!

For more information, please see the here:

Prof Dede Konkwo, a lecturer at the Imo State University has volunteered to be the contact person. All who are interested in participating in this forum should contact Prof Konkwo via email at: dedekonkwo@yahoo.com; Tel 08035774378. According to Prof Konkwo, convening a humanist forum in Imo state is an idea whose time has come! (*Igwe, 2018*)

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Author Peter Gajdics on Conversion Therapy

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 28, 2018

Peter Gajdics is the author of The Inheritance of Shame: A Memoir. He can be found in Amazon, Twitter, Facebook, and Goodreads. Here we talk about conversion therapy and his own experience with it.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is conversion therapy?

Peter Gajdics: “Conversion therapy,” also known as “reparative therapy” or even “sexual orientation change efforts” (SOCE), really took hold in direct response to the burgeoning gay rights movement of the early 1970’s, particularly after the American Psychiatric Association’s 1973 decision to declassify homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. As gay liberation exploded over the next several years and gay people carved out their own place in history, taking great strides toward visibility and self-worth, in some cases legal vindication, the religious right advanced its own ideology of being “ex-gay” — that it was possible to sort of “pray away the gay.” Personally, I don’t really like this term, “pray away the gay,” since I think it reduces what is actually a traumatic experience to the sound of a joke, and the process of attempting to strip away a person’s core self and “convert” them into something that they’re not is anything but humorous: lives have been destroyed and even lost in the name of this kind of ignorance and outright hatred. Ultimately, there was nothing new to any of this; what we call “homosexuals” or even “gay” people today have been victims to all sorts of strange methods and ideologies to help “change” them, or at least to help conceal them, over the centuries. In the 20th century alone we’ve seen aversion therapy, castrations and lobotomies, inhumane use of psychotropics, and of course forced psychoanalysis as a common “cure.” At one time not that long ago it was believed that homosexuals were really just confused straight people who wished to incorporate the therapist’s penis orally in an effort to appropriate his omnipotence; or that homosexuality was caused by childhood prohibition against masturbation. Homosexuals were once considered predominantly anti-social, vindictive, and hateful of all people; homosexuals and “dwarfs” were seen to be comparable in that both had apparently been stunted in their growth; passive homosexuals threatened to lure straight men away from their opposite-sex spouses. Homosexuality, it was once believed, could be cured through 40 sessions of hypnosis; gay men and women could be “made straight” by watching childbirth in hospitals; circumcision could lead to “less homosexuality in Jews.” It’s unbelievable when we think about it today, but these “beliefs” were all once accepted as fact.

Today, the most common form of conversion therapy is perhaps still the religious ideology that seems to target those who’ve been raised with the belief that homosexuality is a sin and can therefore be healed through divine intervention. This is a lie, of course, no different than saying a heterosexual person could become homosexual if only they got down on their knees and prayed. It’s absurd, and yet the “gay to straight” ideology is still believed by millions of people worldwide because of the cult and power of religious dogmatism. Sometimes, abandoning these false beliefs means losing one’s faith in their religion, and that is often just intolerable to a lot of people. Obviously, conversion therapy need not carry any overt religiosity, such as what happened to me with a psychiatrist.

Jacobsen: What was your own experience with it?

Gajdics: In 1989, at the age of 24, I started therapy with a licensed psychiatrist shortly after coming out and being rejected by my family. Like many young gay people, I'd recently fled my hometown to "start over," but quickly fell into a deep depression. I knew I needed to talk to *someone*, and so my family physician referred me to this psychiatrist. One of the reasons I needed counselling in the first place was that I'd never really dealt with a lot of issues related to being sexually abused as a child. Throughout my young adolescence in the 1970's I'd learned from a number of sources that sexual abuse "made" a person homosexual. The fear that this was true for me — that the abuse had "caused" my own homosexuality — haunted me through most of my life up until the time I met this doctor. Unfortunately, not long after beginning therapy, the psychiatrist affirmed the belief that the abuse had, indeed, "caused" my homosexuality, and that the only way to heal from the trauma of the abuse would be to revert to my "innate heterosexuality" (his words). I believed him, to a large degree because this belief system "fit" the narrative of my upbringing. What followed was six years of what today we would call "conversion therapy" — though, surprisingly, that term, "conversion therapy," was never once spoken. The doctor's methods to try and "change" my sexuality included ongoing primal scream therapy, near fatal dosages of various concurrent psychiatric medications (psychotropics), including weekly injections of ketamine hydrochloride, and aversion therapy.

In the years since this therapy ended, I've learned that all conversion therapies begin with some version of the same lie that says being gay or homosexual is an illness or immoral, a deviation, and must therefore be cured or "healed." My own "lie" was that the abuse had made me gay, and like any convincing lie, I believed it until I no longer believed it, and then everything fell apart. I left the therapy in 1995 with acute post trauma, and started my long journey toward healing.

Jacobsen: What have been the justifications for its use in the past?

Gajdics: I think that justifications for the use of these kinds of inhumane treatments of gay people can be largely attributed to the medicalization and moralization of homosexuality, which at one time or another has sadly even been supported and institutionalized by health organizations, governments and world leaders. Much of this barbarianism has been occurring for centuries, and stating it all quite simply like this does not detract from how, for instance, psychiatry's or certain religions' treatment and views around homosexuality in the 20th century alone have caused enormous harm toward generations of LGBT people. Hate crimes, murders and suicides, the psychological or physical torture of "conversion therapy," all are caused by false beliefs, promulgated by authority figures. I often wish that we would all just collectively stop referring to these treatments to "change" sexuality as "conversion therapy." Nothing is ever "repaired" or "converted" in them, and their methods are anything but "therapeutic." These are acts of sexuality abuse; they are acts of torture.

Jacobsen: Have these justifications changed over time into the present, or not? How?

Gajdics: I'm not so sure the justifications have changed but there's definitely been a shift in the way the religious organizations have enforced these "conversion" practices, particularly following the demise of Exodus International, the world's largest "ex-gay" ministry. Today, instead of stating that they can "change" a person's sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual (although in some cases they do continue to say this), now they often use much more subversive language such as how they want to "help" the homosexual live a life of abstinence. In other words — they just want us all to stop having sex because to "act" on one's

homosexuality is the real sin. “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” as the saying goes. There is nothing new to any of this — I grew up hearing all of this in the 1970’s. The religious ideology of conversion therapy forces gay people back into a state of shame-based compartmentalization. We’re supposed to love ourselves as people, because we’re all made in God’s image — but hate what we feel and how we express ourselves intimately. That doesn’t make any sense, and continues with the shame game.

Jacobsen: How can young homosexuals work to better manage their feelings and identity in a positive way instead of with guilt and shame?

Gajdics: Shame and guilt, all of those kinds of negative emotions, are learned behaviours; we do not start out feeling shame, but learn it over time from others — family, religion, the media, the culture around us, even from the people we call our friends. The problem is we forget that these are things we’ve learned, and come to believe that they are essential to who and what we are, that they’re part of “us,” like our internal organs. We stop seeing the forest from the trees, and start acting out of these counterproductive emotions and behaviours — belief systems that are not “us,” but thoughts we’ve internalized. Anything that is learned can be unlearned, though with great difficulty. Oddly enough, these are the exact same words my psychiatrist said to me early on with respect to my homosexuality: “Your homosexuality is learned behaviour, and so therefore it can be unlearned, though with great difficulty.” Of course, he was wrong, because homosexuality is not a belief system; it is not something we “learn” but rather it’s a part of who a person *is*.

The problem in trying to unlearn what we’ve learned as children is that we have to first “see” these behaviours as separate from who we are as adults; we need to create distance from them in our minds. Unfortunately, in today’s madcap culture, driven largely by social media where everyone is always two steps behind the last guy, there is little space for distance. Still, distance must be created, if we are ever to find peace. There are great advantages in learning to recognize these negative emotions as separate from ourselves, since the loss of every part of us that is not who we are helps take us closer to who we were born to be.

A Compendium of Crimes and Criminals of the Eastern Orthodox Church — Part 3

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 29, 2018

I doubt this is comprehensive, nor is it representative of the positives of the church either; it is reportage on the reports from the news. I didn't see a compendium, so decided to write one. Part 1 and 2.

Former St. George Greek Orthodox Church treasurer Constantine D. Christodoulou sought bankruptcy protection after stealing \$415,950 from the church coffers, only becoming caught by the public. He wants, as of October, 2017, protection from the U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Knoxville.

The church forgave him, apparently, but the state prosecuted him (Satterfield, 2017). His wife filed for bankruptcy too. Not the only case of this in North America, there exists the “Greek church civil war now raging in Toronto,” Canada, with the ‘stealing of donations for a sick baby, the appointment of known sex abusers and skimming money earmarked for the poor...’ (Mandel, 2017).

A baby, Alexander Karanikas, needed \$100,000 for a trip home for lifesaving heart surgery at Sick Kids. The laity, the ordinary Greek-Canadian community — as per usual with the community being beneficent, fair, and just — raised thousands of dollars “after the fundraiser was announced by the archbishop (“the Metropolitan”) of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Toronto (Canada),” but most of the money never went to the family.

Only \$1,450 of the \$50,000 raised went to the family. In alignment with this ‘mismanagement,’ the archbishop Sotirios Athanassoulas, church women’s auxiliary, four priests, and the Father Philip Philippou misappropriated funds intended for the “sick, homeless and poor” (Ibid.). Known sex abusers, according to the lawsuit listed in the article, were installed with the Greek Community of Toronto (GCT).

Demetre Tsevlíkoes was placed at St. Irene Chrisovalantou. He was a known sexual predator and pedophile. Mandel said, “The lawsuit contends the Metropolis installed known sex abusers in GCT former Bishop Georgije Djokic was invited by the Metropolitan to conduct mass in 2016 yet was defrocked for ‘allegations of indecent sexual behaviour.’”

This lawsuit also alleged that the Metropolis and priests used hundreds of thousands of dollars that the GCT fundraised, monies gathered through tithing in a collection plate in the pews. The finances were intended for the “disabled, widowed and orphaned, Sunday schools, food banks and physical upkeep of the churches,” and were used “unlawfully.”

Verbal abuse and physical assault were common with the GCT. Allegedly, Father Vitouladitis was the perpetrator, often against the Women’s Auxiliary at St. Irene Chrisovalantou Greek Orthodox church.

The lawsuit directly claims, “The Metropolitan, the Metropolis, the priests and the Women’s Auxiliary were at all times aided and abetted in the fraud by each other, their respective family members, the other Defendants and persons unknown” (Ibid.).

The Russian Orthodox Church merged its purposes in service of an ex-KGB autocrat in charge of an oligarchic elite — and they shall not be questioned, as noted by Human Rights Watch’s Yulia Gorbunova and Anastasia Ovsyannikova in November 18 of 2016.

A criminal investigation was set against local residents in Moscow because of “insulting religious feelings” (Gorbunova & Ovsyannikova, 2016). Activists took to Torfyanka park as well. How did this begin in Moscow’s Torfyanka park?

They state, “The story starts in 2013, when the Russian Orthodox Church got approval to build a church in Moscow’s Torfyanka park and quickly built a temporary shed and installed a large cross. Soon, the church was running weekly, open-air Sunday services.”

The church members asserted the park visitors created noise and children playing interrupted with the prayer. The religious and environmental activists clashed. People held signs in protests. Come 2015, the local authorities compromised with a plot set outside the park to have the church built there.

The church did not want to leave the park. Things got tense. The Russian Orthodox Church, in the service of the ruling elites, have a reciprocal relationship with the Putin regime. In that light, “Early the morning of Monday, November 14, (2015) masked and armed riot police units came to the activists’ homes.” Gorbunova and Ovsyannikova said, “Police smashed the door of one apartment and cut through the lock of another’s front door. One activist said at least 15 armed policemen came to arrest him. They threw him on the floor, handcuffed him in front of his children, and took him away.”

The pro-Kremlin television referred to the activists as “members of a cell,” “neo-pagans” in the possession of “ammunition and psychotropic drugs.” The Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill called the protesters “pagans” and “cultists.” Same term in one and similar tone overall — religion and government aligned in investment in oppression of the public, assaults on laity freedom.

The criminal case that the activists had to answer questions about in a police station were about “insulting religious feelings,” whereupon the police confiscated computers and phones from the activists’ apartments. As noted by the Human Rights Watch writers (2016):

The ties between the Russian state and the orthodox church run deep. The government extensively relies on the Church for endorsement and support, and the Church receives the government’s generous financial backing. The disturbing lack of separation between the two has led to public criticism, corruption allegations, and protests. In 2013, following the infamous Pussy Riot trial, which ended with band members’ conviction for “hooliganism,” the Russian parliament pushed through a law making it a crime to offend someone’s religious feelings.

So it goes.

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Chat with Neil Bera — Member, SMART Recovery

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 2, 2018

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

Neil Bera: It stands for self-management and recovery training. It allows building coping mechanisms with cognitive behavioral therapy. We can dig into our innermost roots of our feelings and thinking, and thoughts, and instinctive behavior and reactions to things. It is to have the ability to control our behaviors as a result of our thinking, whether that be gambling or sex or drug addiction or alcohol. it doesn't matter.

I think the dynamic of having that in our meetings makes it more effective than alternative programs such as the 12-step program.

Jacobsen: What do you think are some of the weaknesses of the 12-step programs?

Bera: Dependency is the issue that you start off with, in my opinion at least, though I go to AA meetings and practice 12-steps, I notice its flaws. The dependence is on a higher power or a group of A members or a sponsor for example. It is as if you are not in a position to make a decision on your own. It is almost as if your empowerment is taken away from you.

I think its singular purpose is beneficial for so many people such as alcoholics or drug addictions. I still find the singleness in purpose takes away from the purpose of trying to become a better person. While that may help the person that needs one thing, I find most people who are addicts tend to have another underlying behavioral problem that needs to be addressed. That may be mental illness.

For example, I am bipolar. If I was only doing the 12-step program instead of being able to be open at SMART meetings about my bipolar, I wouldn't get the feedback because that's not their focus.

Jacobsen: Why is SMART important as an organization in general?

Bera: Knowing what they are and where they came from, they are a small community in comparison obviously to AA and other programs. I think the hierarchy that they have developed that makes a lot of sense in terms of creating facilitators. They have meeting facilitators. They are pretty much being of service in the sense that someone in AA is being asked to service because they are helping other addicts with their problems.

In doing so, they are feeling great about it themselves and in the process spreading the program. I have only been going to one meeting a week, but the same meeting for the last 21 months. That is how long I have been sober. That is not just from AA.

That started with SMART. I wanted to be sober. I thought about both, went to both, but going to the meetings and seeing Steve (my facilitator) helps us out. He doesn't run the meeting. It is almost like a machine in itself. I think the cross-talk in the community within each meeting really makes it special. It almost feels like a place to feel better.

I have never left a SMART meeting on a bad note. Let's put it that way.

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

Bera: Currently, I am practicing as an architect. I wasn't because of alcoholism and drug addiction. It was difficult to get my feet on the ground again. The last three or four years or so. I have been able to get back on my feet and get some sobriety under my belt, get the confidence that I need to succeed again, where I left my path.

My addiction took over. That work is really important in terms of my routine. I think the main thing now is to continue to maintain. What I mean by that is that in AA, it doesn't feel like it is a maintenance program; it feels like you're going to have to keep doing it forever, and ever, and ever. It feels constrictive in a sense. With SMART, I almost want to check in every week to make sure I left everything on the table.

It is almost as if because of the tools of the program have changed my way of thinking. I think that is the name of the game at the end of the day.

Jacobsen: Last question, do you have any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Bera: I think being persistent has been key to my recovery. In a sense that I have been doing this for 7 years now, when I got my first DUI, it only got worse. I didn't find a solution in a lot of things. I just kept getting a little bit, like 30 or 60 days at a time. I couldn't change the way I was thinking.

Cognitive behavioural therapy, it is a way of changing the way we see things. If not for SMART, it wouldn't have stuck with me that I can take charge of my life and take care of myself as long as I work on a few things on myself better. The clear goals are obvious.

We can decide on what problems need attention and what ones don't because of one singular program, and I think this is more effective that I have utilized in the past. The good thing for me is that it allowed me to become the person that I was on my way to becoming before this.

I am very grateful to SMART.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Neil.

Bera: No problem.

Chat with Steve Bergier— Facilitator, SMART Recovery

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 2, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you find SMART Recovery?

Steve Bergier: Okay, well, I first started in recovery in 1990. I am an old guy. At that time, only 12-step groups were available. I went to them for many years. Eventually, I stopped going. I restarted going again in 2011. I became increasingly dissatisfied with 12-step. I started looking online for alternatives and things. I found SMART there at that time.

There was one meeting. I went every week. I decided that rather than complaining about 12-step that I should become a facilitator and start facilitating my own meeting. That's what happened.

Jacobsen: What has been one of your more emotionally moving experiences as a facilitator?

Bergier: That is a good question. I started it more for negative reasons because I liked it. I eventually came to have a great respect for the cognitive behavioral principles. I think the most moving thing was to see some people come in and they would connect with the program and come back week after week.

They would stay clean and sober. That was satisfying for me.

Jacobsen: What is one of the more dramatic turnarounds from addiction to recovery that you have seen in your time?

Bergier: There was one person coming in right out of rehab. They would have 30 days clean. This was a person who was literally homeless and living under a bridge and addicted to heroin. He was kicked out of their home by their family as a young person. Somehow, by meeting us, they became clean. It was a dramatic turnaround in a person's life.

Jacobsen: Regarding the principles, SMART Recovery adheres to and practices, what is the most crucial principle?

Bergier: I think the most crucial is seeing recovery as their own responsibility. That recovery is a process of taking charge of your life.

Jacobsen: Is there any restriction on people who feel the need for the belief in a higher power when going into SMART Recovery

Bergier: No, now, the meetings tend to be pretty secular. I would say half the attendees are agnostic, secular, nones. That sort of thing. The others are religious. But then there are those who are religious do not like the 12-step model. There are many people who go to SMART who also go to 12-step meetings.

Jacobsen: What are some of the bigger reasons people attend SMART recovery and continue to attend in the long term?

Bergier: I would say the number one thing that I hear is that the 12-step model didn't work for them for whatever reasons, whether they are secular or religious people. It didn't seem to help

them. The bottom line is that at least in our area. For every SMART meeting, there are 300 12-step meetings. We are the small kids on the block.

It is easier to go to 12-step. There are more meetings. Many people will drive farther and search out the SMART meetings. I think the number one reason is they don't like the 12-step model. Many people go to both. They will go to 12-step for whatever reasons, to connect with other sober people. That is a real important part of recovery.

12-step has so many more meetings around.

Jacobsen: If people want to donate and help, how can people help out, especially with the massive difference in SMART to 12-step services?

Bergier: You can go to SMARTrecovery.org. If you are willing to donate some time to go the website and take their facilitator training, then you look to starting a meeting yourself. Of course, that takes more of a commitment. The best way to increase the number of meetings is to volunteer your time.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Bergier: The subtitle of SMART is: choice. We need to give people more choices in recovery. But, you know, the enemy addiction and not one program versus another. The more choices that we have the better.

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

Interview with Bruce Gleason — Director, LogiCal-LA

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 5, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, with respect to a skeptical outlook on the world, this is a groundwork. Why is it important in functioning in adult life?

Bruce Gleason: I think everybody wonders at one point in their lives “what is the purpose of life?” and “how can I make this life better for me as well as everybody else?”. I believe that everybody has altruism and narcissism built in them.

There is a balance between the two. What can I do to help others? But I also, need have my own security, security for my own family, and my own position in life. So, the idea of skepticism is to find out what is true, why we behave as we do, and why do we think the way we do.

Why do people do the things they do? This obviously comes from what they think and how they think the world should be. So, the skeptical outlook on life is part life examination and part curiosity.

One thing that you’ll find almost all scientific skeptics saying is that they could be wrong about anything, even of the things that they strongly believe are true now. The reason skeptics do this is because once we find scientific evidence to prove that this one issue that you might be concerned about is more likely true, like climate change for instance; skeptics believe that new evidence may come up in the future to prove that those particular truths are offset by new evidence.

We accept a new evidence as long as it’s stronger than the evidence that we currently believe. Of course, with climate change, that’s not going to happen. Obviously the climate will change for the worse during next few centuries, but suppose that it starts getting better for some new reason. That would offset beliefs that we have right now. That’s an example of a provisional, or temporary truth — meaning we only believe things that are true are based on the current evidence.

We can’t tell what is going to be coming up in the future, but if different evidence does come up that’s stronger than the evidence we have, as scientific skeptics, no matter how much our confirmation bias says that can’t be true, we have to accept it’s true if it has stronger evidence than the evidence than we had before.

Jacobsen: We have evolved brains and they have crummy aspects to them and then some of those include a long list of cognitive biases. What are some of the more prominent ones that come into play in the belief of pseudo-scientific claims for example?

Bruce: That’s a great question. I’m starting to formulate a pretty good theory on confirmation bias and it has to deal with environment. It has to deal with selection pressures, especially when you’re younger.

So, my current theory of confirmation bias is that if you start leaning in one direction for any particular issue that you’re more likely to listen to media reports, friends, or associations that confirm your confirmation bias, even if it’s a little bit, then you start building up a stronger and

stronger confirmation bias over time. So, it becomes more and more difficult for you to change your mind even if there's more science or more proof that comes along. The major mantra of scientific skeptics is we could be wrong, so automatically we they and examine our own bias to make sure if follow the evidence.

Let's take climate change for instance again. There are 1752 climate scientists in the world right now, this is excluding other scientists who are not related directly to climate change. You might be an oceanographer, for instance, but not an actual climatologist. 1752 climate scientists; all of them believe that there is climate change going on and 98% of them believe that it is man-made and the other two percent believe it's happening but would like more evidence that it's **man made**.

The point I'm trying to make is that if you have a confirmation bias that climate change is real, and you have the support of 98% of the people who spend their entire lives working on this problem and working on this issue the chances of you being wrong are much less than someone who reject the consensus of a particular scientific field. So, that is a huge boost in our confidence level that we are on the correct path. There's another side note there. And that is for those people who don't believe in the science, let's take GMOs, for instance.

Do you think Big Pharma has been paying off all of these scientists? First of all, you have to ask, "What are the chances that Big Pharma is paying off every single scientist in favor of producing GMOs?" You have to admit that is much less likely.

If there was evidence of Big Pharma paying off every single scientist and your reject the consensus, what is left? If science is wrong what is left to determine the truth? What is left is to believe in hearsay. What is left is people barking their own opinion on a particular issue with no science fact to back them up. You're left with nothing solid because once you go down that rabbit hole of conspiracy theories (that all scientists were in on it), then you'll lose the ability to tell what is true.

Right now, science is the best thing we have until something else comes along. What are the chances of the majority of scientists in any particular field of study are going to be wrong?

Here's another example. Let's take paleontology over the past 80 years. A vast majority of paleontologists agree that all the things that have been discovered through paleontology are true. Almost all of the public believe the facts the paleontologists say are true based on the evidence presented. Who are we to challenge any of these scientists? We'd have to be a paleontologist to have a professional opinion. GMO food is bad for you, climate change is not man-made, vaccines cause autism, all of the 'woo' that is going around amount to ridiculous non-scientific claims. Who are we to challenge these experts who spend their entire lives working on a small slice of knowledge? They study their profession and come up with a conclusion based on evidence.

Jacobsen: What are some resources the Nones can look into to provide a buffer against or protection from pseudo-scientific claims that abound throughout their lives?

Bruce: I think the number one resource is Snopes. Snopes covers not only non-scientific claims, but also political claims as well. So, Snopes is unique, www.snopes.com. It's unique because if they find out the source of a rumor or a false claim and then they look at the progression of that false claim over time. You can see the development of it. If there's a false claim that people pick

it up, or that *Fox News* picks it up, and then the president picks it up; you can see the progression of that false claim as it goes through its motions.

Another good resource is almost any skeptical website that is science-based. One of the best podcasts is Skeptical Guide to the Universe or SGU. The hosts of SGU might come back and say, “There’s new evidence and we were wrong about this,” but almost all the time since their entire podcast was based on evidence they are spot on of the different issues at hand: homeopathy, chiropractory, healing touch therapy, or GMOs. So happens, one of the co-hosts will be at our conference at LogiCal-LA.com

There’s a slew, probably hundreds of different medical procedures and untrue-based claims that are out there. Richard Saunders runs a website from Australia called www.whatstheharm.net. This is another interesting website that will explain what the harm is if someone does not trust science-based medicine.

An example on non-science based medicine is cupping. Cupping is what athletes do to improve their ability to perform. Is there science is behind cupping? Or chiropractors, homeopathy, or naturopathy? All of these procedures have no scientific proof that they work better than a placebo. You might say — so what? No harm can come of this. But there is harm, especially if you have a disease that you don’t know about and you go to any of these non-science professions for two months, and your condition has not improved, you could have a much worst advanced case of your disease. You could have gone to a Western medicine doctor that provides real medicine and find out that, “Oh, we need a blood test right away.” Now, you haven’t wasted the time to go from stage 1 cancer to stage 2 cancer. Now, you KNOW you’re at stage 1 and you can start fighting it right away. If you make the former decision you have just wasted time while doing all of these other unproven and non-scientific procedures and escalated your disease into the next stage.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity, Bruce.

Shaykh Uthman Khan on Dialogue — Academic Dean/Director of Research, Critical Loyalty

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 5, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are some effective ways, means of communication to make calls for both pluralism and secularism within Islamic documented history, e.g. calls for pluralism and secularism within Islamic documented history, relationships with one another, more flexible gender roles, and so on?

Shaykh Uthman Khan: Dialogue, understanding one another, listening to each other. One should listen with the intention to understand and not with the intention to reply.

When you're talking pluralism, there needs to be inter-religious dialogue and intra-religious dialogue. The big mess that we're in right now is that we don't have dialogue rather have more debates and this is also within Islamic scholarship.

The best example is how many people disassociate with others because they aren't from the same group or sect. For example, someone studied from one particular methodology or school of thought while another person studied from a different methodology, school of thought, or even institution, in realities both are Islamic scholars or at the least educated but many from one side will choose not to associate with the other because they are not from the same group.

There is too much inter-religion and also intra-religion sectarianism. It's a big problem. The only way to overcome it is to come to a common understanding or a common ground.

Religion aside, I have friends who are Christians and Jews. When I'm talking to them, I don't talk theology with them. The theological conversation eventually starts trickling in if I need to talk theology, but we'll talk about something that we both agree on and that is only if the conversation was meant to be theological or religious.

For example, the stories of the prophets or ethics or human rights etc. If it's not a religious topic, we'll talk about all kinds of stuff: family and kids, sports, weather etc.

However, I find many Muslims have segregated themselves from others, or from anyone who is not a Muslim. Anyone non Muslims is many times considered "other".

That approach is promoted in many muslim household and is perhaps born out of culture. When culture dictates a religion then these biases are bound to be imported in. The best approach it "I am a person and you are a person. We may have differences but that is okay!

But within Muslims, I find that a huge problem is that many Muslims tend to segregate themselves from everyone who is not a Muslim. It's a very sectarian mentality. That is why the slurs of Kafir fly around so much in certain groups. *Kafir* means a non-Muslim. its a word that reflects another person being inferior.

Sometimes considering someone a Kafir is simply because a person doesn't like the way another is doing things. "I don't agree with the way you understand this theory. I'm questioning the legitimacy behind this particular prophetic narration." etc.

Based on this problem we can never achieve pluralism. We can never get everyone on the same page if we're going to consider everyone that's not us as "other". If we want pluralism, then we will need to be more inclusive and less restrictive.

This is the result of indoctrination from a very young age. Sure Islam and the books of Hadith tell a person how to live and instruct Muslims how to do the smallest things, however when such acts reflect a person to consider others inferior then it becomes a problem of ethics. And ethics play a huge role in religion.

Many Muslims focus on the details of these rules and forget about the ethics. The question theologians need to answer is can a person be considered a Muslim but lacks ethics? What defines a Muslim?

What separates Islam from other religions is the beliefs and rituals and from beliefs I'm referring to belief in one God, in the Prophet Muhammad, and Holy Books, the Angels, the Day of Judgement. that's what makes you a Muslim. And these are very similar in other religions as well.

Then a Muslim's rituals such as praying 5 times a day, fasting in the month of Ramadan, giving charity. However, the common point in all religions is ethics, and they are universal. So not backbiting or slandering someone or harming others, and being ethically good, is not necessarily doing something only considered good in Islam, but also doing something good in all religions and the world at large. Looking at these ethics is what will bring everyone together on the same page.

When, in dialogue, a conversation starts with ethics then people are more willing to continue the conversation into other religion specific points.

The religion of Islam is simple. It's your beliefs and rituals. I pray five times a day. That's my ritual. The ethics are universal in all religions.

Interview with Leslea Mair — Co-Director, *Losing Our Religion*

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

February 8, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You co-directed the documentary film *Losing Our Religion*. How did this become an idea?

Leslea Mair: Sheer curiosity! I've always been interested in the idea of religious belief, and happened across a blog post about Dan Dennett and Linda LaScola's study. I just found it fascinating.

To go from being a very dedicated believer — to be in ministry you have to be *really* committed! — and then to stop believing sounded like such a difficult journey. When the follow-up study came out and The Clergy Project formed, it became even more interesting to me as a filmmaker. There was a sizable group of these people. It felt like a story that needed to be told.

Jacobsen: How were Professor Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola crucial to its foundation and direction?

Mair: First of all, there wouldn't have been anything to base a film on if it weren't for Linda's interest in clergy and Dan's idea that a formal study should be done. The original study wouldn't have been done at all without those two factors coming together and that was the foundation for the film.

By the time I came on the scene, their work had given rise to an organized group. Linda was the first person I had contact with from The Clergy Project. She and Dan being involved in the film was essential and my first round of shooting included interviews with both of them.

They were my entry point, both idea-wise and in a very practical sense. Linda also facilitated my contact with Clergy Project members, so she took on the role of guide through the issue both on and off screen. I couldn't have made the film without her.

Jacobsen: Who were some stars in the film, who represent the non-religious leader movement in North America?

Mair: We were really fortunate to have some very high-profile people in the film! Richard Dawkins very generously gave us some time out of his very busy schedule — he's not North American, but he is one of the secular movement pioneers internationally.

That's not why we interviewed him, though — he fit into the story we were telling. He was instrumental in the founding of The Clergy Project and without his foundation's funding, we wouldn't have had much to tell! Dan Dennett was also very generous with the time he gave us.

Dan Barker, one more important figure in the formation and continuing life of The Clergy Project, was a terrific interview. He's doing such important work with the Freedom From Religion Foundation, too, around the separation of church and state.

Bart Campolo has been a real ground breaker in the secular movement, and his experience as a former pastor and where he's taking his secular "ministry" was such a great fit for the film.

Jerry De Witt has done a lot of speaking and was one of the very early people to “come out atheist” after joining The Clergy Project. He was actually one of the founding members.

Gretta Vosper has had a lot of media attention as well, and her work within the United Church to accept non-believers has ruffled some feathers. Again, she’s part of The Clergy Project.

Catherine Dunphy has done quite a few speaking engagements on the subject as well.

And of course, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, founders of the Sunday Assembly movement are stars in their own right. They’re both gifted performers and what they’ve created is such a hopeful, uplifting and totally fun experience. Beyond the fun, though, they’ve fostered a growing community. And they’re lovely people.

The real stars of the show, though, were Brendan and Jenn Murphy. I am still blown away at how willing they were to be open with us, let us come into their lives and work through something so personal in front of the camera.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on the losses, what do those who stop believing who intend to leave ministry bet on losing in that act? I ask this because some may think this is in some way a publicity stunt or a way to simply gain in some way over and above the losses.

Mair: I haven’t spoken to a single person who’s found themselves in the position of being non-believing clergy who didn’t deal with a great deal of hardship over it.

The first thing is reconciling the loss of belief with yourself. These are people who took their beliefs seriously and who really felt an attachment to their god. It’s something that really defines who they are.

The loss of that relationship is really tough. People finding out is tough, too. Your relationships with friends, family and congregation are damaged, sometimes irreparably. So not only are you trying to figure out who you are without that belief system, you’re losing the moral and emotional support you’d normally seek from your tribe.

And then there’s the economic side of things. Changing your career is risky and having to make a change quickly and be able to continue to support your family can be incredibly stressful. I don’t know of anyone who didn’t deal with financial hardship leaving the ministry, especially in the short term.

The net gain, though, is on the emotional level. That comes with time.

Jacobsen: Who notably kept their ministry and church, e.g. Minister Gretta Vosper?

Mair: The two people who managed to stay in the ministry are Gretta Vosper with the United Church of Canada and John Shuck, a Presbyterian minister in the US. They both belong to very liberal churches, and they’ve managed to balance questioning, faith and community in a way that is just amazing. It also says a lot about the congregations they’re pastoring.

Jacobsen: What books can people look into for more information on the non-religious community who have leaders that left pastoral roles based on a change of faith into non-faith?

Mair: When you’re dealing with people who’ve had a career in ministry, you’re dealing with communicators! So many people involved with The Clergy Project have written books!

Jerry De Witt wrote “Hope After Faith”. Catherine Dunphy wrote “Apostle to Apostate” (and she let me come shoot video at her book launch party). Another Clergy Project member, Bob Ripley — who was interviewed but didn’t make it into the film — wrote “Life Beyond Belief”.

And Bart Campolo, who isn’t a Clergy Project member, but has had that same path, wrote “Why I Left, Why I Stayed” with his father, evangelical minister Tony Campolo. I recommend them all!

Jacobsen: How have the public reacted to the film with some time for the narratives to sink in more?

Mair: The public reaction that I’ve gotten has been very positive. Anyone who has had anything negative to say hasn’t bothered to reach out to me. I think, though, that the message of the film isn’t something that’s easy to call out. Who can argue with the idea that people need community? Or that being kind, whatever you believe, is a good idea?

Jacobsen: What are your next projects? How people help out?

Mair: My partner, Leif Kaldor, and I make films about a wide variety of subjects. We have a particular passion for science documentaries, and we’re working on a film about environment and health right now.

We also have a few things we’re working on that aren’t ready for discussion yet. I’d love to do more projects on the secular movement, but haven’t had just the right one come along yet. Always open to new ideas!

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Mair: I can’t think of anything!

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

Mair: Thanks so much for talking with me!

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