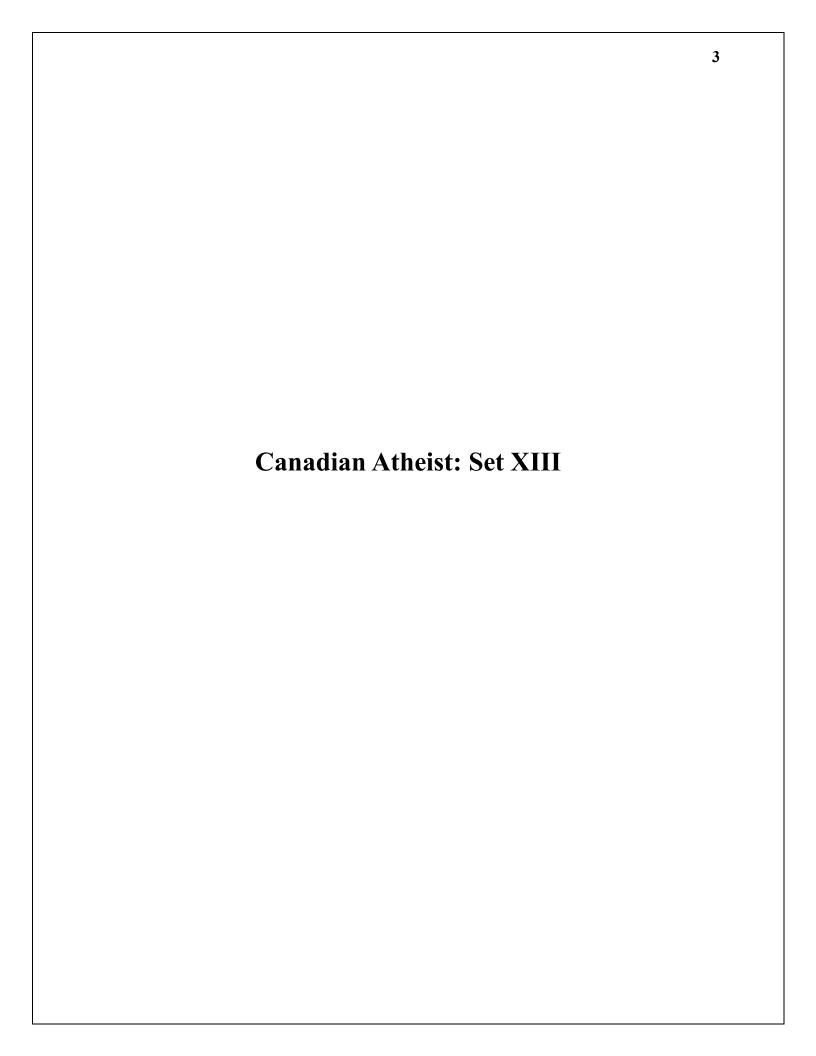
CANADIAN ATHEIST: SET XIII SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Canadian Atheist: Set XIII					
	Acknow	ledgements	7			
1	CANAI	DIAN ATHEIST	9			
	a	Interview with Susan Nambejja on Malcolm Childrens' Foundation	.10			
	b	Interview with Dorothy Hays - President, Atheists, Skeptics, Humanists Association (ASHA)	.14			
	c	Ask Herb 4 – The Silverman Lining on Activism	.17			
	d	Interview with August Berkshire - State Director, Minnesota American Atheists	.20			
	e	Interview with Milad Resaeimanesh – Central Committee of the Ex-Muslims in Scandinavia	.24			
	f	Interview with Takudzwa Mazwienduna – Zimbabwean Secular Alliance	.27			
	g	Ask Mandisa 19 – Ain't No Stopping Us Now	.30			
	h	Interview with Scott Sharrad – President, Atheist Foundation of Australia, Inc.	.33			
	i	Interview with Haafizah Bhamjee – Executive-Administrator, "Ex-Muslims of South Africa"	.36			
	j	Interview with Justin Scott – State Director, American Atheists Iowa	.39			
	k	Interview with Mubarak Bala – Executive Director, Humanist Association of Nigeria	.43			
	1	Ask Herb 5 – Background Noise and Individual Signal	.47			
	m	Interview with Hope Knutsson – Former President, Founding Member, and Board Member, Siðmen (Félag Siðrænna Húmanista)				
	n	Interview with Bill Norsworthy – Co-Facilitator, Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater	.52			
	0	Interview with Mark Brandt – Co-Facilitator, Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater	.55			
	p	Interview with Professor Kenneth Miller – Professor, Brown University	.58			
	q	Interview with Liz Jacka - Board Member, Dying With Dignity NSW	.62			
	r	Ask Mubarak 1 – My Nigeria: Communal Organizing Amongst the More Difficult Circumstances	.65			
	S	Interview with John Hont - Vice-President, Dying With Dignity Victoria	.67			
	t	Interview with Alton Narcissity Mungani – Co-Founder, Editor, & Curator, Zimbabwean Atheists	.69			
	u	Interview with Bill Cooke – Past President and Trustee, New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.)				
	v	Ask Herb 6 – Activism Without Prayer: Mathematics and a Neutral Universe	.76			
	W	Interview with Peter Harrison – President, New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.)	.79			
	X	Humanist Canada Essay Contest	.83			
	y	Dr. Henry Morgentaler Memorial Scholarship	.84			
	Z	Ask Alton 1 – Zimbabwe: United in Freedom and Work	.85			
	aa	Interview with Humanists of Linn County	.88			
	bb	Ask Gretta (and Denise) 6 – Atheists and Humanists at the Pulpit: A Tale of Two Freethinkers	.90			
	cc	Interview with Robert Nola – Member and Honorary Associate of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.) (NZARH)	.93			

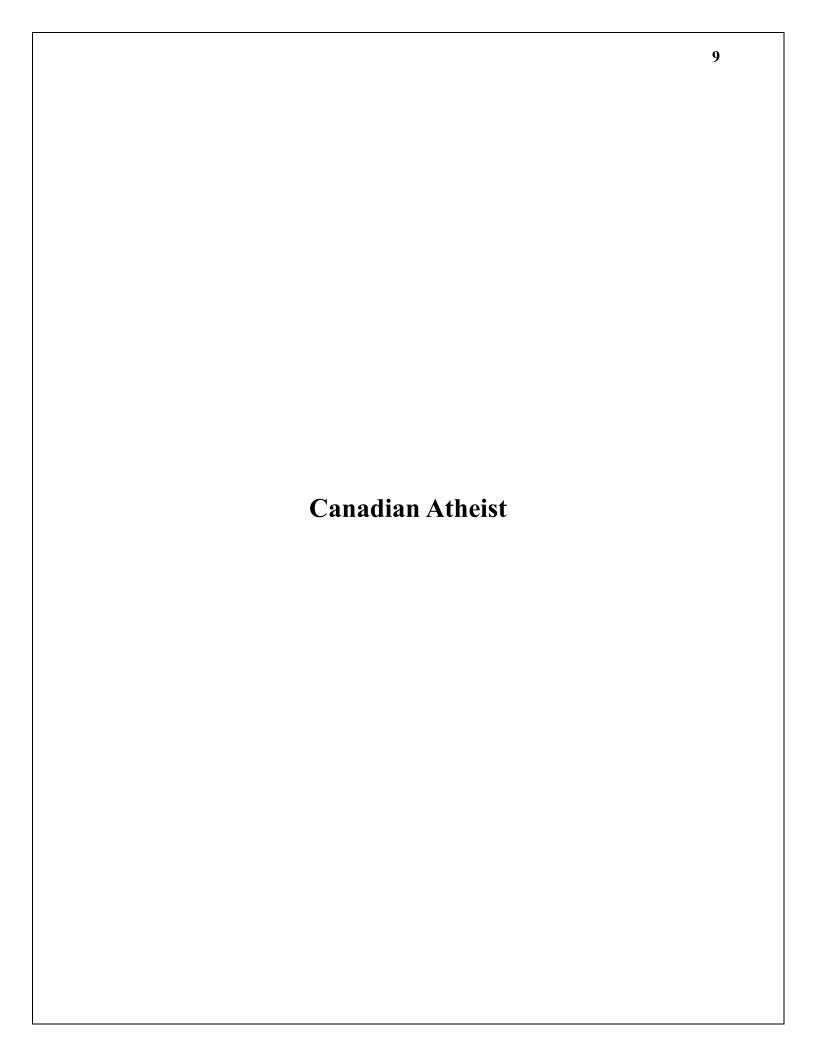
dd Interview with Ngaire McCarthy – Past President and Trust Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.)	9
License and Copyright	10

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Scott



Interview with Susan Nambejja on Malcolm Childrens' Foundation

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 13, 2019

Susan Nambejja is a Ugandan Human Rights Activist who was born in a small town, Kabwoko, in Rakai District, Uganda. She earned a Bachelor of Information Technology degree from Makerere University, a Certificate in Depression Management and Suicide Control, and is a Certified Humanist Celebrant in Uganda where she was trained in Scotland in the United Kingdom.

She is the Founder, and Managing Director and Programmes Coordinator, for Malcolm Children's Foundation Uganda, and is a Former Editorial Assistant of the Open Talk Magazine for HALEA Youth Support Organization.

Nambejja is among the directors of Uganda Humanist Association (UHASSO). Nambejja is a fine artist and a painter. She draws her art from imagination and real life (Nature).

She imagines a happy world for all human beings where there are healthy life and less suffering. Nambejja is a businesswoman, who owns Sudona detergent supplies.

She has worked with Humanist Association for Leadership Equity and Accountability as a secretary, psychosocial therapist, and an entrepreneurship trainer.

Through the same organization, she has taught teenagers about entrepreneurship skills, sharing knowledge with the aim of empowering girl child in Uganda.

She fights for the rights of the marginalized people/families in Uganda. Nambejja is a voice for children suffering from life-threatening congenital diseases in Uganda.

Her ideas are against human suffering and societal inequalities, their origins, and how to mitigate or possibly eliminate them.

Nambejja is a very hardworking, brave and determined lady that leaves no stone unturned. She doesn't give up unless success is achieved. She is very passionate about acts of Humanity rather than human beings.

If you feel like contacting, please do so through the

following: <u>Nambejjanambejja9@gmail.com</u>, <u>malcolmchildrensfoundation@gmail.com</u>, and <u>https://malcolmchildrensfoundation.wordpress.com</u>. Here we talk about her recent work and background.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become involved in humanism and its community?

Susan Nambejja: In 2008, I was in my first year at Makerere University pursuing a bachelor's degree in information technology. I decided to look for a nongovernmental children's organization to volunteer with.

I landed on the Humanist Association for Leadership Equity and Accountability (HALEA) youth support organization and, by then, they had the teens empowerment project.

The project's goal involved empowering teenagers, especially teens who would become pregnant, to go back to school, and as well as helping orphans to go back to school.

My role was to take these children whenever they would get sick to hospital. Being orphans, I would act as their parent.

Together with other roles in the organization which included secretary and entrepreneurship trainer, I begun to ask a lot about Humanism. I got various answers.

But what triggered my interest to keep following and later on change were the values (e.g., fairness, equality, happiness, freedom, and justice for every human being).

I liked the organization and started fighting to ensure that putting Humanity first is key in my life.

Jacobsen: What seems like the stronger points of its, not necessarily structure formal philosophy but, way in which to approach life and live in the world?

Nambejja: Human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. (The right to freedom of speech, medication, to be educated, to eat what you want, to lead and, among others but more so, consider fellow human beings.) To have a sense of Humanity for us all in this world, to me, it is key.

Jacobsen: Who are prominent African humanists who stand out to you?

Nambejja: Sedar Senghor of Senegal and Nkwame Nkrumah of Ghana.

Jacobsen: Why those individuals?

Nambejja: Senghor is the father of the poeticizing tradition. He defended the humanity of black Africans primarily through literature; although, his thought also included reflections on music.

Senghor argued that African value systems were more properly humanistic than European ones because the African models affirmed that the passionate or emotional side of a person carries the same value and legitimacy as the rational, and analytic side.

In Ghana, the secular humanist tradition took hold through the thought of Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972), who in 1946 offered what he called consciencism, or critical material consciousness.

For Nkrumah, African humanism was a call for explicitly political responses to social problems.

Jacobsen: What have been important literary productions of African freethinkers?

Nambejja: Literature by Wole Soyinka communicate has important truth about politics. *Emancipation of a Black Atheist* offers an emotional and intellectual odyssey through the expansive sea of religion in the Black community.

Jacobsen: What are the next important stages of the freethinking African movement for the inclusion of more women's voices?

Nambejja: Encouraging women to take up leadership positions to enable wider representatives of women and indulgence in speaking for the rights of women in Africa.

Women in Africa are still undermined and in some areas are still taken as the weaker sex. If we encourage women to stand on their feet to get involved in airing out views, we can help women

be heard by inviting them to speak on different occasions, seminars, workshops, conferences, and debates, among other events.

Jacobsen: How did all this feed into the founding of Malcolm Children's Foundation?

Nambejja: Despite the fact that I like children and am passionate about serving them, Malcolm Children's Foundation was founded contrary to all this.

I was inspired by the short life of my son Malcolm, born with Truncus arteriosus type 2. A congenital life-threatening heart disease which required over \$40,000 to save his life.

His father and I couldn't afford to raise funds. We suffered a lot, but later on, we were helped by various humanists to take him to India for heart surgery.

He died shortly after the surgery. The pain of losing a child is unexplainable, but I decided to start helping children suffering like him to get access to the medical treatment they need through Malcolm Children's Foundation.

Jacobsen: What is the mission and mandate of the Malcolm Children's Foundation?

Nambejja: Malcolm Children's Foundation was officially registered as a charity organization based in Kampala Uganda, its mission is saving little lives.

We focus on helping children with congenital life-threatening diseases to get access to the medical treatment they need.

Jacobsen: How does Malcolm Children's Foundation provides services and support within its mission and mandate?

Nambejja: Our services include paying patients' medical treatment for those whose treatment is readily available in Uganda, and helping those whose treatment is not available in Uganda by starting campaigns to raise funds required to take them for life saving surgeries.

We help parents to take the required medical tests, including echocardiograms, liver cancer, encephalitis, among others. We do patient follow-ups by visiting patients in hospitals and homes to see their medical improvement.

We create awareness about child neo-natal and post-natal health care. We educate our communities about primary and secondary health care. We do monthly hospital runs where we visit patients and in doing this activity we give out materials that help patients to stay in a clean hospital.

Materials, too, including soap, pampers, sugar, and so on; we also buy oxygen oximeters, bandages, and medicine prescribed for our patients. We encourage patients to go for HIV, Hepatitis B, Sickle Cell, and other diseases tests.

Jacobsen: What is the 5-year plan, say, of Malcolm Children's Foundation?

Nambejja: Helping at least, and not less than, 50 children to get access to medical treatment they need in Uganda and outside Uganda, having a pharmacy where our patients can get free medication prescribed by doctors.

We see ourselves giving equipment like x-rays, echocardiogram machines, scanners, and others, to hospitals that lack them.

Jacobsen: What tasks and responsibilities come with the position of Managing Director and Programmes Director of Malcolm Children's Foundation?

Nambejja: As a managing director and programmes coordinator, I am responsible for the performance of the organization, as dictated by the board's overall strategy.

As a programmes coordinator, I ensure that all programs of the foundation are coordinated and run as expected by the board of the foundation.

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for its work in the coming second half of 2019 and into 2020?

Nambejja: I hope my work will enable me to save children's lives. Their parents will refer to my help for the life of their children. I will rejoice to see children living a healthy happy life. I am not sure, but I hope I will get people willing to help me achieve this goal.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Nambejja: "Life is a big classroom that we all need to learn from each other, and we should love to help each other, otherwise we'd be subject to failure."

Let us join hands to help the poor marginalised people to enjoy life as we do by helping them to have a healthy happy life.

Please visit our website: https://malcolmchildrensfoundation.wordpress.com to see the works of Malcolm Children's Foundation Uganda. Feel free to contact us on malcolmchildrensfoundation@gmail.com.

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

Nambejja: You are welcome, thank you Scott.

Interview with Dorothy Hays – President, Atheists, Skeptics, Humanists Association (ASHA)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 14, 2019

Dorothy Hays is the President of the Atheists, Skeptics, Humanists Association (ASHA). Here we talk about her life, work, and views.

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

Dorothy Hays: I grew up in Toronto (born 1937) in a rather unconventional English-speaking home with a single mom who somehow kept her teaching position even though female teachers, at that time in Toronto, were not to be married, let alone be a mother.

We were Anglican and my mother married a teacher when I was 12 and then we started moving around the province of Ontario. Their marriage lasted 5 years. When I was 21, I married an atheist. I had been given advice to work on this husband and turn him into a Christian.

After dragging him to church for a year I finally began to see his point as to how foolish it was, so I slowly began to think and question everything.

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

Hays: I have a BA in Sociology/Psychology, a B.Ed. and a HBSW (Honours in Social Work). I self-educated myself re evolution, skepticism, etc and today refer to myself as an atheist or more correctly as an anti-theist.

I also learned from being Vice President of Humanist Canada for a few years and then, by default, President for a short period, not running for that position.

I have also been on the Board of CFIC (Centre For Inquiry Canada) and have been running ASHA (Atheists, Skeptics, Humanists Association) for over 10 years. (The name of our group has changed a couple of times over the years.)

I also feel that I have not only self-educated myself but have paid it forward to my children who are also atheists. My second husband and I, who is also an atheist, took our grandchildren to Camp Quest, in Kitchener-Waterloo, about 18 years ago, the first atheist summer camp for children in Canada.

Jacobsen: As the President or leader of Atheists, Skeptics, Humanists Association (ASHA), what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Hays: It is mostly an informal group, although we have gone through periods of having elections, etc. but whenever a change in the executive comes up, the members claim to be satisfied with the incumbents.

So now we just go along as a friendly bunch of people, currently 18 members but we have been as high as 40. We prefer a smaller group as it garners more conversation.

We meet monthly at Lakehead University and have in between meetings at coffee houses and in members' homes. There is also a social aspect where we get together with no agenda; atheists don't really need a topic to get a conversation going.:)

We no longer charge a membership fee but have continued to have a "charity pot," that we try to arrive at a certain amount and then donate to a local charity.

The scheduling and organization of all these activities are shared by several members including the secretary-treasurer and myself.

Jacobsen: What was your working relationship with Doug Thomas? How did this collaborative work with Thomas and others set the stage for the 2010s of Canadian humanism?

Hays: When I was on the HAC Board with Doug Thomas I found him to be an inspiration and fair, level-headed and rational.

I really do not go along with his dislike of Xmas carols, etc, although I have changed my mind on this several times. But I do believe that we should not have a reference to God in our National Anthem.

Jacobsen: Who have been the main opposition to humanistic efforts within Canadian society?

Hays: I would have to say the Conservative Party who seemingly bring their religiosity into government, re science, climate change, immigration, etc. Also most churches who view atheism as something evil or at least something to be avoided.

Jacobsen: Internal to the humanist community within Canada, what have been the difficulties of community, e.g., inclusion, ideological conflicts, and so on?

Hays: When I was on the board of Humanist Canada there were some internal personality conflicts that lead to a few months of actually focusing on a couple of misunderstandings rather than working to better the organization.

At one point there was even a threat of a lawsuit. It finally fizzled out and HAC continued on as usual.

I left the Board of CFIC because of their treatment of one of the founding members of that organization (in Canada); although, I gave a rather politically-correct reason regarding time constraints, etc.

Even in our present group, there are sometimes instances whereby our idea of being able to speak freely are squashed by a few members who take the wrong meaning of something being said; e.g. negative remarks about Islam should not be taken as negative remarks about Muslims, etc.

It is something that we need to work on. Also, seeing that being an "atheist" only means one thing, that a person does not believe in God; sometimes the idea of being rational and having a scientific outlook does not necessarily go along with being an atheist; e.g. belief in alternative medicine, paranormal, the occult.

After all, atheism has no dogma, no rules so atheists should not be judged to be all the same. That is the reason we added skepticism and humanism to our title.

Jacobsen: Who are your favorite writers, thinkers, poets, novelists, scientists, and philosophers who fall within the humanist tradition?

Hays: Well, it was Bertrand Russell who first helped me think rationally and then later, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Dan Dennett, Michael Shermer, Carl Sagan, and Lawrence Krauss. Novelists, Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley.

As far as poetry, Walt Whitman comes to mind, especially his lament: "I think I could turn and live with animals, they're so placid and self-contain'd,... They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins, ... They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God, ... Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago," etc.

Jacobsen: What is provided to the humanist community through Atheists/Skeptics/Humanists Association (ASHA)?

Hays: It is hopefully a safe place for like-minded people to meet and feel free to discuss any subject and to vent or give their opinion on any topic without having to worry about being overly politically correct. It is a place for people to see if another world view might be for them.

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

Hays: We are not formally attached to any other Humanist groups but we are open to ideas. We do have a card that stipulates our mandate: ASHA: A fellowship of like-minded secular people who share a worldview based on science and rational thinking.

Skepticism is the process whereby we apply reason and critical thinking to enhance and inform our worldview." Contact info is on the card.

We hand these out, not so much to garner more members. but to let people who may be interested know that there is a place for them to come if they so wish.

We have a chat site and keep in touch that way. I remind people of upcoming meetings, time, place, room etc. People also use the chat site to post interesting topics and very often on-line "conversation" ensue from this.

About every second meeting we have a member present a topic. We have had topics such as Nuclear Energy, Naturopathy (outside speaker) and one time via teleconference, Justin Trottier re his Men's Group, and many more topics have been discussed over the years.

We have from time to time marched in the Thunder Bay Gay Pride parade to show support and annually donate our charity pot to local charities, such as The Shelter House and also The Underground Gym, a place for disadvantaged children.

We advocated to keep the Thunder Bay blood donation sites open. We advocated to block the Gideons from pushing their religion on elementary school children in Thunder Bay. Our presentation to the Thunder Bay and District School Board was a significant factor in disallowing the Gideons from distributing their bibles.

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

Hays: Scott, thank you for this opportunity to participate.

Ask Herb 4 – The Silverman Lining on Activism

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 14, 2019

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: If you reflect on the *Silverman v. Campbell* of 1996/1997 through the South Carolina Supreme Court case, and other notable and similar cases – especially those that lost, what is the silver lining in this and other cases? Other positives around even some of the negative issues that may emerge from this, e.g., the reinvigoration of religious fundamentalists to push harder than before.

Herb Silverman: Winning is good, but sometimes losing is better—especially when a loss leads to much bigger wins. I'll illustrate with a personal example.

In 1989, a colleague at the College of Charleston pointed out that our South Carolina Constitution prohibited atheists from becoming governor. While I'm no constitutional scholar, I knew this violated Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits religious tests as qualification for any public office. I went to the American Civil Liberties Union office to ask an attorney there how this obviously unconstitutional provision could be removed. The lawyer said, "The best way is for an open atheist to become a candidate." He added, smiling, "In fact, the very best candidate would be you—in a 1990 race for governor of South Carolina." After giving this surprising suggestion much thought, I agreed to run as the candidate without a prayer. I assumed, in my political naïveté, that the state attorney general would then simply consent to bring South Carolina into compliance with federal law, and that would end the matter.

My lawyer knew better. When a reporter asked South Carolina Governor Carroll Campbell what he thought of my candidacy and constitutional challenge, Campbell said, "The South Carolina Constitution is fine just as it is because this country was founded on Godly principles."

My day in court came about a month before the gubernatorial election. Presiding judge David Norton had recently been appointed to the U.S. District Court on recommendation by U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond, a famously conservative senator. My attorney argued against the state's three lawyers and was not optimistic of victory, even though privately the state's lawyers acknowledged we were legally correct. It was discouraging to hear that the law isn't always the primary criterion in deciding cases. A few days before the election, Judge Norton dismissed my case on the grounds that it was not ripe, meaning he would only rule on its merits if I won the election. To the surprise of no one, I lost.

But I'm an optimistic kind of guy, and I always look for positives in a situation. The best for me personally was that I met Sharon Fratepietro when I spoke at the Unitarian Church during my campaign. She volunteered to help, became my one and only groupie, and we've been together ever since.

I then learned in 1991 that South Carolina's Constitution prohibited atheists from serving in *any* public office, and notary public would be the easiest one to challenge. The U.S. Supreme

Court in *Torcaso v. Watkins* had struck down an identical provision in the Maryland state Constitution in 1961. If South Carolina were to grant me a notary public license, it would be an admission by the state that religious tests could no longer be a qualification for public office.

My attorney expected this notary campaign to be successful and shorter than my gubernatorial campaign. Shorter, it was not! Governor Campbell rejected my notary application. When we asked why, he said it would be too burdensome to explain all notary public rejections. But in 1994 we learned that there had been 33,471 notary public applications approved in that time period, and that mine was the only one rejected. As far as I know, I'm the only one in the history of South Carolina to be rejected as a notary public. I then won my case in several lower courts, but the state kept filing appeals.

My lawyer took an 86-page deposition from Governor Campbell in 1995. Among Campbell's many convoluted responses, here is what he said about why it might be permissible to deny office based on religious beliefs: "Would it be right to have somebody running for public office that was avowed to overthrow and destroy the United States of America, and they didn't believe in a supreme being but they believed in a foreign government, and they call that a religion?"

Finally, in 1997 the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled unanimously in my favor, nullifying the anti-atheist clause in the state Constitution.

Although the Religious Right was ultimately unsuccessful, my case indicated the influence they can exert over politicians. None of the political leaders in South Carolina, and certainly not the lawyers advising them, believed they could prevail legally if I continued to pursue my case. Yet those same politicians demonstrated they would prefer to waste time and taxpayer money (close to \$100,000 on court fees) on a lost cause rather than risk the wrath and lose the votes of a well-organized Religious Right.

Mine was a case where the law was unambiguously on our side. Atheists and humanists are somewhat divided on how much effort to put into legal challenges for which there may not be legal precedent, and which could create bad law. Such challenges might also stereotype us as unpatriotic Americans who are trying to destroy all forms of religious expression. Examples include removing "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance, changing the "In God We Trust" motto, and removing government erections of exclusively Christian monuments on public property. For the record, win or lose, I usually support such challenges.

I think we need to make our voice heard and to educate the public. Most don't know that "under God" was only added to the Pledge during the shameful McCarthy era, turning a secular, inclusive pledge into a divisive, religious one. Or that the *de facto* motto established by our founders had been *E Pluribus Unum*, which is Latin for "out of many, one." Again, this was changed during the McCarthy era, a substitution that excludes an increasing number of Americans who trust and believe in no gods.

The U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments on February 27 in a case brought by the American Humanist Association on the constitutionality of a 40-foot-tall Christian cross towering over an intersection in Bladensburg, Maryland.

There are some well-meaning Christian in the United States who think we are all Christian, or at least that we are all religious. We must do a better job in educating our populace about the importance of separation of religion and government (with lawsuits as a last, but sometimes necessary, resort). We need to proudly promote our founding as a secular country that does not

favor one religion over another, or religion over nonreligion, and that the "nones," those with no religious affiliation, are the country's fastest growing demographic.								
Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Herb.								
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Interview with August Berkshire – State Director, Minnesota American Atheists

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
March 15, 2019

August Berkshire is the State Director of the Minnesota America Atheists. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

August Berkshire: I was born in 1959 and came of age during the 1970s. Being raised as part of a white, middle class, small town, New England family, my upbringing was pretty stereotypical of that background. I was raised as a Roman Catholic and was even an altar boy. I discuss my conversion to atheism in my late teens and early twenties in my essay "My Road to Atheism" in the anthology "Atheist Voices of Minnesota". Basically, religion came into conflict with my ideals of being intellectually honest; scientifically oriented; and supporting the women's, gay, and black equality movements I encountered in the 1970s.

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

Berkshire: There were three women who greatly helped my journey to full atheism in the early 1980s: Madalyn Murray O'Hair, Ayn Rand, and a woman I was in a several-years relationship with at that time.

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

Berkshire: This isn't something I've ever considered, and I have to remember back about 40-45 years, but the following come to mind when I think of this question:

- Logic and Science (Spock on "Star Trek" TV series)
- Secular Humanism (The character of Jesus as depicted in the New Testament, stripped of references to the supernatural and threats of Hell more or less as he is depicted in "Jesus Christ Superstar"; "Star Trek" TV series; "All in the Family" TV series; "The Jeffersons" TV series)
- Humor ("Monty Python's Flying Circus" TV series)
- Buddhism ("Kung Fu" TV series)
- Existentialism ("The Stranger" by Albert Camus, "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett, "Crime and Punishment" by Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Space Oddity" and "Young Americans" by David Bowie, "Funeral for a Friend / Love Lies Bleeding" by Elton John & Bernie Taupin)
- Impressionism and Surrealism (poet Emily Dickinson; poet E.E. Cummings; surrealist painters, especially Salvador Dalí; impressionist painters; "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen)
- Individualism ("The Fugitive" TV series, "The Prisoner" TV series, Ayn Rand, "1984" by George Orwell)

• Imagination (much of the above plus the works of Edgar Allan Poe and poems like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" by Oscar Wilde.)

Science and logic played a bigger part in my conversion to atheism than the arts did, but atheism is only part of my worldview.

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

Berkshire: I had already been an atheist for a decade before I got a computer and went online. By then I already had real life atheist friends in Minnesota. Being online mainly helped me do more research about religion and atheism for my presentations and debates.

Jacobsen: How did this lead to American Atheist Minnesota?

Berkshire: The modern atheist movement in Minnesota began in 1984 with the Twin Cities Chapter of American Atheists, which I co-founded. In 1991, all the American Atheists chapters were disbanded. Some local groups folded and others became independent. In Minnesota, it became Minnesota Atheists. Minnesota Atheists affiliated with a number of national freethought groups including American Atheists and are now one of their Local Partners.

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

Berkshire: I am new to this role but I anticipate working with assistant state directors to make atheism more visible. Some ways we can do this are participating in demonstrations and protests, participating in festivals (such as May Day and Gay Pride), and testifying at the State Capitol.

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

Berkshire: American Atheists supplies us with banners, signs, and handouts. Although American Atheists has a national website, they don't have a separate one particularly directed at Minnesota. Their website will soon be redesigned I expect there will be a link for Minnesota activities. Minnesota Atheists has a website that they too plan to redesign, as well as very active Facebook and Meetup accounts.

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

Berkshire: I sent Raghen Lucy, a Minnesota Assistant State Director for American Atheists, my thoughts on this for her interview with you, before I saw that you had asked me the same thing. It was understood by us that she could use it without attributing it to me.

I don't know what she ended up using, but this is what I sent her. You can keep it as her answer, or make it a joint answer if you wish:

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

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

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

See:

"A Christian Nationalist Blitz" By Katherine Stewart

The New York Times, May 26, 2018

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

Berkshire: You mean, how do we get away from being led by mainly educated, older, straight, white men like me? First, we recognize that practically everyone has a talent that can help the movement. Then, we help nurture that talent. Finally, we step aside – even though we still have much to offer – and let them lead. We become elder statespeople that can be called upon when needed to donate money, staff booths, march, and do speaking engagements that they are unable to do. If we make this about the movement and not ourselves, and do what is best for the former, we will also be doing what is best for the latter.

I have seen leaders hang on to power too long and then have their group collapse when they could no longer lead. With Minnesota Atheists we have three-consecutive-year term limits on the president and the chair, so no one will confuse themselves with being the group, and to force us to seek new talent.

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

Berkshire: The sex-abuse scandals within religion are making headlines. Apart from that, if we have a religious friend who we think might be the victim of abuse, we should listen to them in an open, nonjudgmental way. We shouldn't try to convert them out of their religion at that point – it would likely be too much for them to handle. Instead, we should try to get them whatever immediate help that we can, and then maybe steer them towards milder denominations or interpretations of their own religion.

As far as harassment and possible rape within the secular community goes, I think we are finally seeing action being taken against some of the perpetrators. They have been banned as speakers, leaders, and attendees at secular events. American Atheists and Minnesota Atheists as well as other secular groups have adopted a zero tolerance policy towards that behavior.

Part of the problem was that we thought getting rid of god-belief automatically made someone an ethical person. Now we realize that it doesn't.

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



Interview with Milad Resaeimanesh – Central Committee of the Ex-Muslims in Scandinavia

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 16, 2019

Milad Resaeimanesh is a Leader in the Central Committee of the Ex-Muslims in Scandinavia. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Resaeimanesh: I was born in Mashhad, Iran. I have only one younger sister. I have been studying religion since I started my primary school. I also have been practicing the Islamic rules, like praying, fasting etc. However, soon I started my high school studies, as many other Iranian teen agers, I turn to be an atheist, or an ex-Muslim.

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

Resaeimanesh: I have Foundation degree in computing from Nottingham Trent International College and Bachelor of Science in Computer Science from Nottingham Trent University.

Jacobsen: As an Executive in the Central Committee of the Ex-Muslims in Scandinavia, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Resaeimanesh: I am the admin of the CCES website, Facebook page, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. I am also responsible for our monthly TV program. I am also the member of the council of the CCES, which decides about the policies must be followed.

I supervise the new members' responsibilities, and I am one of the spokespersons of the CCES.

Jacobsen: What have been the more prescient concerns of the ex-Muslim community in Scandinavia?

Resaeimanesh: Criticizing Islam is mostly done by the far-right wings. Although they have way different purposes, the far-rights follow almost the same patterns as us.

Consequently, we as a political organization human based goals, who fight for a world based on equality, where the place ones born is never an issue, must clearly differ our activities with the far-right wings.

Jacobsen: Some ex-Muslims may seek help and even asylum. However, they may not know the way to do it.

How can these newer or unsafe ex-Muslims ensure greater personal safety? How can they seek help in coverage or community? What are the mains things to consider in seeking asylum for them?

Resaeimanesh: The Central Committee of the Ex-Muslims in Scandinavia is a political-social organization. We Demand: Universal rights and equal citizenship for all. We are opposed to cultural relativism and the tolerance of inhuman beliefs, discrimination and abuse in the name of respecting religion or culture.

Freedom to criticize religion. Prohibition of restrictions on unconditional freedom of criticism and expression using so-called religious 'sanctities.

Freedom of religion and atheism.

Separation of religion from the state and legal and educational system.

Prohibition of religious customs, rules, ceremonies or activities that are incompatible with or infringe people's rights and freedoms.

Abolition of all restrictive and repressive cultural and religious customs which hinder and contradict woman's independence, free will and equality. Prohibition of segregation of sexes.

Prohibition of interference by any authority, family members or relatives, or official authorities in the private lives of women and men and their personal, emotional and sexual relationships and sexuality.

Protection of children from manipulation and abuse by religion and religious institutions.

Prohibition of any kind of financial, material or moral support by the state or state institutions to religion and religious activities and institutions.

Prohibition of all forms of religious intimidation and threats.

So, if an asylum seeker, joins us, his or her activities with us may help his/her asylum case.

Jacobsen: Who have been important intellectual leaders, writers, and speakers on the issues of ex-Muslims?

Resaeimanesh: The best person I know is Mina Ahadi, the founder of the council of the Ex-Muslims.

Jacobsen: What community and social activities does the Central Committee of the Ex-Muslims in Scandinavia provide for new members? For those newer members, what tend to be either life skill issues or integration issues?

Resaeimanesh: We run social events. The theme of the events is decided by the council of the CCES. We also are very active on the social networking websites and applications.

We ask the new members, to provide and create materials we can publish online, write articles expressing their feeling and opinions about Ex-Muslims issues, etc.

Jacobsen: What other ex-Muslim organizations have been important allies in the work for seeking asylum, building ex-Muslim coalitions, and gathering force for larger scale activist efforts?

Resaeimanesh: Ex Muslims organizations, all around the world belongs to the same movement, though they based on different countries, and they mostly focused on the issues and events happen on the based country.

In 2017, we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the council of Ex-Muslims in Cologne, Germany.

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

Resaeimanesh: Those who are interested in participating and being involved, can simply fill in the membership form though our website. Our monthly activities will be explained to our new members, and they decide which part of our activities and how they would like to participate.

We at the CCES are also very keen and open for the new suggestions in order to improve our performances.

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

Resaeimanesh: I believe, we can build a society based on humanity and equality. This can be reached only if we all rise, and fight for it. I

would like to ask everyone not to remain silent but to stand and fight for a better world. Joining or supporting us, can be seen as an effective way to support the movement we represent.

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

Interview with Takudzwa Mazwienduna – Zimbabwean Secular Alliance

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 17, 2019

Takudzwa Mazwienduna is an informal leader in the Zimbabwean Secular Alliance. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Takudzwa Mazwienduna: I was born in Mutare; the Zimbabwean city that borders Mozambique, to a Catholic family. I grew up as the only child to David Mazwienduna and Abigail Kamundimu Mazwienduna, thanks to Catholic school, I was just as devout as my mother.

I did my primary education in Mutare and Kwekwe respectively before going to Catholic boarding school at Marist Brothers Nyanga Boys High School. I fell in love with the school library during this period and I developed an appetite for knowledge.

There were pressures from my family to take up a scientific career like my father who was a Chemist, but I loved writing and dreamt of being a journalist. I went on to study Literature, Divinity, and History at Advanced level in High School and this was the first time I read the Bible as a practical book to study leading to my doubts about my faith.

Journalism is not a rewarding profession in Zimbabwe, so my parents persuaded me to do something else other than that after high school. I went on to study Development Studies at Midlands State University and worked for the International Institute for Development Facilitation as an intern.

I got to meet chiefs and rural communities in Zimbabwe during Work Related Learning in the course of this degree and was horrified by the religious witch hunting practices that were common. This lack of morality evident in most religious doctrines led me to question and eventually lose my religion.

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

Mazwienduna: I graduated with an honours degree in Development Studies from Midlands State University in 2016. I love reading and learning new ideas and skills however. I have learnt more on my own than I did in my 17 years of formal education.

Jacobsen: What have been the tasks and responsibilities as an executive of the Zimbabwe Secular Alliance?

Mazwienduna: The Zimbabwean Secular Alliance hasn't been formal as yet but we have done a lot as a community.

We never appointed tasks to each other but we took turns to represent the secular community on radio, in religious discussions and in decision making bodies taking advantage of the various connections and opportunities our members have.

Jacobsen: What are the important social and communal activities of the Zimbabwe Secular Alliance?

Mazwienduna: Some of our members donate blood every year to help reduce the child birth related deaths in rural Zimbabwe. We have also started community libraries and created platforms on social media to raise civic awareness; something that is not very common in Zimbabwe

Jacobsen: What have been important activist efforts in its history? What have been the successes and failures of these efforts?

Mazwienduna: Zimbabwe doesn't have a long history of secular activism. We are the first to emerge. This might be because our constitution is secular, the government and society however are not and this gave us the need to.

We have managed to increase awareness about Secularism on national radio and we have managed to get one of our own included on the National Censorship Board. Due to our lack of funding however, we got kicked off national radio on the command of the Christians who sponsored the shows.

Secularism is still a far fetched dream in Zimbabwe and no one cares that the constitution protects it, that kind of shows how low civic awareness is and also explains why the Zimbabwean government gets away with so many atrocities.

Jacobsen: In terms of the ways in which the general public views those working for more secularism in Zimbabwe, how are they viewed? How are the secular and the non-religious as a community treated in Zimbabwe?

Mazwienduna: Secularists are automatically viewed as Satanists or Anti Christs. Most Zimbabwean Atheists are still in the closet because they know for a fact that they will be harassed, humiliated or even disowned by their families.

I, for instance, have grown distant from my own family because of my outspoken secularism. I haven't seen them for 2 years since I've been living in South Africa; a more secular community.

Zimbabwean society also doesn't tolerate LGBTQ rights (gay people are still sent to jail if discovered) and angry mobs will harass any woman they see wearing a short skirt (a very common occurrence). Zimbabwe is exactly like the 21st century version of 17th century Salem.

Jacobsen: Who have been the important activists, writers, speakers, and thinkers in the secular movement and community in Zimbabwean history right into the present?

Mazwienduna: There hasn't been anyone advocating for secularism in Zimbabwe before our community was formed. While there might be Atheists and Agnostics in Zimbabwe, most of them are still in the closet and awareness is very low when it comes to secular issues.

Jacobsen: As we move further into 2019, what are your hopes and fears for secularism in Zimbabwe?

Mazwienduna: We want to have more media presence and we hope a culture of tolerance will build up and that Zimbabweans respect human diversity.

We remain uncertain of the political climate however, the current government doesn't respect the rule of law and they have committed gross human rights violations in the past 2 years.

The authoritarian government is least likely to support secular concerns; the only language they understand is war and terror.

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

Mazwienduna: We are registering the Humanist Society of Zimbabwe as an organisation for the first time. Any contribution of any form will be welcome. You can contact us on the Zimbabwean Atheist Facebook page.

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

Mazwienduna: For secularism to be attainable in most African societies, there is need for civic awareness to be raised in communities so that the rule of law gets backing from the people and become established.

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

Mazwienduna: It is my pleasure Scott. Thank you.

Ask Mandisa 19 – Ain't No Stopping Us Now

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 17, 2019

<u>Mandisa Thomas</u> is the Founder of <u>Black Nonbelievers</u>, <u>Inc</u> (<u>Twitter</u> & <u>Facebook</u>). One of the, if not the, largest organization for African-American or black nonbelievers or atheists in America.

The organization is intended to give secular fellowship, provide nurturance and support for nonbelievers, encourage a sense of pride in irreligion, and promote charity in the non-religious community.

I reached out to begin an educational series with one of the, and again if not the, most prominent African-American woman nonbeliever grassroots activists in the United States.

Here, we talk about speeches and music.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, you have been involved in some conferences in the past and in giving speeches. This is beginning to ramp up, a bit. This is exciting. Because, the first time we met, you were indicating to me, and likely to others, a personal desire to move from work to activism.

That seems to be blossoming. What are some indications about it?

Mandisa Thomas: Yes, last year on March 28 was my last day at my full-time job at the CDC. I turned in my resignation on March 4th. The reason – or part – for leaving was because of my work with Black Nonbelievers.

I was attending more nationwide secular events, which ultimately led to more speaking engagements – including Puerto Rico last year. This also led to being featured in other major publications, such as *The Humanist* and *Playboy* magazines.

This change has increased my flexibility, which was great. Because almost immediately, my calendar started filling up. It has become easier for me to travel and to do my work with the organization and my own brand.

I like being able to travel and commit to this work without having to rush back to a formal job, which became very stressful and mundane for me. This is exactly where I set out to be and am glad about where I am right now.

Jacobsen: What are some speaking engagements in the past, as a speaker or a keynote for 2019? What will be the topics?

Thomas: My next engagement is in Washington, D.C., with the American Humanist Association as part of their speaker series. I will also be in Minneapolis later on in February.

March is a hectic schedule. I will be speaking in Atlanta on March 1in New Orleans on March 16, in Nashville on March 23, Pittsburgh on March 27, and Houston on March 31.

Other major events for this year are the Women of Color Beyond Belief Conference, and BN's SeaCon 2019.

The topics range from effectively managing organizations to religion in the black community, and how BN helps those who have left religion, and also helps the secular community.

Because it is a thriving community. I discuss ways to maintain it, and keep it alive.

Jacobsen: What are some talking points with regards to risk factors of declines in membership in certain secular communities? As we know, some communities – small and medium-sized – have collapsed into the past. Although, they have recovered too. But they have collapsed given a variety of factors.

Thomas: Some reasons include burnout. Many people are inspired to start groups, but they take time and dedication to maintain. Most of the work falls on a few people's shoulders. I know that from experience. It can be exhausting.

Also, certain people who get involved have this idea that we must tolerate everything and everybody. There are some people who come into the community and have a lot of baggage, whether it's from religion or other experiences.

It is like we're expected to be everything to everybody. That is impossible. When we continue to keep people that don't work on their own issues, it can drive other people away. It can be a problem.

Life also gets in the way. We all have families. Most have jobs. When people start getting involved, they tend not to manage the time. It is also challenging getting others to help. There are plenty of suggestions. But getting people to step and DO can be hard.

Those are some of the factors that cause some collapsing. Also, not enough continued financial support. Some people were burned by their church experiences and giving large amounts of money, so they are hesitant about giving money to secular causes.

What they need to understand is, for things to thrive, there must be mass financial support. It is about showing the work that we're doing. It is going towards our effort, towards our time. It is going towards things that are needed.

So it's ultimately a combination of factors. But also, one of those things that I see as an event professional, is there are many who take planning and maintaining the groups for granted. It is important to be consistent.

Jacobsen: We have talked about dealing with some difficult people in the past. For those who want to view it, they can see earlier in the series.

What about those individuals who don't necessarily want a secular community but are disaffected with their fundamentalist community? They are in between. Any recommendations?

Thomas: There are Sunday Assemblies across the U.S. It is similar to a church. But it is a fellowship. Many of us are fellowship oriented. We try to bring people together for activities.

Our groups also respect anonymity. You do not need to be open with humanism, atheism, agnosticism, etc. though we encourage people to do so at their pace, and whenever possible.

Some of the organizations provide things others do not. It is not a one size fits all community, as with life. There may be secular community or activities that may be more religious in nature. Maybe, you can tolerate that part of it. It is totally fine.

It is a decision that you can make. However, if you are a person who likes to fully engage, and want to be more involved in the secular groups, it is good to upgrade your participation. You'll be helping to cultivate and grow the organizations.

Because it doesn't happen without the people willing to step up, volunteer, and become involved.

Jacobsen: One thing I noticed about some Sunday Assemblies that may have more European attendees may be The Beetles, and so on.

For those wishing to attract a wider cultural audience, could there be recommending Mary J. Blige, some Nas, some Lauryn Hill, and so on, for them to expand their appeal?

Thomas: When I participated with the Sunday Assemblies in the past, I always recommended them to play McFadden & Whitehead's "Ain't No Stopping Us Now." It is very positive. There is nothing religious about it.

I do encourage more people of color who are going to participate in the groups to offer the recommendations and to expand into other genres of music.

There is a lot of good, uplifting, positive, and R&B music from the black community that we could tap into. It takes work on the part of the attendees and the organizers.

At Black Nonbelievers, we certainly embody black music and black culture. Some of the artists you mentioned tend to be spiritual or religious in nature. I would recommend doing more research for them because there is plenty of music out there. It can be a blast, and positive as well.

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

Thomas: Thank you.

Interview with Scott Sharrad – President, Atheist Foundation of Australia, Inc.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 18, 2019

Scott Sharrad is the President of the Atheist Foundation of Australia, Inc. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Scott Sharrad: I grew up in the suburbs of Adelaide, Australia and went to the local state primary and high schools. It was, at the time, quite an Anglo area with at least 90% of the students being of an Anglo background.

Religion wasn't part of my upbringing in my home; I often describe it as secular. My father had a strong interest in fossil collecting which manifested in me as an intense curiosity in science and how the world works.

I do remember my first experiences with religion. My primary school (Spence Primary School), shared grounds and facilities with three other schools: Hysen, another government school; Pilgrim, an Independent/Anglican School; and Nativity, a Catholic primary school.

I was in year 2 or 3 – I believe – when students from Nativity performed the Stations of the Cross and the entire Campus came out to support and watch them.

I was in the middle of my class with close to 900 other students from the other schools, standing on tiptoe to try and see and make sense of what was going on.

My second experience came when I joined "Kids Club," a youth group on Thursday evenings with craft, games and food. I imagine I went along because I didn't have many friends. However, this youth group, like so many was run by a church (Southern Hills Baptist Church).

I remember they would occasionally do a prayer; not every week though. One of the adults or the minister would lead the group and everyone would close their eyes and bow their heads. I remember looking around and wondering why this felt so alien and foreign.

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

Sharrad: I have a Bachelor of Music Education and am currently completing a Bachelor of Business (Accounting). I worked as a contract and relief teacher for a few years before moving on after burning out from long days of work both at school and then again when I got home.

During my entire life, however, I've been constantly reading, talking and learning from others whilst gaining experience volunteering.

Jacobsen: With the presidency of the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc., what are some of the important tasks and responsibilities with the national leadership position?

Sharrad: The Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc. is fundamentally a democratic organisation where every member of the Committee of Management is equally responsible for the success of the Foundation.

I see my role as being a facilitator, helping others to achieve their goals, providing guidance and support, and helping others learn how to run an organisation. I consider this to be vital to ensure the longevity of the Foundation.

Jacobsen: Who have been the most vocal opponents of the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc.? Obviously, the international attitudinal and legal data indicate a widespread, mass hatred or base antipathy to atheists – no matter the strength of our particular brand of coffee.

Sharrad: The Australian religious and political landscape is quite different to many other western countries. The general public attitude towards religion is that it is a private affair and "as long as you're not pushing it on me, I don't care what you believe" is the general sentiment.

This can be seen in the public reaction to two previous Prime Ministers: Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott. Both were religious, Anglican and Catholic respectively; Rudd attended church every Sunday, often doing door stops on the church steps.

But the public reacted strongly against Abbott's Catholicism because of his past history and his present actions. In particular, his attempt to ban the Morning After Pill while he was Health Minister leading to a parliamentary vote to override the decision.

Rudd practiced publicly but never tried to legislate his beliefs; Abbott practiced privately but actively tried to legislate in line with his beliefs. The Australian public did not like that. And so whilst there is an "Australian Christian Lobby," a fundamental and evangelical organisation that tries to influence politics, its influence is waning.

Jacobsen: Following from the previous question, how has Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc. continued to fight these regressive forces?

Sharrad: The Foundation does its part by maintaining, as much as it can with its volunteer base, a public presence. However, to be honest, much of the progressive movement recently experienced in Australia has been the result of "single issue" campaigning: marriage equality being the most recent change.

The AFA supports all of these progressive campaigns as they arise, not wishing to detract from the people those issues directly affect and only taking an active lead when the issue is directly related to atheism or secularism.

Jacobsen: In terms of the important legal and sociocultural victories of the past 19 years for Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc. and atheism in Australia, what have those been in your opinion?

Sharrad: The 2011 and 2016 Census campaigns encouraging Australian's to mark "no religion" are definitely high points. These campaigns were run by the Atheist Foundation of Australia in collaboration with a number of other Atheist and Humanist organisations, in particular Sydney Atheists and the Humanist Society of Victoria.

Our campaigns, combined with a change in the answer format of the question, led to a substantial increase resulting in more than 30% of Australians actively stating they have no religion.

Jacobsen: Could there be a mass mobilization of the various national and international secular organizations to work on unified goals through the UN, in entire regions, and so on?

For example, a mass mobilization for the removal of the blasphemy laws around the world with continuous, strong pressure from around the world Secular people comprises a significant number of the global population, in the hundreds of millions.

Sharrad: The Atheist Foundation of Australia is an affiliate member and supporter of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). The IHEU is an international NGO with: Special Consultative Status at the United Nations in Geneva, Vienna, and New York (including General Consultative Status at UNICEF); observer status at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (Banjul); General Consultative Status at the Council of Europe (Strasbourg), and a partner in human rights with UNESCO (Paris).

Jacobsen: What are some of the activities and social and community provisions through the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc. to its membership?

Sharrad: Duo to the large geographic area and sparse population, The Foundation, in the first instance, provides online forums for people to connect through and in the second supports independent local, city based organisations who provide the in-person community support atheists desire.

Until recently, the AFA published a publication, *The Australian Atheist*, but that has been discontinued due to the lack of volunteer editors. The Foundation does plan on reviving its publishing mandate with a new site to be launched in the near future.

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

Sharrad: The most effectual way at this point in time to support organised atheism in Australia and to ensure that an atheist voice is heard in the public sphere and in the corridors of power is by volunteering your time. All membership organisations depend on volunteers for their success and the AFA is no different.

If someone would like to volunteer their time or skills, they can reach the AFA via email: <u>info@atheistfoundation.org.au</u>. One can also become a financial member by visiting our website https://atheistfoundation.org.au or going directly to: https://bit.ly/2FSR1Ow.

With the launch of the new site, there will be more ways of providing ongoing financial support to the Foundation as well as many avenues to contribute original content and articles.

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

Sharrad: The situation in Australia for atheists is a mostly positive one. However, there are still pockets of discrimination which are harmful to the individuals experiencing it and by extension harmful to our society as a whole and so we must be vigilant to those.

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

Sharrad: Thank you.

Interview with Haafizah Bhamjee – Executive-Administrator, "Ex-Muslims of South Africa"

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 19, 2019

Haafizah Bhamjee is the Executive Administrator of "Ex-Muslims of South Africa." Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Haafizah Bhamjee: I grew up in a relatively conservative Indian family in Johannesburg. I was raised Muslim, but often found religion disinteresting and restrictive.

The community that I was a part of was incredibly insular. Because, I suppose, of the inherent inequalities left behind by the past, Apartheid spatial planning created pockets of communities that exist quite separately from the rest of South African society.

Often times, I felt isolated inside of that community because I thought differently to my peers and the people around me.

Starting school at age seven was the first time I began interacting with people of different races, cultures and religious beliefs. It offered me a place to explore the world in a more positive and fascinating way.

My mother, whose family is conservative, enrolled myself and my siblings into madrassah from a young age. I attended madrassah in the afternoons, after school each day.

At madrassah we were taught all manner of Islamic scripture and teachings. I disliked it and performed poorly. I attended madrassah for eleven years. Looking back, I regret the time lost.

These two vastly different kinds of education meant that I was able to see things from two different perspectives, and it opened my mind up to the possibility that everything is far more complex and complicated than it seems, and that there is no easy answer to anything.

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

Bhamjee: I am lucky to some extent. I am the only person in my immediate family who graduated from University, and one of very few women in my family to gain a tertiary qualification. My father was always very open-minded and encouraged us to study and gain knowledge.

However, I received other kinds of education too. I've been involved in different kinds of activism and human rights advocacy since I was a teenager.

My political education, interacting with radical communities and being exposed to different political theory definitely changed the way that I see morality.

In Islamic households we are taught about a kind of morality that centres the protection of religion and theocracy. This often is at the expense of people's lives and happiness. Women, almost always, get the shorter end of the stick.

Being able to see inequality as immoral was revolutionary for me. Choosing to foreground my desire for dignity and respect was what led me towards questioning faith itself.

The Islamic education I received did little to answer my questions. Contesting the two always led definitively away from religion.

Jacobsen: As an Executive-Administrator for "Ex-Muslims of South Africa," what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Bhamjee: Primarily, it's about people.

I left Islam more seamlessly than others, meaning that I was not harassed or attacked for my decision and I was not pressured by my family. I come from a supportive background and I am grateful for that.

Things are not always as simple for everyone. Many ex-Muslims still live in fear and secrecy, despite the secular democratic laws that protect freedoms and choices. Leaving Islam is often met with shaming and violence.

ExMZA attempts to create safe spaces online and offline for ex-Muslims to come together, speak about their experiences and support each other.

We arrange Meet-ups and underground online chat groups to help ex-Muslims interact with each other. We also try to do some awareness through social media platforms and the media.

Our main concern is to ensure that everyone who reaches out to us is offered a safe space to chat and share their thoughts, and so that they feel supported when they decide to come public about leaving the faith.

Jacobsen: What are the main concerns of ex-Muslims in South Africa? Does the sex and gender of the ex-Muslim become a factor in the problems faced by an ex-Muslim?

Bhamjee: Ex-Muslims are aware of how their individual community's function. We know the extent to which 'the boundaries can be pushed'. Many live secretly as ex-Muslims continuing to practice publicly.

Generally, the cost of coming out is too high. Many fear that their decisions would impact their relations with their families and friends. Others are concerned that it would result in strained working conditions or would restrict their career opportunities. The shame that comes with being an ex-Muslim is often too much to bear.

Some additionally fear that they will be subjected to physical abuse from their families or from members of their community.

Many of us who are public about being ex-Muslim have received death threats or threats against our loved ones. Some have experienced physical or emotional abuse, and have been disowned by their families.

Men and women experience apostasy differently. For one, its often easier for men to hide their beliefs, or lack of beliefs. Women, on the other hand, are still expected to wear the hijab and to raise their children Islamically.

Furthermore, modesty culture means that when a woman leaves Islam, she is dealt with in the same way that one might deal with a disobedient child. We are rarely spoken to as equals. And

we are often gaslighted when we describe the different forms of sexism and patriarchy that we face.

Jacobsen: What organizations have been important allies of the organization?

Bhamjee: We have often found support in the South African Secular Society. An organisation that is just a few years older than we are.

Solidarity amongst atheists and free-thinkers is important in order to create a united face against the persistent rise of religiosity. South Africa is a conservative country, with well-funded and established religious organisation.

Jacobsen: Moving more into 2019, what are the targeted objectives for you?

Bhamjee: ExMZA started out as a support network, but we are slowly beginning to realise the need for targeted discourse and activism inside of Muslim communities.

We hope to begin to get the conversation started around the taboo, "unspeakable" nature of apostasy. We want to be able to live positive lives, without fear of harassment, and to be accepted by our friends and family members.

This can only happen if Muslims come to the table and choose to be more accepting. We hope to reach out to sympathetic Muslim leaders and organisations, and to gain the support of liberal Muslim communities.

We also hope to utilize the internet as a tool towards conscientisation and de-stigmatization.

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

Bhamjee: Like I said earlier, it really is about people choosing to be open minded and accepting.

Getting to a point where people are comfortable with diversity in the community, i.e. ex-Muslims, former Muslims, LGBT+ Muslims; means that we begin exposing conservative, insular communities to the possibility of acceptance and change.

We encourage everyone to learn more about us and to help us to build a network of solidarity. Starting up the conversation requires sympathetic people in the media to come forward and offer to carry our message forward through media exposure.

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

Bhamjee: Yes, I'd like to highlight the importance of solidarity and free-speech. Often times, the kind of work that we do requires making thoughts and opinions public, and this often leaves people vulnerable to harassment. It is important that keep the pressure on when it comes to foregrounding the rights of ex-Muslims to speak.

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

Bhamjee: Thank you for taking the time to interview me.

Interview with Justin Scott – State Director, American Atheists Iowa

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 20, 2019

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

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

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

Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Justin Scott: I experienced a pretty average middle class, Iowa upbringing. I'm sure at the time it seemed like a struggle but looking back on it, it was no worse than what many Americans experience.

My parents divorced when I was young so I got used to not getting to hang out with friends every other weekend as I would visit my dad. Both of my parents remarried and worked.

My dad was in the public eye locally as an insurance salesman. This career choice all but guaranteed that religion would continue to play a role in our lives as worked for a Lutheran insurance company.

This meant that every Sunday was more than sermons and coffee/donuts afterwards. They were work days for him.

We attended church and Sunday school regularly which was odd as my mom, although a self-described Catholic, never really seemed interested in religion or church. I think she sent us there on her weekends to appease my dad.

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

Scott: My dad first and foremost. Although he was heavy on bible scripture and guidance ("It's not MY will, it's THY will" ...man I got sick of hearing that from him growing up) he was also a very practical and pragmatic man.

When he finally shut up about his divine inspiration, he was very straight forward about life and how to maneuver around the bullshit it can throw at us.

At the end of the day, I think he had just experienced enough in his life that he didn't want his kids to repeat his mistakes. It's just too bad that he relied so heavily on his religion and deeply held beliefs to do it.

For what it's worth, there wasn't a single religious figure or leader that really made a lasting impression on me.

Perhaps that was due to their personalities, perhaps it was due to the fact that the Lutheran churches I was part of growing up were very much like Hallmark cards: they were just there to give you the warm and fuzzy version of Christianity.

Believe in a God and Jesus, do some nice things in your life, help others and everything else will pretty much work itself out.

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

Scott: Growing up I really didn't explore deep concepts. It's not that I wasn't a deep thinker and didn't want answers, I was just too wrapped in being a child of divorce and navigating the struggles that come with that.

I'd say that movies like Schindler's List and American History X were the first movies to really open my mind to the evil that exists in this world.

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

Scott: Great question. When I was in college, social media was just beginning and I really had zero interest in it which is hilarious given the fact that I practically live on it now.

Back then I was big into message boards for the sports teams that I loved. One website offered fans an "Off Topic" board where everything was free reign.

I can remember stumbling upon some atheist and nonreligious threads that made me literally look over my shoulder from time to time to make sure no one had seen me reading them.

The notion that being an atheist or nonreligious was even an option was foreign to me.

I always got the sense from my dad that being religious was a forgone conclusion; that it wasn't a matter of whether I was going to be a believer, it was just a matter of what Lutheran church I was going to be part of the rest of my life.

Jacobsen: How did this lead to American Atheists Iowa? How can others become involved in <u>non-religious activism</u>? Any reflections on the response from Rubio now?

Scott: Iowa American Atheists existing and me accepting the state director role is something I could have never envisioned when I came out as an atheist just four years ago.

In 2015, as I was coming to terms with my atheism, I just wanted to know that I wasn't the only person out there. I was nervous about what being an atheist meant and if/how it would change people's perception of me.

In just three years, however, I've not only been fortunate enough to have created three atheist groups in Iowa but I've been named the 2017 Atheist of the Year by American Atheists and am now proudly serving as state director in Iowa.

It's been quite the ride. Anyone reading this can have the same thing happen. For what it's worth, I encourage that. I want every atheist out there reading this to know that being a great atheist and activist for secular issues doesn't take any special talents.

When I look back at the trajectory I've followed to Iowa American Atheists and by no means is it the end all, be all of my activism career, it boils down to 1) working hard, 2) being persistent 3) knowing that not only are you not atone but your efforts may very well inspire the next great activist.

I am still learning but that's a good thing as I'm finding that the more I trust those around me, the more success we all enjoy!

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

Scott: The main task is to support and celebrate the atheist community of Iowa however I can. No two days in this role have been the same. Some days it's heavy on emails and phone calls.

The next day I may be coordinating activism efforts with a large atheist non-profit group. And after that I may travel across the state to offer assistance to an up-and-coming humanist group.

What I love so much about this role is that it challenges me to put my energy and focus on serving fellow atheists across Iowa. I try inspiring them by sharing my experiences with them (the good and the bad) in an attempt to make them the best atheist activists and citizens they can be.

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

Scott: When groups sign on to become an affiliate with American Atheists they enjoy a plethora of tabling materials like rally signs, bumper stickers, buttons and other items but most importantly, they join a network of atheists that are as motivated as they are to make a positive impact in their communities.

There is no greater feeling as an organizer to see people's faces light up when they realize the community of atheists that are out there, ready to put their metaphorical and literal arms around them.

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

Scott: I don't think it's so much that we have unique issues, it's the fact that with Iowa being a hotbed for national politics with our caucus every four years, there's an expectation that potential presidential candidates must engage with every corner of our state in order to have any chance to win the presidency.

This poses the atheist community a unique challenge and opportunity to put secularism on the national and international spotlight. My activism during the 2016 presidential race attempted to do this.

Despite some major national and international headlines that I was able to generate, it didn't spark a larger conversion nationally about secular issues, atheists or atheist voters.

Sure, there were stories published on these topics however they weren't a direct result of activism on the ground here. I'm hoping to change that with the 2020 presidential race, starting now.

Regarding inclusivity issues, the biggest one facing us right now is the prayer process in the Iowa legislature. I delivered what is believed to be the first secular invocation (aka "atheist prayer") in the history of the Iowa legislature back in April 2017.

Since then, I have been discriminated against two years in a row by my Senator who states that my atheism and his Catholicism will not allow him to support me to take part in state government.

This is something that is being discussed nationwide as state legislatures are coming under fire and are being sued for not providing an inclusive experience to atheists and nonreligious Americans.

We're also seeing this situation play out in city councils across the country as well. I'd be just as fine if the whole process of government-endorsed prayer and religious ritual came to an immediate end nationwide.

I know it's a cliché but America cannot enjoy true religious freedom without freedom from religion. The more state legislatures and city councils insist on either upholding the status quo of government-endorsed prayer or bringing it to their chambers, the weaker our Constitutional protection of church/state separation becomes.

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

Scott: I'm not the first to say this so I'm not taking credit with this but encourage and make sure that all of those kinds of secular individuals are afforded an opportunity to be in a leadership position.

The more diversity of those making decisions, the better. It's those unique perspectives that will enrich the community and our "movement".

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

Scott: Great question. First, I don't think we ever have to choose one or the other. They should both be issues that we focus on and I think in varied ways, the atheist community of the world is attempting to face both.

I think with both; it starts with addressing the threat to human dignity that both of your examples pose.

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

Interview with Mubarak Bala – Executive Director, Humanist Association of Nigeria

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
March 21, 2019

Mubarak Bala is the Executive Director of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Mubarak Bala: I grew up in the mid '80s, (born July, 1984) life was liberal, and our society in northern Nigeria, multi-tribal, then the Saudi program kicked in, to counter the Iranian exportation of their Islamic Revolution. Clerics were sponsored to study Islam in Arabia, and disseminate core Islamic values (Sunni).

By the 1990s, the society started changing, more provocative sermons, women were then secluded, and the colorful Somali-type hijab, replaced the colorful light veils seen with Hausa-Fulani women.

I only spoke Hausa and understood Arabic by age 10, almost zero English, although savvy with Mathematics and Science skills. This is because I was enrolled in a Saudi-Funded 'Islamic Foundation' school named as such, with semi-fanatics and a Muslim-only staffing.

It was only for Muslims. By 1995, we were taught, as part of the Extra-curricular activities, how to shoot bows and arrows at an arranged Evening class, only once. Maybe it was sneaked in as a curriculum, since the Military government frowns at Fanaticism.

Families were mostly liberal, I missed most of the early childhood plays as my curricula were tight, 7am-1pm, the supposedly Western Education at Islamic Foundation, then 4-6pm another called Sabilur-Rashad Madrassah, Quran-only school, and between 8-10pm another Islam and jurisdiction lesson, mostly Islamic History and how to behave as a Muslim.

Even on weekends when we were supposed to be free, we had extra-Islamic lessons at another Madrassa, morning and Evening.

Now you understand how suffocating that would be for a kid.

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

Bala: By Secondary School age, 1995-2001, I was first at a day-science-school called Islama Community Secondary School, an all-Muslim school in Kano, 1995 to 1997, then on to its sister school as a boarding school, it was a Science school with Strict Islamic discipline as well as Qur'an memorization.

I was good at both, and always read translated versions of the Quran when the things bore me, I have been warned to stop by my clerics, as no one was supposed to read and understand them by themselves, my curiosity never waned though.

I had a habit of comparing what Allah said on an issue, and what science really said, friends would jeer me if I narrate my observations, especially, as always, when Science seemed to get it right, and quiet opposite of what Islam says.

But all the self-education, also gave me the courage as to as too much, getting answers in some, or beat up/flogged on others. I hoped to modernise Islam and make it more acceptable to reasonable minds. I thought this would help humans escape that punishment of hell-fire Allah created just for them.

Now I know better, lol.

Jacobsen: What is your current role in the Humanist Association of Nigeria? What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

Bala: The just concluded National Convention in Abuja, January 12-15th, ended with an interim executive body, with me as President, a board of Trustees, as well as tasks and charts as how to steer the Association further into success and activities, funding and further expansion of the ever growing membership in the country, from both religions.

Our Agenda has been set, we are registered, and have been more vocal and present both online and in person, to national activities and events, political and social, our website would soon take up, and the bulk of our work would be out there for all to see and follow.

As part of organising ourselves, we also are partnering with other socio-cultural/secular NGOs on a few activities of interest, such as child prevention from witchcraft accusations by the Christian clergy, and the Almajiri (google a few links) enslavement of male kids by Islamic clerics.

Jacobsen: As you consider the struggles since the foundation of the Nigerian humanist movement by Dr. Leo Igwe, what have been the real victories and honest failures of the Humanist Association of Nigeria?

Bala: Failures are the delays we faced in getting registered, it took two decades just to register the secular association, in a much debated legal tussle, this hindered our growth, organisation and funding which would have been the means by which we could support members at risk, educate society to understand our stand and why the society need reason and rationalism.

Had we succeeded in getting most of the basic structures in place from the 1990s that the founding members started, we may have countered the narrative that led to the agitation for Boko Haram and sharia insurgency.

Our successes are numerous now, we have at least been recognised by the government, which is a very important step, and a strategic stepping stone, to achieve all other goals.

Jacobsen: What have been the hardest struggles in the fight for secularism, human rights, and humanistic policies and initiatives at the national level?

Bala: Mostly in this part of the world, it is mis-information and mis-representation. Many think moralities only come from millennia old books and that whoever counters such archaic canonical orthodoxy, is up to something sinister and dangerous.

I personally was misunderstood by my immediate family, the moment I expressed doubts about religion, they called me names and sought to silence and deter me from ever coming public with it, honor to them, is ultimate, and any price could be paid to preserve it.

Same it is, at the national level, the government, having emerged from the clueless age of the military era, is handed over to semi-educated illiterates, greedy but oblivious to facts of life, which in effect, allows individuals to abuse office and sneak-in tribal and religious agenda, from both Islam and Christianity, as rivalry grow, to hoist them on the populace. Secularists and liberals suffer most from both angles.

Jacobsen: Who tend to be the ones who push back the hardest against equality of the humanist community in Nigeria?

Bala: The masses. Nigeria has the largest number of un-schooled populace, mostly in the north off the country, which is why, many are also subconsciously, just terrorists without the balls to carry arms. Democracy dictates they have a vote, which means they could influence politics and policies, and yes they do.

Second is the clergy, from either of the major religions here. They have access to the leadership, and so, exert pressure as to which direction they wish the government and country is steered, mostly to ill-ends,

Jacobsen: Why are international solidarity movements important, in spite of the inevitable times when things will become incredibly difficult, painfully so, emotionally and then hard in terms of financials as well?

Bala: Before I knew of any such secular movements in Nigeria, I thought there may never be life after atheism in Northern Nigeria, then many made contact, and I realised, all we needed is organisation and a safe space.

We now no longer need International Organisations with trivial (mostly financial) assistance, we simply raise money within ourselves, and get a few support financing when the bills are bulky.

What we most need and require these days, is the voice from other International Associations, especially when we have legal or threats to counter, within Nigeria.

Such organizations have bigger voices and could influence policy-makers within and outside our shores, with good media contacts, especially the on-air ones, as well as the online flood of individual efforts. It does save lives.

Jacobsen: Who are the biggest charlatans in Nigeria? How do they exemplify the fraudulence, bilking, and manipulation through demagoguery, fear mongering, and lying seen in other mass religious movements in other regions' histories?

Bala: We have two major religions here, Islam in the north, Christianity in the south. Both religions and their clergy, have been the bane of our national development.

They scare people with imagined monsters and social exclusion, such that reason is feared, shunned and ridiculed.

Sadly, the system favors those with the votes, and so, although on paper, the country is secular, we are nowhere near that now, with governments and politicians boasting of contributing to erection of the largest Jesus statue in Africa, (google it, its funny), to the largest church auditorium in the world.

Nigeria now has more worship and miracle centres, than hospitals, schools, and industries. It is appalling.

Most appalling is that the effort to educate the people that these are not what they need, were mostly met with violence. Imagine trying to save a victim of a snake-bite, only to be attacked by the victim, mistaking you as a bigger venom carrier. Sad!

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

Bala: We hope to have formal websites and organization's accounts, we mostly raise funding from ourselves, we also plan to register members, so as to see how we could spread the responsibility around, to ease the burden on the main circle.

We hope to also get assistance from other well-to-do sister organizations outside our shores, especially how to counter fanaticism and put up ads that open up the society from the general delusion that breeds terrorism and misery on and off our lands.

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

Bala: It has been a great hour, the questions were apt, and takes one down memory lane... sweet memories, and scary paths one could have veered into.

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

Bala: It is my pleasure. Would be glad these encounters happen more often. Thank you.

Ask Herb 5 – Background Noise and Individual Signal

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
March 21, 2019

Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition of America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. Here we talk about expectations in activism, mathematics, Judaism, and ethical values.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: As the collective background of an individual remains an important consideration, not as an in-depth reflection but as a heuristic of what to statistically expect, in activism, how can knowledge of the background of a collective help explain larger scale phenomena of communities?

For example, as a logician and mathematician, you rejected the rituals and the god of Judaism but accepted the ethical values of the Jewish traditions.

This reflects many ordinary Jewish people who reject the supernaturalism and the ritualisms of Judaism. Your individual flavor of non-religiosity differs in more nuanced and sophisticated respects than this. However, you get the thrust of the point.

If an activist runs for office or wants to become active in community civic and political life, how can a demographic and collective background understanding of the community help with activist work in dealing with the community and in individual interactions with local American citizens – noting, of course, this can extend to other areas of our region or the world as a means by which to effectuate positive change?

Herb Silverman: I think activists who run for public office should not only describe their views on issues that affect the community, but also explain what led them to those views—religious or otherwise. We are all affected by our early influences. Some people change a little, some a lot, and some not at all. Activists should also be able to formulate good reasons to run for public office. I certainly had a good reason to run for governor of South Carolina in 1990—to challenge the provision in our state constitution that prohibited atheists from holding public office. I lost the gubernatorial race, of course, but won a unanimous decision in the state Supreme Court, thus nullifying the anti-atheist clause. Mission accomplished.

As an added bonus, my campaign turned out to be more educational than I had anticipated—for me and for other South Carolinians. People were curious about who or what turned me into an atheist and on what basis I could live a moral life. It was an opportunity for me to examine my religious beliefs, describe the difference between" evidence based and biblically based morality, and change some stereotypes people had about atheists. I didn't indiscriminately bash religion, as many had expected. I talked about what I kept from my Orthodox Jewish upbringing, which includes an emphasis on education, promoting social justice, the idealistic aspiration of *Tikun Olam* (repairing the world), and questioning. This last one motivated me to abandon the religious teachings that no longer made sense to me, like meaningless religious rituals, unreasonable dietary restrictions, and God belief. Judaism does not require belief in God, and I'm comfortable being a member of the atheist sect of *Humanistic Judaism*.

Despite my quixotic "political" career, I don't think atheists running for office should lead with their atheism or even talk about it unless the subject comes up. We should be able to justify our positions through the application of reason, science, and evidence, which is likely why most of us became atheists. At the same time, if asked about our religious beliefs, we should not hide our atheism. During the Q&A in a debate I had about morality, one person said I must be an honest person because I acknowledged being an atheist. Trying to avoid the A-word because you think it is a skeleton in your closet makes it become a skeleton. I think it's better to openly discuss your so-called skeletons before others discover them. To the surprise of many, I revealed all my skeletons in my autobiography. For better or worse, no opposition research is needed on me.

Whether motivated by activism to run for office or work on important community issues, you will need support from others. It helps to seek common ground, sometimes with people you often disagree (perhaps because of their biblical beliefs). But if they are inspired by religion to treat others fairly and do good works, we can work with them on selected issues. Just about all religions and secular philosophies have grounded morality in some version of the Golden Rule. The good values a religion promotes are human values, not specific to any particular religion. And those are the values we should emphasize when working with religious people. We may differ about a future life, but atheists and theists can work together on concerns that matter in this life, like human rights, racial discrimination, the environment, poverty, peace, and other social justice issues.

In seeking supporters for your cause, it helps to support others in their causes with which you agree. I'll illustrate with an example. The South Carolina Progressive Network is composed of 36 organizations, including the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry. Most organizations either have no theological position or have members who are quite religious. All are outside the mainstream and opposed by the Religious Right. The rationale for the Progressive Network is that people are more likely to listen to a network of groups than to one lone group or one lone individual.

For instance, our secular humanist group sought Network support for a Charleston Day of Reason, coordinating with national freethought organizations across the nation. I expected opposition from some religious members because it was on the same day as the National Day of Prayer. I told them the day was picked because reason is a concept all Americans can support, and that we wanted to raise public awareness about the persistent threat to religious liberty posed by government intrusion into the private sphere of worship. To my pleasant surprise, the support was unanimous and the Progressive Network asked Mayor Joe Riley to issue a proclamation in support of a Charleston Day of Reason, which he did.

The Network and others joined in a local park to celebrate a day of reason, tolerance, democracy, and human rights. The celebration began with a member of Charleston City Council reading the mayor's proclamation. Others, both secular and religious, then contributed freethought statements or comments in support of reason. When we associate faces with organizations, it is much easier for these groups to support each other's causes. It's also a great way to make new friends.

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

Interview with Hope Knutsson – Former President,

Founding Member, and Board Member, Siðmennt (Félag Siðrænna Húmanista)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 22, 2019

Hope Knutsson is the Former President, a Founding Member, and a Board Member of Siðmennt (Félag Siðrænna Húmanista). Here we talk about her life, work, and views.

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

Hope Knutsson: I was born and grew up in New York City, the middle child of 3 sisters, in a secular family with Jewish roots. I feel enormously grateful to my parents for not indoctrinating me with religious myths but emphasizing the importance of education and social responsibility.

My mother was an elementary school teacher and my father, a college graduate who had been accepted into medical school but didn't go due to the Great Depression, owned a printing company. All 3 of us sisters are college graduates.

I have been a social activist all of my adult life, active in the 1960's in protesting the war in Vietnam, the Military-Industrial Complex, nuclear power stations, and the inequities of the American health care delivery system. In 1974 I moved to Iceland to help establish a curriculum in occupational therapy at an Icelandic university.

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

Knutsson: I majored jointly in philosophy and psychology and have a Bachelor's degree from Brooklyn College/City University of NY. I have a Master's Degree in occupational therapy from Columbia University.

Throughout my life I have read extensively, subscribed to publications, and taken courses in assorted areas of health care, psychotherapy, atheism, and Humanism. I was mentored by the prominent cognitive behavioral therapist, Dr. Arnold Lazarus.

Jacobsen: As a founding member of Siðmennt (Félag Siðrænna Húmanista), why was the organization founded in the first place?

Knutsson: In 1988 I started to organize the first civil confirmation program in Iceland, modeled on the one in Norway.

After the first program was completed in 1990 the families who had been involved in it decided to form an organization for secular ceremonies in order to keep the secular confirmations going and to expand to offering the nation secular baby-namings, weddings, and funerals as well as working towards separate of church and state because Iceland still had and has today, a state church.

This is a bizarre anachronism in a democratic republic. Iceland has in recent years usually been listed in the top ten least religious countries in the world. Siðmennt, the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association was founded in 1990. I have been a member of its board ever since and was president for 19 years.

Jacobsen: Why was there a niche for ethical humanism within the context of Iceland?

Knutsson: A very small percentage of Icelanders are religious but most people used the services of the state church clergy because there were no alternatives available. Icelandic clergy are viewed as civil servants, rather than moral leaders.

Siðmennt did a survey of the life stance views of Icelanders in November 2015 and one of the interesting and widely publicized results was that the percentage of young Icelanders who believe that a God created the world was

ZERO! https://www.patheos.com/blogs/progressivesecularhumanist/2016/01/poll-0-0-of-icelanders-under-25-believe-god-created-the-world/?fbclid=IwAR17SG95XH3GoN0eDE-m5WJzEI05GUmIKn6cm0kAj9-tmrsbI9OZUUWNtf0

Jacobsen: What are the ethical humanist concerns within Iceland?

Knutsson: Working towards separation of church and state, eliminating Christian proselytizing within the school system and other public places, providing secular alternative ceremonies at the important transition points in life, commenting publicly and holding educational conferences about ethical and human rights issues.

Jacobsen: How has Siðmennt (Félag Siðrænna Húmanista) developed over time, as you have seen the trajectory into over a couple thousand members now?

Knutsson: Just for background information: the total population of Iceland is only 350,000. After the first 2 decades of its existence Siðmennt had around 300 members. We lobbied Icelandic MPs for almost a decade to get equal legal status and funding with religious organizations.

In 2013 the law about religious organizations was finally amended and granted life stance organizations equal status. Siðmennt applied to be registered under the new law and in May of that year we became the first legally registered life stance organization in Iceland. Since that time our membership has grown by leaps and bounds and is now close to 3000.

Siðmennt has been running the secular confirmation program for 31 years and it has grown from 16 teenagers the first year to 542 now in 2019. This winter we are holding 24 classes in critical thinking/ethics/human rights/human relations and 14 ceremonies in various parts of the country in the spring.

We have around 50 trained celebrants who conduct baby-namings, weddings, and funerals. The demand for our ceremonies has snowballed. In 2018 we conducted 396 ceremonies, which is a 15% increase over the previous year. We conducted 13 confirmations for 470 kids, 123 baby-namings, 248 weddings, and 12 funerals.

Siðmennt is one of the leading groups working for separation of church and state. Another high priority is getting religious proselytizing out of the public schools. Fortunately, there are hardly any faith schools in Iceland. Siðmennt holds conferences and seminars on a wide variety of human rights and ethical issues. We also have an annual Humanist of the Year award along with an award for science education.

Jacobsen: Who are the leading writers and thinkers within the ethical humanist tradition?

Knutsson: Do you mean the classical internationally known ones? Or our local ones? Our local living scholars are: Jóhann Björnsson, Sigurður Hólm Gunnarsson, and Svanur Sigurbjörnsson.

Jacobsen: As we move into a world with rising authoritarianism and demagoguery with women's rights as one of the first considerations of both of those forces for being axed, what can the international ethical humanist, secularist, and, indeed, feminist movements do to attenuate and reverse the corrosive social and legal effects of the aforementioned rising authoritarianism and demagoguery?

Knutsson: Siðmennt has held both local seminars and conferences about the rise of populism and will be hosting an international conference that includes these issues in June. https://icelandtravel.artegis.com/event/ieha2019?fbclid=IwAR1virCGRxQzukZdjXSn10U5GYLdN09YRWYGIV3KIipUvku7lZ6vjGYjCK4

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

Knutsson: Are you asking about local people or people abroad?

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

Knutsson: No.

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

Knutsson: You are very welcome.

Interview with Bill Norsworthy – Co-Facilitator, Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 23, 2019

Bill Norsworthy is the Co-Facilitator of the Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Bill Norsworthy: I was born and raised in Louisiana. My parents both graduated from college. My mother was a language major and father was a journalist.

They were both devoted Episcopalians, so I was, too. By high school, I had my doubts, having discovered Thoreau, Emerson and the Transcendentalists.

While in graduate school I was introduced by a friend to Unitarian Universalism. A couple of years later I joined the UU Congregation in Atlanta. Since then I have been an active UU in several congregations.

I have two sisters, one in Louisiana and one in California. I have two adult children, both of whom live in the Tampa Bay area and six grandchildren. I have been in partnership with Marie Chapman for 15 years.

As for the dynamics of my formative years, I would say that my parents were very helpful in allowing me to think about the world and to express my thoughts without being too judgmental. It wasn't always a smooth one, but my journey as a Freethinker has been quite fulfilling.

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

Norsworthy: I graduated from Louisiana State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Finance. I also have an MBA from the University of Massachusetts.

Informally, I have always enjoyed reading and discussing ideas with friends and colleagues. Most of my reading is in non-fiction and focuses on history, biography, science and religion.

Jacobsen: You are a Co-Facilitator for the Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater with Mark Brandt. How does the work as a co-facilitator differ from other service or gathering leaders of more traditional religions?

Norsworthy: One of the best aspects of Unitarian Universalism is its non-theistic philosophy.

This allows our Humanist Group to explore a wide range of topics and issues in our monthly meetings. While it is not a requirement of membership, the great majority of our Humanist group members are atheists or agnostics.

This group offers opportunity to connect with like-minded people and to support the search for better understanding of the cosmos and the roles we have in it.

Jacobsen: What is the typical layout of the gathering, of which you facilitate? Is there a formal schedule? What is the general content?

Norsworthy: We generally meet once a month from September through May. Our meetings are held on Sunday afternoon and are followed by lunch at a nearby restaurant.

We usually have a single guest speaker and we always have a Q&A session after the talk. Sometimes we have a musical presentation, as well.

One of our meetings each year is to celebrate Darwin Day. It is hosted by our group plus several other freethought groups in the Tampa Bay area: CFI, Atheists of Florida, Suncoast Humanists.

These meetings, held on Saturday at UUs of Clearwater, usually have three speakers on science topics and the program lasts about three hours.

Jacobsen: In terms of the primary and secondary beliefs of Unitarian Universalism, how does the humanistic flavor of Unitarian Universalism differ from the non-humanistic one?

Norsworthy: UUs generally have a very liberal attitude toward religion. Our focus is on the life we have and not on one that might exist after this one.

Some UUs do have a belief in something, which they choose to call God, but very few would define God in an anthropomorphic or personal way.

Jacobsen: What are the main activist efforts of the Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater?

Norsworthy: Since we are part of the UUs of Clearwater, the Humanist Group doesn't have an independent activist program. Our members do participate in various social justice activities.

Our group does work with the other freethought groups in the area to promote science, freethought, atheism and humanism.

Jacobsen: What have been the important social outreach efforts of the Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater?

Norsworthy: As indicated above, the UUs of Clearwater has a very active social justice program that supports racial equality, refugees, immigrants, farm workers, prison reform and those in poverty.

Jacobsen: What do you see the potential threats to the community and social life of the Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater as we move further into 2019?

What might be proactive efforts to combat some of these, potentially, regressive forces in alliance with other organizations?

Norsworthy: As throughout the world, there are regressive forces locally that would like to create a theocracy.

In this area, these forces are empowered by conservatives who are in firm control of the government of the State of Florida.

We have not experienced any direct persecution but the potential is always there. The Tampa Bay area is not too extreme (not to say that there aren't extreme people here), but political affiliation is about one-third each for Democrats, Republicans and Independents.

Our Humanist Group is affiliated with the Tampa Bay Coalition of Reason and with the American Humanist Association. In addition, I am a member of the Board of the Secular Coalition for America, a coalition of 19 national freethought groups.

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

Norsworthy: We encourage our members to be involved in community organizations and political parties and to represent our worldview that secularism is the best way to deal with the challenges of the modern world.

We do accept donations to defray the cost of our speaker program. We haven't engaged in writing articles...yet, but that is an excellent idea. Thanks.

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

Norsworthy: The freethought/secular movement has been gaining strength for the last 300+ years. While this has not been a straight line of growth, it has experienced a significant increase in the last generation.

The future of Secular Humanism will likely be even better, as the ideas of the Enlightenment continue to inspire creativity and problem solving that will improve life on this "pale blue dot," as Carl Sagan so eloquently described our fragile planet. We are committed to furthering that cause.

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

Norsworthy: Thank you, Scott. Your inquiry is much appreciated. Please let us know if we can answer any other questions.

Interview with Mark Brandt – Co-Facilitator, Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 24, 2019

Mark Brandt is the Co-Facilitator of the Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Mark Brandt: I was born in Iowa in 1946 and moved to Florida at age 11 in Feb 1958. The nuclear family consisted of my parents and older brother. Mom and dad were married for 69 years.

They both died in in 2009. We had a plain vanilla family life. There was never any violence or abuse. I would describe home life as midwestern stoic. My older brother died at age 43 in 1986. Church was required for me by my parents until I was age 15.

They didn't come but I was required to go until that age. Culture, language etc were all midwestern protestant. Education included a BA from Florida State University, the sophomore year of which was spent in Florence, Italy. Post graduate study culminated in a law degree (JD) from the University of Virginia.

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

Brandt: Formal education is noted above, although my scholarship in law school was spectacularly mediocre. The last 30 years or so have been devoted to trying to learn more about the world.

The first major undertaking was to read the bible from cover to cover, skipping only the parts about the cubits of the ark and some of the genealogies. That really set me on my secular/atheist path. I have been a modest autodidact since then reading most of the atheist authors.

I have joined 4 secular humanist and atheist organizations, to wit: AHA, CFI, FFRF, and AA. Articles in their publications have been read and digested. Several years ago a group of secular friends engaged with 5 Baptists.

We would get together once a month for discussions on subjects such as evolution, suffering etc. After 8 or 9 sessions, we were starting to repeat our arguments and decided to disband the discussions.

It was a good learning experience and helped to refine my worldview and arguments for atheism/humanism.

Jacobsen: You are a Co-Facilitator for the Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater with Bill Norsworthy. How does the work as a co-facilitator differ from other service or gathering leaders of more traditional religions?

What is the typical layout of the gathering, of which you facilitate? Is there a formal schedule? What is the general content?

Brandt: As to co-facilitating the UU Humanist group, Mark and I try to have a speaker once a month. Meetings are held from 12:30 to 1:30 on Sundays after the UU services.

After our meetings, usually a bunch of us adjourn to a local restaurant for further conversation. Usually in Feb, our group, along with other Tampa bay free thought organizations sponsors a Darwin Day Celebration.

In the past, we have hosted Daniel Dennett of Tufts University and Frans de Waal of Emory as our featured speakers. Richard Dawkins and the former head of American Atheists have also spoken at our UU campus.

Our meetings are secular. There are no songs or rituals. They are just an opportunity for like minded folks to gather. It's an informal gathering. We have also hosted a summer social at a restaurant and a winter solstice potluck dinner.

Jacobsen: In terms of the primary and secondary beliefs of Unitarian Universalism, how does the humanistic flavor of Unitarian Universalism differ from the non-humanistic one?

Brandt: UU's do not subscribe to a formal creed so you'll find an eclectic mix of beliefs. Secular humanism is one of the main worldviews among UU's.

Our UU congregation has been quite accepting of differing views. Those who have some nebulous spiritual views seem to accommodate us humanists quite easily and vice versa.

Jacobsen: What are the main activist efforts of the Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater?

Brandt: Our activities are listed above. We try to not be overly active (this may be a rationalization for being lazy) so as to not be considered a rogue group within the congregation.

Our members are active within the larger congregation in social action issues and other congregational activities.

Jacobsen: What have been the important social outreach efforts of the Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater?

Brandt: Our congregation has been quite active with migrant workers, refugees, the LGBTQ community and other marginalized groups.

Jacobsen: What do you see the potential threats to the community and social life of the Unitarian Universalist Humanists of Clearwater as we move further into 2019?

What might be proactive efforts to combat some of these, potentially, regressive forces in alliance with other organizations?

Brandt: I don't see any direct threat to what the UU Humanists are doing. There is a battle on the national level with the religious right trying to turn back the clock against the forces of modernity which humanists have embraced.

There is the possibility of violence fomented by the right, but no threats have been received by our humanist group. We have not been actively engaged in trying to promote secularism other than our normal activities.

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

Brandt: Our group is listed on the UU Clearwater website. We do receive inquiries from time to time. Visitors to UUC also find out about our group and ask to be included on our email list.

We will continue to gently push for a more rational, evidence and fact based world eschew the mythological world of deities and gods.

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

Interview with Professor Kenneth Miller – Professor, Brown University

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 25, 2019

Professor Kenneth R. Miller is a Professor of Biology and Royce Family Professor for Teaching Excellence at Brown University. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Professor Kenneth Miller: I was born and raised in Rahway, New Jersey, which is part of the New York City metropolitan area. My Dad was in the Army, and was stationed in Fort Dix, NJ, in 1944 when he attended a local dance event for GIs and met the high school girl who would become my Mom.

My Dad, who grew up in Indiana, graduated from high school and spent two years studying for the priesthood before he decided that the life of a priest was not for him. Then, WWII intervened, and he spent the next four years in the service. He was trained in communication circuitry during the war, and worked off and on for subcontractors of the telephone company in NJ after I was born. My Mom had trained as a secretary in high school, and worked for many years as a medical assistant to two doctors in town.

Our family wasn't very well off, so after a few years we had to move in with my Mom's parents, so three generations shared that house. I attended the public schools in Rahway, and graduated from Rahway HS. I was awarded a college scholarship by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and studied Biology at Brown University. I earned my PhD in Cellular Biology at the University of Colorado, supported by a National Defense Education Act fellowship.

I was pretty busy in high school, being elected student government president as well as Governor of New Jersey Boys State, which led to a senior year where I traveled throughout the state giving speeches at American Legion events (since the Legion sponsors Boys State). I was also a varsity swimmer (a sport I continued in college), an Eagle Scout, and worked summers as a lifeguard.

I was raised as a Roman Catholic (my Dad's faith) although my Mom converted to Catholicism only after I was born. My Mom's parents, whom I loved dearly, were Methodists, although they rarely attended church. My Dad was determined that his boys would go to public, rather than parochial, schools, and I thank him for that. As a result, I had friends of all faiths, and some of no faith at all.

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

Miller: As noted, I graduated from Rahway High School, and then earned a BS and then a PhD in Biology, so that's the extent of my formal education. In addition to my interests in science, I have always been a voracious reader, and that led to an interest in writing. In college I took several courses in literature, and even enrolled in a poetry workshop course. I published a couple of poems in a campus magazine, and continued to write poetry in graduate school, even participating in a couple of public poetry readings. In retrospect, I'm glad I picked science as a

career path rather than poetry, but the discipline of verse writing clearly made me a better writer, and I believe that is reflected in the books and articles I have written as part of my professional life.

Jacobsen: You, in some ways akin to the brilliant and underappreciated Eugenie Scott – or Darwin's Golden Retriever, amount to a living American monument, in regards to the personal role in one of the landmark moments in the evolution and creationism sociopolitical, and educational system, controversy. In reflection on the progress since the *Kitzmiller v Dover* (2005) trial, what is the educational system, in terms of biological sciences, looking like now, compared to 2005?

Miller: It is now nearly 15 years since the Kitzmiller trial, in which I was an expert witness, and it's very clear that the outcome of the trial was a pivotal event for science education in America. The precedent set by the trial took the steam out of the "intelligent design" (ID) movement, and made it clear to school systems across the country that there would be severe First Amendment issues with any attempt to undermine the teaching of evolution for religious reasons. As a result, evolution is now part of the required science curriculum in every American state (yes, even Texas!), and formal efforts to introduce ID into state curricula have failed repeatedly. That's a good thing. However, the pressure has not abated, and we continue to see efforts to introduce "alternative theories" into the science classroom under the guise of "academic freedom" bills that have been introduced in several state legislatures. The National Center for Science Education, with which I am affiliated, and dozens of state "citizens for science" organizations have successfully parried nearly all of these efforts.

Jacobsen: The Roman Catholic Christian hierarchs, probably, do not want to repeat the mistake of the dealings with Galileo Galilei. Prominent science popularizer and astrophysicist Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson argues for a caveat, of course, to the Galilei affair with the unpleasant demeanor of Galilei as a non-trivial factor to consider in the eventualities of the case. The Pontifical Academy of Sciences has eminent scientists, including Nobel laureates, who meet periodically for scientific reasons and will offer advice to the Holy See upon request. What else have been some proactive efforts of the Roman Catholic Christian hierarchs and, potentially, laity who are educators in biological sciences to prevent this Galilean fiasco happening once more?

Miller: Yeah, I'm pretty sure that the Church today realizes that they handled the Galileo thing rather badly, and doesn't want to see anything like that happen again! It's worth noting, as Dr. Tyson pointed out, that a personality clash between Galileo and the Pope had as much to do with the suppression of his work as any doctrinal objections.

The Catholic Church has, in fact, been a major sponsor of scientific research over the past few centuries. Despite the many failings and, yes, crimes of the institutional Church, Catholic institutions like the Vatican Observatory and Catholic colleges and universities have supported scientific research and educated whole generations of scientists. It is also worth noting, with respect to evolution, that four popes (Pius XII, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis) have spoken or written in support of the theory of evolution. No doubt to the surprise of many non-Catholics, the Church has actively supported and promoted scientific research and science education for centuries.

Jacobsen: In terms of the opposition to the teaching of evolution by natural selection, broadly speaking, what has been their efforts to distort the reality of evolution by natural selection, miseducate the young, or simply lie for socio-political points?

Miller: These efforts have taken many forms, some of them attracting very little public notice. Teachers everywhere report informal pressure from parents and occasionally from students to skip or water down their treatment of evolution, despite state standards requiring it to be taught. Anti-evolution organizations like the *Discovery Institute* and *Answers in Genesis* churn out a steady stream of anti-evolution talking points, which are occasionally picked up by state and local groups hoping to challenge the teaching of evolution in their local schools. And I have already mentioned the "academic freedom" bills that regularly appear in state legislatures.

Very few of these efforts are overtly religious. Rather, they do their best to sound scientific by arguing that evolution is disproven on the basis of thermodynamics, information theory, the complexity of the genome, or by gaps and inconsistencies in the fossil record. Then, while they provide absolutely no evidence supporting special creation or intelligent design, they argue that these "theories" must be considered since they are the only possible alternatives to the theory of evolution. In effect, they have placed their ideas, without any scientific support, as the default explanation in the event evolution is rejected.

Jacobsen: Based on the recent book by you, what is the central argument for free will within an evolutionary context?

Miller: To be clear, in my book *The Human Instinct*, I did not claim to have discovered a neurological basis for free will. Rather, I argued that many of the determinist arguments against free will are not valid. These include a set of well-known behavioral experiments, in which Benjamin Libet claimed that the brain's decision to act in a certain way occurs subconsciously (and therefore deterministically) before we become aware of it. Like Daniel Dennett, I disagree with Libet's claim that these results demonstrate anything like an absence of free will in decision making.

Instead, I argue that much of the resistance to the concept of free will comes from those who actually wish to make a case for a purely physical concept of brain action that denies a spiritual soul, and thereby excludes the spiritual or mystical from human thought and activity. Well, I also am a physicalist in the sense that I see no reason to believe that there is anything that happens in the brain that cannot be explained by the laws of physics and chemistry and the cell biology of neural connections. But that does not mean that the physical basis of thought denies human agency, by which I mean the capability to observe, to analyze, to consider, and then to make rational decisions. To me, that is exactly what free will means.

I make the further point that if that sort of free will does not exist, then neither does science. The reason is that science itself depends upon the ability to evaluate observations and experimental data in a rational way that allows for the brain to choose freely between possible alternatives. If scientific reason itself is predetermined, then each and every scientific conclusion of any sort is suspect.

Jacobsen: John Paul II wanted to affirm the reality of a spiritual self. How does the conceptual Roman Catholic Christian conceptualization of a soul and ensoulment connect with this argument for free will if at all?

Miller: Many people would argue that ensoulment is the very essence of free will, and that human agency is couched in the spiritual soul. I don't agree, since I believe that independent decision-making is based in the dynamic circuitry of the brain itself. I do think that the concept of the soul as the spiritual reflection of human individuality is important to Christianity, and would agree with JP-II's point that science is not competent to investigate the reality of the soul, since the soul itself would have to be a spiritual entity, not a physical one.

Jacobsen: In terms of the teaching of evolution by natural selection and adherence to Roman Catholic Christian theology and suggested practices, following from the previous question, why does this exist, potentially in principle, beyond the confines of science to investigate, as a metaphysical – not a supernatural – question?

Miller: I take your question to mean why ensoulment or any question worth asking should be beyond the competence of science to investigate. Indeed, there is a philosophical concept often called "scientism" which suggests that science is indeed the right way to answer any question, or at least any question worth asking. The interesting thing about scientism is that science itself can provide no support for its claim that it alone has access to all things knowable.

Let me be clear. Science is the best method we are ever likely to discover for exploring, explaining, and understanding the physical world, including the world of life. But certain questions very clearly lie beyond the competence of science to approach. Some of these are philosophical, dealing with meaning of life, the nature of good and evil, the essence of virtue, the reality of love. Others, such as the ultimate origin of the universe or the sources of the laws of physics, are existential in that they are unlikely to be solved by scientific approaches. We cannot, for example, explain why the fundamental constants of nature hold the values that they do, or, in the words of many philosophers, why there is something rather than nothing. This does not negate science in any way. Rather, it is a recognition that some questions are beyond the power of science to answer.

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

Miller: Given the nature of your blog, I would suspect that very few of your readers are theists, and perhaps many of them are suspicious of the commitment to science of anyone who professes a belief in God, as I do. Let me assure them of two things. First, communities of faith have a long history of nurturing, supporting, and promoting the practice of science. Think of the great scientific contributions of the Islamic caliphate, as well as the Christian medieval university system, which gave rise to major advances in the physical sciences and astronomy. Second, I would make a point shared by nearly all of the scientists I know who would identify as believers — that is, that any faith that might require the rejection of science is not a faith worth having. This is not because science in any was proves or justifies our faith. Rather, to take a phrase from Guy Consolmagno, Director of the Vatican Observatory, it is because our faith in God justifies science itself.

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

Miller: My pleasure! Thank you.

Interview with Liz Jacka – Board Member, Dying With Dignity NSW

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 26, 2019

Liz Jacka is a Board Member in Dying With Dignity NSW. Here we talk about her life, work, and views.

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

Liz Jacka: I was born in Auckland New Zealand in 1945. I am of Celtic origin (Scottish, Irish, Cornish) and had a pretty strict Catholic upbringing and education. The family didn't have much money. There were four kids, of whom I am the eldest.

My parents' marriage was very problematic and my relationship with my father was pretty toxic. (I forgave him when I was in my forties after undergoing psychoanalysis. He also apologised although he had not had analysis.)

I was educated to PhD level, having studied both science and humanities. I spent my life as an academic, first in Philosophy, then in media studies. We never talked about anything difficult in the family so I had no idea about death etc.

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

Jacka: See above for academic details. I have self-educated in end-of-life issues. After I became very interested in the issue of voluntary assisted dying (VAD) about 6 years ago, I have read all of the international debates and reports about the issue and have watched very closely developments in various parts of the world. I have also read many of the recent books on the subject.

Jacobsen: As a Board member, a longstanding one, in Dying With Dignity in Australia, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Jacka: My involvement began when I provided research support to NSW Upper House Greens MP, Cata Faehrmann who in 2013 introduced a VAD Bill into the Upper House of the NSW Parliament. It was defeated by 23 to 12. I am a member of the Greens Party and VAD is party policy.

I joined the Board of Dying With Dignity NSW in 2014 and have done various things over the period until now. I have written submissions to inquiries, I have participated in campaigns around actual bills (another attempt was made in 2017 to pass a bill in NSW, which failed by only one vote).

I do a lot of menial clerical stuff and I take all the phone calls that come into the office. This has been a big and quite taxing part of my job as we are often approached by desperate people and their relatives and asked for hep to die. So I have become a kind of phone counsellor.

I also contribute to a weekly media watch of all Australian stories about the issue and I have helped to organise forums on the issue and I have spoken to various audiences about the issue. I have also written articles and letters to newspapers and magazines.

Jacobsen: What have been the developments of the organization since your time in it?

Jacka: Our organisation has gone through big changes since I've been on the Board. This is due to the election of two extremely dynamic and switched-on board members who have expertise in digital campaigning techniques.

They both work almost full time on the issue and they are both very active in the Voluntary Euthanasia Party which has fielded candidates in both Federal and Sate elections.

Jacobsen: In terms of moving further into 2019, what are the important activist efforts of dying with dignity in Australia in general? Who are the important allies in this collective effort to advance, if wanted, personal autonomy in the choice of how and when one dies?

Jacka: The 2017 Bill was introduced into parliament by a cross-party group, which gave it a much better chance of succeeding. A similar Bill will be introduced again in 2019. There is also a state election in March 2019. All our efforts will go into campaigning hard for our cause.

Our allies and a doctors group who are in favour of VAD, The Nurses Professional Associations (the nurses officially support VAD), to some extent the Associations who represent senior Australians.

We have yet to have much success with the Palliative Care profession. Here, as elsewhere, they see VAD in opposition to VAD whereas we would see them as complementary.

Jacobsen: Who are the important writers and thinkers of this national and global rights-based movement?

Jacka: One of the Australian campaigners is Dr Rodney Syme of Victoris, who has been helping people with end of life decisions for many years. he has written two excellent book (google him).

He has also gone on national TV and confessed to actually assisting terminally ill people to die at the time of their choosing (which is illegal) but has never been charged with any crime.

Other doctors have written books on the futility of intensive care and heroic measures for the frail and elderly. Awareness to the issues amongst the general population is growing with around 85% saying they would approve of VAD for terminally ill people who are suffering intolerably.

Jacobsen: In terms of the real successes and honest failures in the efforts for dying with dignity, the right to die, euthanasia, and so on, what have those been in the history of Australia's branch of this movement?

How can others interested in becoming politically and socially active build on those successes and learn from those failures?

Jacka: This is a huge question. I think the chipping away approach over the years in Australia is bearing fruit. All states and territories are considering introducing VAD. In fact, Victoria passed a VAD law in 2017 and this comes into effect in June 2019.

Western Australia has issued a parliamentary report urging the introduction of VAD laws and Queensland is also seriously considering it. Note that in all three of these states there is a Labour government.

Jacobsen: Historically speaking, who have been the primary opposition to the dying with dignity movement? Why them? How can this opposition be combatted?

Jacka: The primary opposition to VAD are the Catholic and Anglican Churches. They have managed to spook politicians and there is a huge reluctance on the part of the conservative parties (the Liberal and National parties).

The extreme religious right has a solid grip on the Liberal Party, which makes it very difficult t get Liberals to vote for VAD because they are afraid of not being pre-selected.

The other strong opposition comes form official doctors group, The Australian Medical Association, although when doctors are surveyed individually there is a slight majority in favour.

As outlined above, the palliative care profession is officially against it, though we get Emails from many palliative care nurses who are in favour, based on their close acquaintance with the pointy end of the dying process.

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

Jacka: Any amount to things to do: we particularly need people who are prepared to front politicians and demand that they hear the arguments. We need people who will help us to monitor and respond on our facebook page, we need people to letterbox, and come to demonstrations.

We need people with design and internet skills. All members of the current board (10 in all) do all the work on a voluntary basis.

We do not seem to have been successful in getting a permanent group of extra volunteers, but when the Bill was being debated in parliament in 2017 a large number of our members fronted up outside Parliament House wearing t-shirts and waving banners.

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

Jacka: I think in 10 years' time, maybe less, all of Australia will have VAD. There is a greater recognition of the problem that modern medicine can cure anything except frailty and the wonders of modern medicine are keeping people alive far beyond their desire to keep living and their capacity to lead a life that is meaningful to them.

Of course, even worse off than terminally ill people (at least they will die within a foreseeable time frame), are those with incurable degenerative diseases such as MS, MND, Parkinson's and severe stroke who may be forced to live for years in a situation where they have no dignity, no autonomy and little capacity to take pleasure from their life.

I personally would like to see VAD extended to these groups. I am not presently in favour of including those with mental illnesses or dementia, even though their suffering must be terrible. That is at present in the too-hard basket.

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

Ask Mubarak 1 – My Nigeria: Communal Organizing Amongst the More Difficult Circumstances

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 26, 2019

Mubarak Bala is the President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. We will be conducting this educational series to learn more about humanism and secularism within Nigeria. *Here we talk about humanism in Nigeria*.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Looking into the humanist community compared to the traditional fundamentalist religious community within Nigeria, what remain the greatest risks to them?

Mubarak Bala: The greatest threat to one's existence as (a closeted) Atheist/Humanist/Secularist, is exposure, without their contingency plan.

Many are still closeted, given they have jobs, homes, families and children whose bills and responsibilities lies on their shoulders, so all could collapse like a house of cards, should anyone suffer a leak, either by mistake or betrayal, sometimes by trusted persons once intimated about one's belief or unbelief.

There was one, whose girlfriend knew was, and showed acceptance to, (probably out of the desperation to get married and the hope he may revert back), but betrayed him, to his family after marriage and pregnancy.

He died in 2017 in what the family just said was a motorcycle accident. And as it is, we could not ascertain if it was really an accident as he was hurriedly buried according to Islamic rites, and hardly does any authority care to investigate accidents in this part of the world.

Our resources also, would not have allowed for us to further the investigation on our suspicions. As he was far, very far from the states in which we have better reach and connections.

It was sad.

Jacobsen: In addition, what was the central difficulty for individuals such as Dr. Leo Igwe, and yourself, in the maintenance of the humanist community in Nigeria, especially as the antipathy to the non-religious was, already, very high?

Bala: Firstly, we have scarce funding, from between ourselves, since we only muster from our earnings, and most of our members are still students, with no jobs nor financial independence. So organizing events, sponsorships and logistics are hard, but we still thrive, thanks to our well to do members who share more than the average fees we tax ourselves.

Secondly, there's that sense of suspicion, as members fear newcomers fearing their sincerity, finding comfort in the small community of friends we have scouted or risked to have received their contact, who mostly are genuine rationalists and thinkers looking for a community. The fear by members, who in all honesty is genuine, drags our, (already out) efforts to longer and slower cohesion.

There's also this nagging question between Humanists as to what or what should a humanist do or not do. Many think just by being atheist, they have 'conquered' and so, chose to be assholes to

others, bullying the religious (their person, and not the religions we normally bash), and also, bring rancor and disharmony within the community. Although it is expected in a pack of cats, where no one lords it over others, there still need to be sanity of attitude towards the fellow human, be it a theist or non-theist.

Jacobsen: For those facing less difficult circumstances in the foundation and maintenance, and growth, of a humanist community, any encouraging words for them?

Bala: We always advise that people be safe in their closets, until they could finish school and secure the already scarce jobs in the tight economy as ours, not just in Nigeria but throughout the region (West Africa), and the continent as well. The developed countries have better soft landings for atheists and the minority, not here.

I have gone through both thick and thin, and have first hand experience in how things could go from spark to boom. Mostly, shouting out loud is only a last resort if one's life is clearly in danger, that's when we have to come together and save who so ever has emergency, and we do this, more efficiently now, with our experience, locally and with good contacts with others beyond our borders.

The hope is that in future, we could be able with resources and better organization, be able to lobby and educate, or pressure the authorities to help or establish protection agencies or centers for vulnerable people from at risk situations, especially since it is their loved ones in these situations that harm or try to kill them, and bury any evidence or suspicion.

The safest place to be an atheist is no longer just in the mind only, it is on the internet, with an account that keeps your identity safe, while you keep good contact with like mind, in future when it is safer, one could then come out.

Already, we have marriages between members and issues therefrom, so there is hope, we no longer have to fear that no one would marry us. Many would, even as theists as they are, especially if their parents are not a hindrance. Some, are lucky to even meet their match online or within our safe spaces across the country and the country. There is hope and always good news these past years especially.

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

Interview with John Hont – Vice-President, Dying With Dignity Victoria

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 27, 2019

John Hont is the Vice-President of Dying With Dignity NSW. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

John Hont: Please see https://www.dwdv.org.au/about-us/meet-the-board.

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

Hont: As above.

Jacobsen: As the Vice-President of Dying With Dignity Victoria, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Hont: Support the president and the board. Provide leadership, along with the president, on future directions of the organisation.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more tragic as well as heartwarming stories coming out of the work of Dying With Dignity Victoria?

Hont: Please see https://www.dwdv.org.au/takeaction/personal-stories-2.

Jacobsen: In terms of the activism of the past through Dying With Dignity Victoria, what have been important legal and sociocultural victories?

What have been some honest failures? How can others and yourselves learn from the failure and improve upon the successes?

Hont: Great success in 2017, with the passing of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act (VAD) 2017.

Jacobsen: Moving into 2019, what seems like some of the more important targeted objectives of Dying With Dignity Victoria for 2019?

Hont: Continue our public education program on VAD and Advance Care Directives. Monitor the outcomes from the VAD Act.

Jacobsen: Who tends to be the main opposition to the values, principles, and aims of Dying With Dignity Victoria? Why them? How can their counter-efforts be combatted?

Hont: Australian Christian Lobby, Right to Life. Combatted with tireless campaigning and providing factual evidence.

Jacobsen: In terms of the ways in which there have been written works around the right to die, dying with dignity, accompanied suicide, euthanasia, medical assistance in dying, and so on, what are the important articles and books to become more richly informed on the subject matter?

Hont: Rodney Syme's *A Good Death*. Lots of articles and information on our website <u>dwdv.org.au</u>

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

Hont: People can join, donate, volunteer, or become a board member.

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

Hont: I hope I have provided the information you were seeking.

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

Hont: You are welcome, Scott.

Interview with Alton Narcissity Mungani – Co-Founder, Editor, & Curator, Zimbabwean Atheists

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 27, 2019

Alton Mungani is the Co-Founder, Editor, & Curator of Zimbabwean Atheists. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: In terms of your family background, what is it?

Alton Mungani: I was born in a small city in the middle of Zimbabwe called Gweru. The last in a family of four boys, I was the quiet, reclusive boy who stayed in his room and read a lot. I was quiet because my three older brothers were closer to each other, often had what I thought were abrasive personalities; and would often gang up to pick on me. So I decided that the best way to avoid that was to keep out of their way. My parents were middle class labourers, and for the first six years of my life, we lived in a high-density suburb. After my parents built a house in a middle-low density suburb, we moved; my brothers changing schools, and being six years old, I started my primary education at what was regarded an 'A' school in the city. For secondary and high school, my parents insisted on sending us all to boarding school, which we all did. My brothers eventually all left the country and are living and working outside Zimbabwe. My parents are now retired, and I still stay at home with them.

Jacobsen: What is the personal background? Your story leading into the present work as a Zimbabwean freethinker.

Mungani: From childhood, I was always a literary gourmand. I would pore over every book I could lay my hands on with a feral hunger. I did not care whether the book was 'for my age' or not, whether or not I actually understood what I was reading, but I read still. I exhausted the books at home, and I basically spent every free second in the school library. This hunger for knowledge was to be the foundation of my being a freethinker, way before I realized it. My family identified themselves as Adventists, even though we were never really the super-devout types. My father drank and smoked (still does), and since that is 'frowned upon' by Adventists, he was never too enthusiastic about church. The rest of the family would go to church here and there; and I had a stint where I was particularly religious. I was in the church choir, would participate in activities, and was generally a 'good Christian' (hic). But that was not my only religious exposure. I have an uncle who is of the Rastafarian religion that I grew up around. I would talk to him about almost everything, and he encouraged my inquisitive mind. He would give me more books to read, and we would discuss and debate what I would have read. Through him, I realised and appreciated religious diversity.

The ghosts of the books I read would haunt my every waking hour. A lot of the books were of the philosophical tilt, and my inquisitive mind began to question even further. My adventures in philanthropy began to buttress my love for humanity. I learnt and taught myself that human rights needed to be respected, regardless of race, sex, orientation, tribe, or social position. I got to realise that while offering service in one way or another, many organisations sometimes violate certain rights, be it intentional or otherwise. Being a freethinker got me to understand that religion, especially brand-name religions (as Rami Shapiro calls them), have a tendency to violate certain human rights, and the victims are none-the-wiser because the violation has been

clothed in such a way that they think the violation is to their benefit. I became a personal champion for enlightening people on their rights and how not to be victimized.

Jacobsen: What were some pivotal moments in life for you, in terms of atheism?

Mungani: As a liberal mind, the transition into atheism was not a momentous event, but a gradual realisation and awakening, combined with disillusionment. Living in a society that is predominantly Christian, many sceptics and freethinkers have stayed silent, in fear of discrimination and labelling. That said, I can say some of my pivotal moments are when the religious not only acknowledge, but even respect my atheism. A vivid example is when I attended a social gathering where the deliberations were usually preceded by a prayer. On that particular day, the moderator of the gathering mentioned that there was not going to be any praying involved. This, of course, was received with dissatisfied murmurs from the crowd. At the end of the event, the moderator walked up to me and explained that he had prevented the praying because I was in the room, and he did not want to offend me. That gave me a warm feeling, because where the religious can be so entitled as to want monopoly over offense; it was a confidence boost to know that there are people out there who respect humanity regardless of religious leanings or none at all.

Another pivotal moment with regards atheism, was when I wrote an article that was published in a national newspaper in 2017. The article was a treatise in support of a proposed new curriculum for primary and secondary education in Zimbabwe. The curriculum had secular leanings, advocating for the tolerance of the diversity of cultures in Zimbabwe, as well as advocating for a more science and technology-based approach to education; thus championing reason, objectivity and free enquiry in schools.

Jacobsen: What were some important books for you?

Mungani: The most important book that solidified my conviction as an atheist was *The God Delusion* by Professor Richard Dawkins. I received the book as a birthday present from my cousin; and I did not put it down until I finished reading it. After the first read, I studied it more, making reference to other books and the internet. I looked for and began reading his other books, namely *The Blind Watchmaker* and *The Selfish Gene*, which I still read here and there. Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* were other books of value to me. Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't mention Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great – How Religion Poisons Everything*. This book remains a personal favourite.

Jacobsen: Who have been pivotal mentors or figures in global and then African, even Zimbabwean, free thought for you?

Mungani: Secular activism worldwide has seen many champions over the years. From figures with a science-oriented tilt like Richard Dawkins, to comedians like Seth Rogen, I find inspiration from the small, seemingly insignificant acts, to the grandiose discoveries like stemcell research.

In Africa, I have been inspired by the works of Leo Igwe and my personal friends Takudzwa Mazwienduna and Gayleen Cornelius, who continue to champion free thought and humanism against numerous odds.

In Zimbabwe, the interactions through social media platforms like WhatsApp groups, I have grown to realize that my country is full of intelligent freethinkers, who are chock full of knowledge and innovative ideas.

Jacobsen: When you look at the landscape of the frauds and religious charlatans, and fundamentalists, in Zimbabwe, who are prototypical examples of it?

Mungani: The scourge of zealous Pentecostal Christianity in Zimbabwe has crippled the psyche of millions. Self-stylised 'prophets' captivate the minds, hearts and pockets of many Zimbabweans. Names like Prophet Walter Magaya of PHD Ministries and Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa of UFIC Church are the prototypes. They have made multi-million dollar businesses out of the pockets of none-the-wiser people. The frauds attributed to them are too numerous to mention. We would keep at this *ad infinitum*.

Jacobsen: What are ways to overcome magical thinking in Zimbabwe?

Mungani: More than anything, a strong re-education is required. The people of Zimbabwe need a crash course in disillusionment. They need shock therapy to shake off the Stockholm Syndrome they suffer from, in the name of western religion. The majority of the problems that riddle the country would dissipate if the people let go of their imaginary friends. Only then can we overcome magical thinking.

Often, it is not the laity or the followers, but, rather, the corrupt leaders who take advantage of the laity or the followers who endorse magical thinking and utilize this to take advantage of them. Of course, this can take religious or secular form with, sometimes, the worst forms of encouragement of us and them thinking with racism and other forms of bigotry and xenophobia. What are some effective means by which to empower the laity or the followers, or the general public, to be more skeptical of these corrupt leaders, religious or secular?

The laity needs to be taught that it is totally fine to ask questions. We have a tendency of putting leaders on a pedestal, thus somehow making them the absolute authority. It doesn't help that the leaders themselves claim 'divine endorsement', and catch the laity at their weakest. From an elemental point of view, the followers must deign to ask if indeed 'God' sent the Israelites to sack Jericho (since the Bible is where they get the majority of their justification); then move further to ask why this leaders claims that that leader and his followers are wrong, and why he thinks he's right.

Scepticism is borne of inquiry. If one can enquire of anything, then it's simply the next step to be sceptical of that thing you inquired of.

Most importantly though, the laity needs to learn to laugh at themselves. Laugh at yourselves when you ask questions. Laugh because you realise that you could have asked all along, but you didn't. Laugh because you realise that all along you've been living your life how someone else wants you to live. Someone who probably died hundreds of years ago and should have never been listened to in the first place. Laugh because now you can, where you couldn't before! Laugh because why not?

Jacobsen: Any recommended authors on atheism or freethinking in Africa?

Mungani: Atheism in Zimbabwe is still in its infancy. Due to the high levels of religiosity in the country, many freethinkers are 'in the closet' while they communicate on social media platforms, that's just about it. We are trying to instigate an awakening of sorts; where the more atheists and freethinkers come out, even more are encouraged to rear their heads. Social stigma and persecution has kept many potential bestsellers from being published, if only their writers had the freedom to put pen to paper. Many families are religious, and in some cases, if one family members reveals that they are atheist, that may lead to disdain, or in extreme cases, ostracizing

of said confessed atheist. That has, unfortunately, meant no published authors on freethinking in Zimbabwe.

Jacobsen: Who are some of the important figures in the history of freethought in Zimbabwe?

Mungani: Freethought in Zimbabwe has only recently seen the light, in a manner of speaking. As I mentioned above, we are only beginning to spread our wings. In our very brief and almost non-existent history, I make reference to the aforementioned Takudzwa Mazwienduna, who has written numerous articles on freethought on different online publications. Shingai Rukwata Ndoro is one other figure who has been very vocal on social media platforms, openly challenging politicians and religious leaders alike to toe the human rights line.

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

Interview with Bill Cooke – Past President and Trustee, New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 28, 2019

Bill Cooke is the Past President and a Trustee of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.). Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Bill Cooke: My background is unusual, I suppose. I was born in Kenya when it was a British colony. I am one year away from being second-generation Kenyan.

We left Kenya in 1965, two years after it became independent, unlike most English people my parents knew, who left soon after. We then moved to New Zealand, rather than return to England.

I grew to adulthood just at the time when the English became 'pommie bastards', in reaction to Britain joining the EU and hanging countries like New Zealand out to dry.

As to religion, my father's favourite comment sums my parents' views up. When asked if he was religious, he would answer, "Religious? Certainly not. We're Church of England."

I was brought up in a house crammed with books. That is a habit I have maintained, owning something around 4000 now.

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

Cooke: Neither of my parents had much formal education. The war intervened. But they both valued learning and education. I was the first in my family to go to university. I ended up three master's degrees and a PhD.

Jacobsen: As the Past President and Trustee of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.), what comes along with this experience, in perspective as a past president, and this new role, as a trustee?

Cooke: My mantra while active is that nobody is indispensable. The curse of voluntary organisations (especially if they have money) is people who come along, so some work, and presume themselves indispensable to the organisation's future.

The moment anyone gets anywhere near such a thought is the moment they should be sidelined. So, proper procedure and processes, while dull, is what is indispensable.

Jacobsen: What have perennial threats to the work and practice of the rationalistic and humanistic movements in New Zealand?

Cooke: New Zealand is such a secular country that remaining relevant is among the key challenges.

As well as maintaining a continuing critique of religious claims and pretensions, rationalist and humanist organisations really must offer up a contrasting vision of how life can be led successfully without recourse to the supernatural in any way.

Jacobsen: Who have been important allies in the activist work for the organization?

Cooke: In my view we should ally ourselves with liberal religious groups, who often share similar views about evangelical religion. I have in mind groups like Unitarians and the Sea of Faith.

Also, a range of single issue groups like voluntary euthanasia, penal reform are natural allies. I would like to see much more effort made to work with green organisations. The anti-science Gaia-inspired fluff many of them like to spout is a barrier to the progress that is needed.

Jacobsen: What have been substantial or, at least, noteworthy legal and sociocultural wins towards more equality and instantiation of rationalist and humanist values within the public sphere?

Cooke: Changing attitudes toward homosexuality, blasphemy and euthanasia. And there is something of a reduction in the casual prejudice against atheists.

Jacobsen: If you could mark one man and one woman who have been integral to the work of the international rationalist and humanist movements, who have they been? Why them?

Cooke: Paul Kurtz had many faults, but he put his money where his mouth is and made many serious contributions to humanism, both in the United States and around the world.

And Alice Roberts in Britain is doing excellent work in articulating a science-based humanist outlook to the general public.

Jacobsen: What are some other recommended organizations, books, and so on, with rationalist and humanist content?

Cooke: The Center for Inquiry in the US, the Rationalist Association in Britain and the Atheist Centre in India are the standout organisations in my opinion.

For books, the list is too long, but a core list would have to include Bertrand Russell's 'The faith of a rationalist' and 'Why I am not a Christian'. I enjoyed Andre Comte-Sponville's *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* and Robert Solomon's *Spirituality for the Skeptic*.

In other moods I got a lot from Alex Rosenberg's *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*. Floris van den Berg's *Philosophy for a Better World* does a fair job of lining atheism up with green priorities. I also got a lot from Tzvetan Todorov's *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*.

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

Cooke: Time and money are the two most important ways to contribute and there is no shortage of ways to employ those two resources.

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

Cooke: The movement is not, in my view, doing enough to articulate what a humanist life, free from the pretensions of supernaturalism, would look and feel like.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Cooke.	
Cooke: Happy to help.	

Ask Herb 6 – Activism Without Prayer: Mathematics and a Neutral Universe

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 28, 2019

Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition of America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. Here we talk about mathematical training, comprehension of the universe, and the effects on secular activism and personal worldview.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: In terms of the mathematical training for you, and as you have a high level of mathematical training and expertise connected to a lifetime of activism, how does the comprehension of the relations of numbers to one another and of numbers to physics and cosmology, and of physics and cosmology to the universe as an apparently neutral operator, influence secular activism and personal worldview?

Herb Silverman: As a youngster from an Orthodox Jewish background and an interest in mathematics, I was fascinated and puzzled by an infinite God with infinite power who lived in infinite space for an infinite amount of time. I felt that studying "infinity" would help me understand God. I became intrigued by Zeno's Paradox of the infinite, and here's one version of that: An arrow goes halfway to its target. It then goes another halfway, and repeats the process an infinite number of times. Therefore, it can never reach its target. But, of course, the arrow does reach its target.

Zeno was a philosopher, not a mathematician, living in an era before the concept of a limit (the basis of calculus) was discovered independently by Newton and Leibniz. They showed that infinite sums can converge to a finite limit. In Zeno's case, we can begin with one half, then add half of that (one fourth) and keep adding halves. This infinite series has the limit 1, which is the Zeno target.

I later learned that infinity is a theoretical construct created by humans, and that the number "infinity" does not exist in reality. Since the concept of infinity can help solve math problems, it seemed to me that an infinite God was created by humans to help solve human problems. Infinity, like gods, is not sensible (known through the senses). Mathematically there are many types of infinities, just as people believe in many gods. My mathematics students have sometimes falsely treated infinity as if it actually existed as a real number, and such misuse often got them into trouble. And so it is with many god believers who treat a so-called infinite deity as a real person.

Religious believers assume their god is real and infinite because a finite god would be limited. However, we can show mathematically that there can't be a largest infinity. In fact, there are <u>infinitely many infinities</u>. So, any infinite god could theoretically be replaced by a more powerful infinite god.

The nineteenth century mathematician Leopold Kronecker once said, "God created the integers, all else is the work of man." I interpret this statement to be more about the axiomatic approach than about numbers or theology. To build a system you have to start somewhere (Kronecker started with integers). Mathematicians usually begin with axioms that seem "self-evident"

because they are more likely to guide us to real-world truths, including scientific discoveries and accurate predictions of physical phenomena, though there may be doubt as to whether the axioms themselves are true. Most ancient religions are also loosely based on axioms. Their most common axiom is "God exists," which is not as self-evident as it appeared to be in a prescientific world. A "God axiom" might give comfort to some, but it lacks predictive value.

Mathematician are interested in conclusions that may be deduced from axioms, regardless of whether the axioms are actually true. Mathematicians, unlike most theologians, recognize that their axioms are just made up. So, a perfectly valid and logical proof may have nothing to do with reality. Part of the beauty of mathematics is seeing the strange and mysterious places that apparently simple and innocuous assumptions may lead.

Case in point: The Euclidean geometry taught in high school contains five reasonable axioms, like "all right angles are equal" and "there is exactly one straight line between two points." Euclid's fifth axiom, known as the "parallel axiom," says that for a point not on a straight line you can draw exactly one line parallel to the original line that passes through the point. By eliminating Euclid's fifth axiom, mathematicians developed systems known appropriately as non-Euclidean geometries.

Is this axiom changing merely a useless game? Even if it is, mathematicians can justify it on aesthetic grounds if the subsequent reasoning is deep, innovative, and creative. This particular story has a happy ending even for the most practical individual. Einstein developed his general theory of relativity by making use of the theoretical mathematics of non-Euclidean geometry, and applying it to what we now understand to be a non-Euclidean, four-dimensional universe consisting of three-dimensional space and one-dimensional time. Euclidean geometry, however, still works just fine here on planet Earth. ("Superstring theory" might eventually reconcile quantum mechanics with general relativity, though the theoretical mathematics behind it requires at least a ten-dimensional universe. Sounds impossible, but so did a four-dimensional universe in the days of Euclid.)

Some mathematical discoveries seemed so unusual at the time that they were assigned strange names like "irrational" number, a number that can't be expressed as the quotient of two integers. The square root of two is one of infinitely many irrational numbers. My mathematics research field, complex variables, might sound supernatural because it deals with what are called "imaginary" numbers. There may be no perfect God, but there are "perfect numbers," defined as numbers equal to the sum of their divisors. The first is 6 (1+2+3). The next perfect number is 28.

Whether intentionally or otherwise, many scientists may be viewed as secular activists because they have made obsolete many "God of the Gaps" arguments. We can accurately predict future eclipses, which are no longer attributed to God's wrath. With every natural scientific discovery, there's less reason to believe in the supernatural. The eighteenth-century French mathematician and astronomer, Laplace, did groundbreaking work on the stability of our solar system. When Emperor Napoleon asked him why he didn't mention a creator, Laplace said: "I had no need of that hypothesis." Perhaps a future Laplace will explain to a future Napoleon why our universe had no need of a God hypothesis.

Regardless of current disputes about infinity, I'm happy that we can freely discuss our views without meeting the same fate as Giordano Bruno in 1600. He taught that the universe was infinite with an infinite number of worlds like ours. At that time, it was considered heretical for finite man to discover the nature of the infinite, which was deemed clearly allied with the nature

of God. This brilliant mathematician and cosmo victims of the Inquisition.	ologist was burned at the stake, one of the	ne last
Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity an	d your time, Herb.	
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Interview with Peter Harrison – President, New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 29, 2019

Peter Harrison is the President of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.). Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Peter Harrison: Born in Auckland into a church going family I was introduced to Christianity at a young age. However, the influences of TV, especially Star Trek and the Spock character gave me a respect and love of science.

As I grew I also embraced the martial arts and some of the philosophies of Buddhism. While I attended Sunday School the stories were always understood as mythology rather than literal truth. I've never been a theist, but my family is mostly Christian.

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

Harrison: I reached six form certificate before joining the software industry in 1990. I have always had a passion for computing and artificial intelligence.

In 2002 I helped form the New Zealand Open Source Society and became it's first President. As part of this role I opposed software patents in New Zealand.

Thanks to the efforts of many people this campaign was a success. This experience educated me in running social campaigns and managing voluntary organisations.

Jacobsen: As the President of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.), what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Harrison: The responsibilities of President have primarily been organisational. From time to time I am called on to speak for the association, but to be honest this is not a position which carries much fame.

I have presented before select committees and Auckland Council in relation to submissions we have made. I have participated in several debates which can be found on our YouTube channel. Such duties usually rest with the President.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more important upcoming initiatives and programs of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.)?

Harrison: This year we hope that the legal case related to religion in state schools will be heard. This has been an ongoing campaign since 2012. The NZARH has committed significant resources to help this legal case proceed.

We are also supporting law changes such as the decriminalization of abortion and the End of Life Choice Bill that is before Parliament. We are also supporting the end of Blasphemous Libel law.

Later this year we expect Statistics New Zealand will release the latest number on religious affiliation from the last New Zealand Census. If the expected projections are correct Christians will no longer be the majority in New Zealand.

We have also been helping atheist refugees fleeing Islamic countries settle in New Zealand. This is an increasing problem and one which needs international attention.

Jacobsen: Why are rationalists and humanists, typically, treated in a different way than the religious in countries around the world, and often for the worse?

Harrison: Ask the easy questions why don't you. New Zealand is a pretty tolerant country. I think that here we don't really face overt day to day discrimination to nearly the extent people do in the rest of the world.

That said there are still discriminatory laws on the books that give religious organisations special rights that secular organisations don't have, while we continue to have discriminatory religious indoctrination in state schools.

In some countries atheism is a capital offense and those proclaiming it face execution. In countries we consider more enlightened and democratic such as the United States atheism is less respected and more hated than Islam despite many great people from the United States being atheists.

A full answer to this question is beyond the scope of a short interview.

Jacobsen: Who are prominent New Zealand writers and speakers on the subject matter of rationalism and humanism?

Harrison: I don't think we have a 'Christopher Hitchens' type character who is well known outside our community. Max Wallace and his wife Meg Wallace have written books about the Purple Economy, meaning the religious economy resulting from tax exemptions.

Robert Nola was a professor at Auckland University, now retired, who taught Philosophy and engaged with religious topics.

Bill Cooke, now residing in the UK, has written multiple books, the last one on the history of Humanism called 'A Wealth of insights'. I have spoken several times at various venues, including a number of engagements with Christian venues.

See some these videos for some videos from the above speakers.

https://www.youtube.com/user/NZARH

Jacobsen: If you could move the dial of equality for the rationalists and the humanists within the country more towards equality, how would you do it?

Harrison: The mission of the NZARH is not to fight exclusively for the interests of humanists and rationalists, rather it is to support our objects, which means the promotion of reason and evidence being a way to know about reality, and supporting the right to freedom of belief and speech for all. We support an open and tolerant society.

While we will certainly campaign to see inequality in the law towards atheists addressed we also stand beside minority religion in terms of their right to belief and free speech.

What we don't agree with is bigotry and hatred against groups based on ethnicity, gender or sexual preference. We don't agree with special rights and privileges for the religious or religious organisations.

Jacobsen: In terms of activism and advocacy, what have been real successes and honest failures of the rationalist and humanist movements within New Zealand? What can other organizations around the world learn from those successes, to build on them, and failures, to enact course corrections in case of heading in that direction?

Harrison: One of the lessons I discovered at the Open Source Society is that the President has no command authority. There is no army, no ranks, no ability to direct.

Furthermore, unlike religious organisations we hold free thinking as our primary value, and so our organisation is filled with people who have strong views differing from one another in many respects.

Individual agency and open discussion in the NZARH is the norm, and a collective orthodoxy does not exist. Religious organisations have an agreed orthodoxy which cannot be challenged which defines their community, within which there is security and support.

For these reasons sometimes getting everyone pointed in the same direction can be challenging.

But this weakness is also strength because people do not simply accept what they are told blindly. I'm proud that we have people who are capable of acting independently with integrity and honesty. One thing that runs high is our commitment and dedication.

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

Harrison: Becoming a member and contributing financially is always welcome. We use this money to run campaigns which aim for significant social or legal change.

Social networks have allowed us to reach more people, but it is still a challenge to convert social media support into more real world support. We have not been entirely unsuccessful with this but it is still a non trivial problem.

Many people are concerned about specific issues, and so their focus will be on what they are personally invested in. We are involved with several campaigns where people can help support directly.

What this means depends on the campaign. Some might involve writing to your MP, others might involve protests, others involve attending committees and councils.

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

Harrison: The importance of reason and evidence today cannot be overstated. We live in a world where the leaders of the most powerful country in the world denies the science behind the most serious existential risk we have seen to humanity behind nuclear war.

It is troubling to see the rise of science denial such as flat earth belief and the proliferation of beliefs which are manifestly in contradiction to what we know from the science.

We are in the end game now. What we do as a species over the next twenty to fifty years will potentially seal our fate as a civilization if not a species.

We have seen the degeneration of reasoned debate and the advent of a toxic political environment where people are being vilified, abused and threatened. If we don't get our house in order the price we pay will be our future.

At the end of the day my motivation for volunteering as the humble servant of the association was to do what little I could to turn the rudder, even if only a little.

Obviously there are many also trying, a personal hero of mine today despite his flaws is Elon Musk. He respects science and evidence. He understands the threat we face and has done more than any individual I know to turn the rudder. We need more like him.

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

Harrison: Thank you for taking the time to write.

Humanist Canada Essay Contest

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 29, 2019

Humanist Canada together with the Association humaniste du Québec will be hosting an essay through the Humanist Canada Essay Contest.

The essay contest will provide an opportunity for students at the high school and CEGEP level express thoughts on humanism in Canadian society.

It is intended for the advancement of humanist values in both the Anglophone and Francophone spheres of the nation.

Within this advancement is critical analysis and thought about the value and need of humanism in Canada now, there are no predefined topics, though.

In addition to the opportunity to freely express one's thoughts as a young person on humanism in Canada, there will be a total of \$8,000 in prize money.

The first place prize in each language will be \$1,000. Thus, this does qualify as a proper competition, where the deadline is May 15th, 2019.

"We are proud to give Canadian students a forum to express humanist themes given the on-going attack on science and reason we have observed in society," Dr. Lloyd Robertson, Vice-President of Humanist Canada, stated, "Humanist Canada and Association humaniste du Québec are proud to be the hosts of the HCEC. We look forward to receiving many submissions from inspired and interested high school students."

The full information for the essay contest can be found here: https://hc-contest.ca/en/.

Dr. Henry Morgentaler Memorial Scholarship

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 29, 2019

The Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics (OCAC) and Humanist Canada have established a partnership through the *Dr. Henry Morgentaler Memorial Scholarship*. The intent of the scholarship is to provide physicians help in the acquisition of the skills necessary to perform abortions.

Dr. Morgentaler (1923-1913) was a humanist physician, a pro-choice advocate, and the first president (1968 to 1999) of the Humanist Association of Canada (Humanist Canada).

His legacy in Canadian society is the provision of safe abortion services – seen as a fundamental human right, as stated by, for example, Human Rights Watch, Supreme Court of Canada-level legal challenges, the decriminalization of abortion in the country, and the courage in civil disobedience to risk jail-time.

Also, Morgentaler trained several physicians at his clinics. In honour of the legacy and efforts for the progress for or furtherance of reproductive rights in Canada, the *Dr. Henry Morgentaler Memorial Scholarship* will continue the work of Morgentaler for the next generations of abortion providers and services.

"This scholarship recognizes Dr. Morgentaler for his work and sacrifice in the fight for a woman's right to access safe, fully funded abortions on request," said Rosemary Warren, a member of the OCAC. "In keeping with Dr. Morgentaler's great interest in training, these funds will assist physicians to become abortion providers and help ensure Canadian women's right to choose."

The scholarship will be offered at \$1,000 (CAD) on an intermittent basis for physicians who will intend to become abortion services providers. These will be used for a training-to-competency within the techniques and skills necessary to offer the abortion services within Canada.

"Humanist Canada is excited to collaborate on this important scholarship with the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics to continue to protect women's reproductive rights in Canada as well as advance the humanist and human rights values Dr. Henry Morgentaler stood for, and stands as a testament to, in the national narrative of Canadian society," Scott Jacobsen, a Board Member of Humanist Canada, stated.

More information can be found here:

https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/dr-henry-morgentaler-memorial-scholarship-announced-821243261.html.

Ask Alton 1 – Zimbabwe: United in Freedom and Work

Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 29, 2019

Alton Mungani is the Co-Founder, Editor, & Curator of Zimbabwean Atheists. This educational series will explore non-belief in Zimbabwe. Here we talk about the dominance of Protestantism in Zimbabwe, decolonization, and the comical examples of religion gone awry.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is the dominance of Protestantism in politics and cultural life in Zimbabwe?

Alton Narcissity Mungani: Protestantism has hybridized and evolved into the very cause of strife in Zimbabwe. Percentage-wise, it would be difficult to pin down, but more than 70% of the Zimbabwean population is religious, and of that percentage, 60% are Protestant, and it is increasing. In the political sphere, politicians are at the forefront of claiming divine inspiration and monopolising their deity.

We find politicians spewing such rhetoric as "the voice of the people is the voice of god"; clearly disregarding that, among those very 'people' are a growing population who are disenfranchised by this obsession with religion. As Zimbabwe is a politically charged country, the message of any political leader will almost inextricably be the message of their followers.

Even within the current political zeitgeist in the country, the main opposition leader is even a 'pastor'. That does not build much confidence in the electorate, unless the electorate themselves are sheeple that are easily manipulated (and that is the case for the majority).

Culturally, Protestantism has sunk its metaphorical teeth deep into our culture. As it were, Zimbabwe was a cultural smorgasbord, before imperial religion was introduced.

There were numerous groups with just as numerous cultural beliefs and practices, yet still managed to coexist under the same African sun.

With colonialism came religion, specifically Christianity, which the many different groups were either forced, bribed or cajoled into adhering to. Such quotings as The Beatitudes served to alter the very culture of Zimbabweans.

Where they would say "blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of god" (or something to that general effect), they made the meaning literal to the Zimbabweans, and became the basis for their exploitation of resources.

That is just one example of how Protestantism disrupted the culture of Zimbabwe.

Jacobsen: What role will decolonization play in the dismantling of fundamentalist religion in Zimbabwe?

Mungani: The very basis of fundamentalist religion in Zimbabwe is rooted in colonization; where, as mentioned above, the Western imperialists introduced fundamentalist religion to us.

While there were already existent religious customs, beliefs and practices in Zimbabwe, these never escalated towards the fanatical, and were more of a personal understanding and recognition of one's environment and one's place in the whole "machine of the universe".

Every human being had a role to play, was a worthwhile cog in the wheel of nature. Colonization then introduced a "super"-natural aspect to all of this, discarding the pre-existing customs and condemning them as evil.

Even after Zimbabwe's independence from colonial rule, decolonisation was not yet a possibility. This was because, while Zimbabwe fought and won against colonial rule, the country started its journey as and independent country by following the model of the colonial power.

Our leaders would put on the airs of the British, dress like the British, dine like the British, and even build their parliament after the British. To this day, the bicameral parliament in Zimbabwe still holds a procession led by the Sergeant-at-Arms (dressed like the Black Rod of the British House of Commons), who holds a golden mace which has to be present before any debates may commence.

None of what I have described above resembles anything practised by any precolonial group, tribe or nation in the whole of Africa. While at that, the Speaker of Parliament will then commence the business of the day with a prayer to the Christian god. This in itself reeks of fundamentalist religion, which imposes upon people and demands no resistance.

Decolonization will, for one, restore the pride in ourselves as a free-standing people who do not need someone to come and tell us to throw away what we have always done in favour of the foreign.

It will also destroy the virus of fundamentalist religion, which is nothing short of divisive, imperialistic and capitalist.

Jacobsen: What are some comical examples of religious gone awry in Zimbabwe?

Mungani: Most recently, a self-styled 'prophet', Walter Magaya got into trouble with the law. This was because he claimed to have worked with some Indian scientists to formulate the cures for HIV/AIDS and Cancer.

The product was named "Aguma", and was introduced by Magaya to his congregants at one Sunday service, claiming to remove all traces of HIV or Cancer in a week.

Magaya had not consulted with the Medical regulatory authorities of the country; his 'miracle medicine' had never been tested for safety; basically, a lot of rules were flouted.

Now, for a person who leads thousands in his church countrywide, I personally think it was rather foolhardy of him to just go ahead and introduce dubious medication, especially in a country with rampant social media accessibility (ergo: word travels fast).

By the end of the next day, Magaya was under national scrutiny. It was found that his miracle drug was nothing more than "snake oil" and he was fined hard by the law.

While this was comical, it was also worrying, because there were some of Magaya's followers who actually stopped taking their prescribed medications, because of this 'miracle cure'...

Most recently, (as recent as this last weekend), I read a story of a group of people who tried to reenact the botched "resurrection" job by South Africa based Nigerian charismatic, Pastor Alph Lukau and his "Lazarus-esque" co-conspirator, Elliot. (The interwebs are brimming with this story.) Anyway, this last weekend, a child had passed away, and as the family and friends were getting ready to inter the body, a group of "apostolics" showed up, waxing poetic about a divine revelation that the dead child was, in fact, not dead. Attempts to "resurrect" the child were, of course, futile.

Again, while this was hilarious, it is also terrifying that there are people to this day who are spewing their vitriol that the apostolics were right. Except they weren't, were they? lol

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

Interview with Humanists of Linn County

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
March 13, 2019

Here we talk with the Humanists of Linn County.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: For the humanists in Linn County, why was the organization originally founded?

Humanists of Linn County: Although there were other secular social groups (i.e. atheist, agnostic), there wasn't a secular/non-religious community that was focused on doing positive good in our community and promoting the tenants of humanism.

Jacobsen: Who were integral to its formation in the first place?

Humanists of Linn County: There were several charter members. The key person that lifted the organization off the ground was Roxanne Gissler.

Jacobsen: How has the organization developed over time?

Humanists of Linn County: We formed a 501c3, developed by-laws, created a Meetup and Facebook page. We met every weekend at a local coffee shop where we provided members and guests with updates to our groups activities and also discussed religion, politics, etc.

Jacobsen: What are some of the more prominent and enjoyed social and communal activities of the Humanists of Linn County?

Humanists of Linn County: We enjoy the weekend coffees. We also host "Skeptics in the Pub" on a monthly basis which attracts a different demographic of people.

We also organize road-side cleanups and other volunteer activities throughout the year. We also completed our second celebration of Carl Sagan's birthday party at our local planetarium.

Jacobsen: What are the demographics of the Humanists of Linn County? Does this, in any way, affect the provisions of the organizations?

Humanists of Linn County: The demographics of our group skews older. Although we do have an affiliate group, Freethinking Families of Linn County, that has catered to families the last couple years.

That said, we are beginning to discuss ways to better accommodate families with children as this, I believe, is the key to the growth of our community.

Jacobsen: In terms of the important activism of the Linn County humanist community in the past and right into the present, what have they been?

Humanists of Linn County: We have participated in Reason on the Hill at our state capital where we have given a secular invocation at the opening of the House and Senate legislative sessions.

We have promoted humanism at various local venues as well as partnering with our local Inter-Religious Council on many social justice issues. We also do an annual Science in Schools fundraiser where we raise money for a local middle school science or math department.

This has caught the attention of local news organization and has given us positive publicity.

Jacobsen: What have been the real successes and honest failures?

Humanists of Linn County: Each year we host an Annual Symposium on a particular topic. Our last symposium was on Parenting Beyond Belief. We held it at our local nature center and found it to be well-attended and a real success.

As far as failures, we have had difficulty growing the organization due primarily to limited options for a meeting space and also making it somewhat difficult for potential members to get information about our group. That has been solved with the recent launch of our new website.

Jacobsen: How can others build on those successes and learn from those failures?

Humanists of Linn County: Recognize the importance of making it easy for people to connect with your organization and more importantly understand what humanism is and why they should care.

Jacobsen: How can other become involved in the organization with donations, volunteering, membership, or alliance building with their own organization based on common causes and concerns?

Humanists of Linn County: They can visit our website at <a href="https://hlen.ncb.nlm.

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

Humanists of Linn County: I think with a growing secular demographic in our country people our looking for a sense of purpose, a moral foundation, and feeling of community outside of organized religion. I believe secular humanism can provide all three.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time.

Ask Gretta (and Denise) 6 – Atheists and Humanists at the Pulpit: A Tale of Two Freethinkers

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 31, 2019

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

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

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

Our guest today, Rabbi Denise Handlarski, is the Rabbi of SecularSynagogue.com. Secular Synagogue is an online community for Jews. Handlarski is the Rabbi of the Oraynu Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Toronto, an Ordained Rabbi through the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, and a member of the Association of Humanistic Rabbis.

She is licenced to perform life cycle events including wedding ceremonies, funerals and memorials, baby namings, and Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. Handlarski focuses on "Tikkun Olam" or repairing the world, and the emphasis of ethical behaviour within Jewish culture.

Here we talk about atheists and humanists at the pulpit.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When we observe the freethought history of women, and if we take into account the predominance of men in the leadership and in the history texts, the tales of women freethinking, in and out of religious communities, can become either lost, downplayed – for a variety of reasons, or lost in the mosaic of the profiles of men.

Within The United Church of Canada and the Humanistic Judaism traditions, what set the stage for the freedom of women to lead, sermonize, and create communities of faith or non-faith – in the case of an atheist reverend and a humanist rabbi? How does this tradition lead right into the cases of the two of you?

Rabbi Denise Handlarski: The Humanistic Jewish movement has always been open to female leadership, with no obvious barriers to entering our seminary, being hired in our communities, etc. I would say that all major religions are still unlearning some of the patriarchy and paternalism on which they are founded. Our texts, our institutions, our broader communities where we live and practice, continue to need to work through some gender stereotyping and expectations.

Having said that, I believe there is no movement in Judaism more committed to equality and equity than Humanistic Judaism. We give tradition a vote and a voice, but our philosophy and ideology mandate that we choose justice over tradition every time. For that reason, we do not hold onto problematic texts, liturgies, songs, etc simply because of their traditional or nostalgic value. I'd also say that although some movements try to make the name of their god feminine, or

alternate masculine/feminine names/pronouns, the idea of God as Male is still quite dominant. Sometimes the English translation is changed, but the words being said in Hebrew continue to be words evoking and invoking a male God. I do think this filters into how Judaism is understood and experienced.

I came to Secular Humanistic Judaism as a teenager, feeling my feminism was in conflict with my Jewish community. I had witnessed so much sexism already, and it made me want to reject the religion and culture completely. It was when I found secular communities that were culturally Jewish that I found I could have my feminism and my Judaism too. There is no doubt that this was foundational on my path to be a rabbi.

Again, we continue to have problems. There is no doubt that sexism still lurks in Humanistic Jewish communities, as in all communities. I believe that some of the ways I've been spoken to and treated by congregants, members of the public, other rabbis, has to do with my sex and gender. Still, I'm aware that it was only a few generations ago that a woman wanting to become a rabbi would have no option available to her. I'm proud to be part of the movement that allowed women leaders in first, and has made it part of our expression of Judaism to pursue gender justice.

Rev. Gretta Vosper: There are so many in <u>The United Church of Canada (UCC)</u> who are ignorant of its history and who believe that dismissal or condemnation of a non-theistic or atheist minister is appropriate. It is not. In fact, based on our historical theological trajectory, non-theistic clergy should be the norm and atheistic clergy welcomed alongside them.

Until the 1960s, preachers in the UCC held very close to the traditional perspectives represented in the <u>UCC's 1925 statement of doctrine</u>, an archaic assertion of beliefs that were mostly undermined by contemporary, critical scholarship. Although most educated within UCC theological training institutes or colleges would have been made familiar with contemporary critical scholarship, upon stepping into their first pulpit, they often learned very quickly that their congregants were not. The great chasm which had always existed between the pulpit and the pew has remained in place, it would seem. The UCC, however, was about to let down the drawbridge and share their heretofore privileged knowledge with those outside the keep.

The bridge was lowered in 1964 with the publication of a radical new church school curriculum – aptly titled <u>"The New Curriculum"</u> – the product of over a decade of work led by the UCCs most celebrated scholars. From kindergarten to adult study classes, regular churchgoers, for the first time ever, were exposed to the findings of contemporary, critical scholarship. It was a new day for the UCC and its clergy excitedly shared contemporary critical scholarship with the people in their pews.

Whoops.

Over the first year of the curriculum, Sunday School registration dropped by close to one hundred thousand children. Adult membership peaked in 1965 and has diminished ever since. While the positioning of contemporary, critical scholarship within the grasp of the general public may not be the only factor that gutted church membership, it was certainly coincidental with that decline. But so, too, was the creation of a strong social safety net, the core of which is <u>Canada's universal health care system</u>. It is significant that in every social democracy, the strength of a social safety net is inversely proportional to religious belief and participation. The UCC might have educated its people beyond belief, virtually eliminating the need to stay in

church, but with the government of the day alleviating fears about health, welfare, and the future, it may be that the church didn't stand a chance. [1]

Beginning in 1982, a denominational team worked on one of the big questions raised by the New Curriculum: "Is the Bible really the world of God; is it authoritative for us?" They returned their work to the highest denominational council which quickly learned that, decades after the New Curriculum began teaching progressive scholarship, many members were unaware of its dramatic claims. Indeed, the curriculum saw less than a decade of publication. So the denominational council rejected the team's recommendations coming to a fretful compromise: it refused to state whether the Bible was the world of God or not. Four years after agreeing that ordained gay clergy could be in relationship while leading a congregation, no one wanted to rock the boat so seriously and so soon. Survival trumped truth.

And here is where a little bit of cynicism about the leadership of women in religion comes into play. On the critical edges of belief, power and prestige are scanty. Those whose identity is tied up in the pre-critical vestments of authority and knowledge have no interest in risking either. They stay cloaked until they retire and when they do leave the pulpit, if they don't get handed the collar of "Emeritus Minister", they rarely look back. Others simply leave leadership roles and participation before they retire, their inability to reconcile what they know with what they need to say they know.

But women, we who watched from outside the in group for so long, are eager to get in and see what we can do with the stuff religion provides. And it is great stuff. We arrive in the circle with little allegiance to many of the elements of leadership that have long been considered privileges or signs of power. And this is why women have the disposition, the strength, and the vision to be leaders on the permeable membrane the lies between religion and the secular. We are invested in the substance of religion — its place in the articulation of meaning, the central place it has occupied in our pursuit of well-being, connection, the luminous aspects of human relationship. We are not invested in the exclusive narratives and the exclusive language in which they have long been couched, much of which is tied to the privilege and power we have mocked and now eschew.

So here we are, two women committed to the truth, eagerly exploring the membrane between religion and the secular, and very likely making history along the way.

Gregory S. Paul, "The Evolution of Popular Religiosity and Secularism: How First World Statistics Reveal Why Religion Exists, Why It Has Been Popular, and Why the Most Successful Democracies Are the Most Secular." in *Atheism and Secularity, Vol 1, Issues, Concepts, and Definitions*, Phil Zuckerman, ed., Praeger: Oxford, 2010.

Interview with Robert Nola – Member and Honorary Associate of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.) (NZARH)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 31, 2019

Robert Nola is a Member and Honorary Associate of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.) (NZARH). Here we talk about his life, views, and work.

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

Professor Robert Nola: My father was a Dalmatian immigrant to New Zealand from Croatia in the late 1920s (but he was called 'Austrian'). There is a quite large community of Dalmatians in New Zealand.

Like most of them he was a Catholic but religion sat rather lightly on him. This background was an important influence in my youth. My mother was New Zealand born but of Portuguese, Welsh and Scottish background; however, none of this was a strong cultural influence.

Not being a Catholic she had to become one when marrying my father – in the long run she never really did. Instead she struck out on her own path to religion becoming a spiritualist later in life. So there was not, as whole, a unified commitment to any particular religion in my family.

Since there was a state school directly opposite where we lived I went to that instead of a more distant catholic school. So luckily I escaped a catholic school education.

But I did attend the central cathedral mass for Dalmatians at 10 o'clock on Sundays. For my father, that was more of a social get-together for Dalmatians than a religious happening.

Being before Vatican II, the Mass was in both Latin and Croatian – something which was rather a marvel for a boy growing up in New Zealand in the 1940s and 1950s.

In so far as I have a religious background, it was Catholic rather than anything else. I remember asking a priest 'What is a protestant?" In an Irish accent which still rings in my ears but which I cannot imitate he replied "Robert, all Protestants are going to hell!'.

That became a longstanding religious belief of mine and one of the last I abandoned (well, I still believe it a bit!). It has always seemed to me that the Catholics had a more well worked out worldview than Protestants.

But to an atheist, both are equally mad. The encounter with the priest was my first exposure to the sectarianism which has blighted religion.

When young I was most impressed by the Eucharist in which the body and the blood of Christ were up there on the altar – and then presented to us. I thought that was as close as we could get to God.

But later I came to believe that all this was rubbish, such was the influence on me of a central doctrine of Catholic Christianity. This is a good example of how a ludicrous religious dogma can be built up out of supposed events in the life of (a supposed) Christ.

Later I discovered in the local Library Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian*. From that point on I never looked back. At last I had some good reasons for rejecting religion and being an atheist.

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

Nola: In many ways reading Russell was influential. I went to university and studied mathematics and philosophy. I earned a PhD in philosophy at the Australian National University and then returned to an academic position at my old university in Auckland.

I recently retired as a full professor after teaching for 47 years. My area of research was philosophy of science (with dollops of metaphysics and epistemology).

For a long time, I did not care about religion, but I did cover many topics which had a bearing on it both positively and negatively. For example, I taught a course in Philosophy of Atheism.

Jacobsen: As a Member and Honorary Association of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.) (NZARH) how did you earn the latter position? What tasks and responsibilities come with the latter position?

Nola: Though initially I did not take a very active role in the NZARH, I did attend meetings over the years and gave talks in Rationalist House, a building which is close to the University and is owned by NZARH as its headquarters.

I suppose for those reasons I was made an Honorary Associate. This is a means of giving the Association a more public profile by drawing on public figures.

Much more prominent are Associates such as Richard Dawkins along with two previous Auckland mayors who had been public atheists. Luckily no special tasks befall an Honorary Associate – apart from trying to publicly represent the causes of atheism, rationalism and humanism.

Once elected I thought I should try to fulfil this role given the higher public profile Christianity had achieved even though it is in decline – and other religions as well.

Social and political issues surrounding blasphemy, apostasy, euthanasia, abortion, religious education in schools and issues surrounding religious refugees and the like are still with us – not to mention the doctrinal absurdities of all religions.

Jacobsen: What is the perspective of the membership about the overall operations of the association?

Nola: There is no one perspective. Members have come to NZARH as atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, humanists, and the like. Some are also renegades from religion.

So there is a plurality of perspectives; but there can be unity of purpose. There is an annual AGM which elects a Council which meets once a month. If there is an issue here, it is how the Council communicates back to the membership NZARH and its various branches.

But in general the Council has been able form policies which the general membership of NZARH endorses.

For example, there is the national organisation SEN, Secular Education Network, which was formed to advocate the repeal of NZ laws concerning religious instruction and observance in schools.

Yes, this is still part of NZ law governing primary school education. SEN has been strongly supported by NZARH in funding its case before the courts (still ongoing).

Importantly the NZARH publishes quarterly a 24-page journal called *The Open Society* (now in its 92nd volume). It is run by an editorial committee. It generally contains a number of articles on a wide range of issues.

Recently there has been an attempt to increase the Maori perspective on religion hoping to show that there are such people as Maori atheists who are not part of the great wash of supposed Maori spiritualism and Christianity!

Jacobsen: In terms of those functions and social and communal activities of the association, what are important ones for community building amongst and between the various rationalist and humanist communities in New Zealand?

Nola: The NZARH is centred in Auckland and has at least 5 branches in the North Island. There is also the NZ Humanist Society (NZH) centred in Wellington with its branches. And there are various Sceptics societies.

In 2018 NZARH and NZH pooled resources to host the International Humanists Conference in NZ during August. This was successful and shows how the various organisations in NZ can come together for a united purpose despite their separate identities.

Jacobsen: How can the association replicate other associations' or organizations' activities to better build community solidarity and increase membership, to increase both the numbers in the community and the strength of the existing one?

Nola: This is a difficult question for which I do not have a complete answer. But some background. Recent censuses have showed a decrease in belief in religion, especially Christianity, with the growth of non-believers.

In the 2013 census, 48.9% of NZers claimed some Christian affiliation. However, of European NZers 46.9% said they had no religion; and surprisingly 46.3% Maori said they had no religion.

We are awaiting the result of a 2018 census hoping it will show that the percentage of non-believers has surpassed the percentage of Christian believers.

But a 2018 report, *Faith and Belief in NZ*, prepared by religious organisations has already shown this. They say that more than half of NZers (55%) do not identify with any main religion.

One in five have spiritual beliefs (20%) whilst more than one in three (35%) do not identify with any religion or spiritual belief. A third of NZers (33%) identify with Christianity (either Protestant or Catholic), whilst another 6% identify with other major religions.

These results show that New Zealand is a largely secular nation and increasingly so. This is under-recognised.

Now the interview question concerns increasing membership. Can we say that with the decline in religious belief and growing secularization in NZ there has been a corresponding increase in membership of NZARH?

Though I do not have exact figures the answer to this would appear to be 'No"! This is an issue for NZARH to address.

Jacobsen: What are the main reasons for members leaving the community if, indeed, they do leave it?

Nola: They get too old to attend or pay subscriptions, or unfortunately die. Some find us no longer 'relevant', as they say. NZARH keeps track of the membership but there are no details of which I am aware concerning overall variation in membership and the reasons for that.

Jacobsen: For those who are questioning their faith and leaning more towards scientific skepticism as a way of thinking and humanism as a life stance, what would you recommend for them in terms of coming into the rationalist and humanist community and safely leaving the, usually, fundamentalist religious ones?

Nola: I would say that they should engage with the best of atheist and humanist literature. In its building NZARH has a magnificent library. But it is unfortunately underused.

It could become a centre for an appropriately organised instruction in atheism, humanism, rationalism, and the like. We should work on establishing such reading and research groups.

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

Nola: At the moment, most of what members do is voluntary. This includes being a member of the Council or a member of the editorial board for the journal, writing for the journal, etc.

I cannot see how this could change. Though we have a membership of over 400 people, only a few at any one time are active. So if anyone shows an interest in an issue they are immediately snapped up to do a job of work for NZARH.

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

Nola: Most of the questions concern organisational matters. And that can be appropriate. But not addressed are issues to do with the kind of doctrines an anti-religious group should support.

In the name 'NZARH' the 'R' stands for rationalism and the 'H' stands for humanism. First, a concerted effort ought to be made in addressing what R and H stand for. This is not well-understood and lip-service is often paid to rationalism and humanism.

It is not enough to simply repeat the phrase "evidence based belief" as an account of rationalism. Second, in the academic world there has developed over the last quarter century a number of investigations into religion from the point of the theory of evolution and cognitive psychology.

These offer the best approach to understanding why humans have developed religious beliefs. But they need to be separated from the academic contexts in which they have been developed and made more accessible to a general audience.

Third, there is a perennial dispute over the credentials of religion versus science. Science is generally under attack around the world and that is not acceptable.

A good book on this conflict is Jerry Coyne's *Faith versus Fact*; there are many themes in this worth studying and developing. So there is work to be done not only on the organisational and political fronts but also the intellectual front as well.

Jacobsen:	Thank you for	the opportunity an	d your time, Professor Nola.
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Nola: Thank you for the questions and I hope that this initial encounter will lead to more exchanges between Canadian and New Zealand atheists.

For example, Canada is a leader in changes to its euthanasia laws while NZ is still mired in parliamentary reviews and debates in which the Courts can play no role.

Interview with Ngaire McCarthy – Past President and Trustee, New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen April 1, 2019

Ngaire McCarthy is the Past President and a Trustee of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.). Here we talk about her life, views, and work.

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

Ngaire McCarthy: I am Māori: Born 1942 in Auckland. My Iwi are Ngapuhi, Ngati Tamatera, Ngati Hako. I have six siblings; my father was an atheist my mother was a sceptical religionist.

Although I was not introduced to religion I observed it at school and at functions, I was astute enough to notice that Christians saw us Māori as sinners that needed to be converted to their god. I resented them and their hypocrisy. My eldest brother introduced me to science fiction, from those books grew a curiosity about science, astronomy and the complexity of the world around me.

I read my father's books on Socrates and Plato, so my education started at home. I was brought up with a social conscience and a healthy disrespect for authority.

My mother taught us about our tikanga our Māori culture, the first thing I noticed was the place of women in the pakeha world, before colonisation Māori women were equal to their men, Christianity tried to change that, happy to say that they did not succeed, we Māori women worked hard to retain our place in our own society while pakeha women were suppressed and had no rights.

I joined the Women's Liberation movement to help my pakeha sisters fight for equality and respect. As far as creation stories go I prefer the stories of my Māori ancestors, we have about 95 gods and goddesses, they were adventurous, magic and funny, and they only warred among themselves.

In my teens I became involved in the fight for the rights of my people which led me deeper into the history of the part that religion played in the oppression and suppression of Māori.

I became interested in the NZ anti nuclear disarmament organisation and discovered Bertrand Russell, that was the beginning, the foundation of my thinking that led me to grow an insatiable thirst for knowledge and justice.

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

McCarthy: I was formally educated until 5th form college, I left school to join the workforce which was quite normal for large families at that time for both Māori and Pakeha; however, I left school as an A student, with my eyes wide open. My favourite place to be was the Auckland Public library and when I could I slipped into any free lectures of interest that were on at the University.

My main education took place at the University of hard knocks, as I learned to navigate around racist gate keepers who were there to make sure that as a Māori you could never advance up the ladder in the workforce, or rent an apartment, or get the same wage as Pakeha.

I found the "NZ Rationalist Ass" when I saw them on a march in Auckland, complete with banner in support of Māori rights.

Jacobsen: As the Past President and Trustee of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.), why was the association founded in the first place?

McCarthy: In 1923 word arrived in Auckland that Joseph McCabe was to visit NZ the author of 65 books at the time he was renowned for his books on the history of papacy, spiritualism and evolution.

His imminent arrival in Auckland was the catalyst that prepared the way for the formation of the Auckland Rationalist Association.

Dr. Bill Cooke has written the full history of the NZARH. "Heathen in God zone"

Jacobsen: What were some of the early bumps and achievements along the way to success for the organization into its current level of development and growth?

McCarthy: In the early days the Association concentrated on religion and the way it had infiltrated into our law and public schools. They laid the foundation for our aims and objectives, all of this had to take a back seat when the second world war started, the Association was upfront in its condemnation of fascism.

The NZARH is self-funded and relying on the generosity of its members was not enough, leadership issues and lack of money was an ongoing problem.

In 1927 the Ass' began its own journal called "The Truth Seeker" an ambitious undertaking for so few people, but it proved successful, over the years it has had a number of name changes, today it is called "the Open Society "The journal is now in its 91st year of continuous production financed solely by the Association and is one of the unsung triumphs of NZ publishing history.

Jacobsen: Who have been, typically, opposed to the work and advocacy of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists (Inc.)?

What are effective means by which to build bridges rather than burn them, and to correct misrepresentations, if deliberate, or misinformation, if accidental about rationalists and humanists?

McCarthy: Naturally the largest group of people who are opposed to our work are religionists and those who are opposed to a separation of church and state.

Over the years I have watched the attitude toward our organisation change as decades of our Associations work in the field of lectures, journals, education on atheism, lectures and conferences have finally come home to roost.

We own a magnificent freehold historic building in Symonds street opposite the Auckland University, purchased by past members in 1960 which houses the largest collection of free thought literature in Australasia, we build bridges through education which is the only effective way to combat misinformation and misrepresentation.

Jacobsen: What is the specific flavor of New Zealand rationalism and humanism?

McCarthy: Tolerance, justice, a fair go for all citizens, the right to food, shelter and above all a society that is humane and without superstition.

Jacobsen: Who are respected authors and speakers for the broader audience of the rationalist and humanist community? Those who would even, and in fact do, appeal to the wider masses of the public who simply reject non-religion and scientific skepticism *a priori*.

McCarthy: We have excellent speakers and authors within our membership ranks, we have branches throughout NZ, members in the UK, and Australia, we lack any super star speakers, however as a team our authors and our speakers command respect where ever they go.

Jacobsen: What is the one big thing missing from the community of humanists and rationalist around the world?

How can we work, as a global community, to build this more, not for superiority in any way but, rather, for equality with those who wish to follow a path of church-life and religious scripture?

McCarthy: Over the last decade, globally Rationalists, Humanists, Sceptics, Atheists and all free thinkers have been drawing closer together. We are exchanging ideas and attending each other's conferences we are building a strong community of freethinkers all over the world.

The only way forward for global free thought freedom, is for our organisations to collectively concentrate on a secular education for all public schools.

To attain "Freedom of religion and freedom from religion" should be the driving force of all free thought organisations, it is time to concentrate on removing special privileges from all religions in secular countries, it is time to declare secular countries as the only healthy way forward for a healthy open society.

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

McCarthy: Every organisation in the world is asking these questions.

We now reach out to young atheist humanists through our website, the young do not join associations. Our membership fluctuates between 3 to 400 paid membership.

Our reach through social media is 2,000 and climbing. We have a face book page which is very busy. Everyone is time poor, but when something needs to be done our members are there to help.

Our building brings in huge rent, our building "Rationalist House" is an Auckland icon and gives us a well known profile. Our journal and our website carry application forms to join our association.

We are active in the community of NZ through our Celebrants, who do secular weddings and funerals, we are asked to contribute to social government policy making and we debate religionists, we have been around long enough to avoid debating with militant religionists and pseudo scientists.

Social media has been a game changer for all news media, clubs and organisations, we embraced the change.

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

McCarthy: The NZARH has had a different road to travel than other free thought organisations, the biggest hurdle has been educating the public, NZs and Māori, about the place of Māori in a secular world.

Our treaty of Waitangi is the founding document of our nation and as such we are partners with our government. Our Treaty is entrenched in law and protected; however, the churches and religious journalists who are against secularism use scare tactics and fake news to spread negative lies about us losing the Treaty if NZ becomes secular.

So far we are succeeding, as Māori leave religion faster than NZs. We noted that in our last census 2013, (latest census figures yet to be released) that religion was on the rise in Auckland our biggest city, which goes against statistical trend.

On further investigation we found that Auckland has the biggest intake of global refugees in the country and they are all religious. So for me it is obvious that the next big challenge for free thinkers is to work toward a secular state where separation of church and state is entrenched in law.

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

McCarthy: Nga mihi.

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