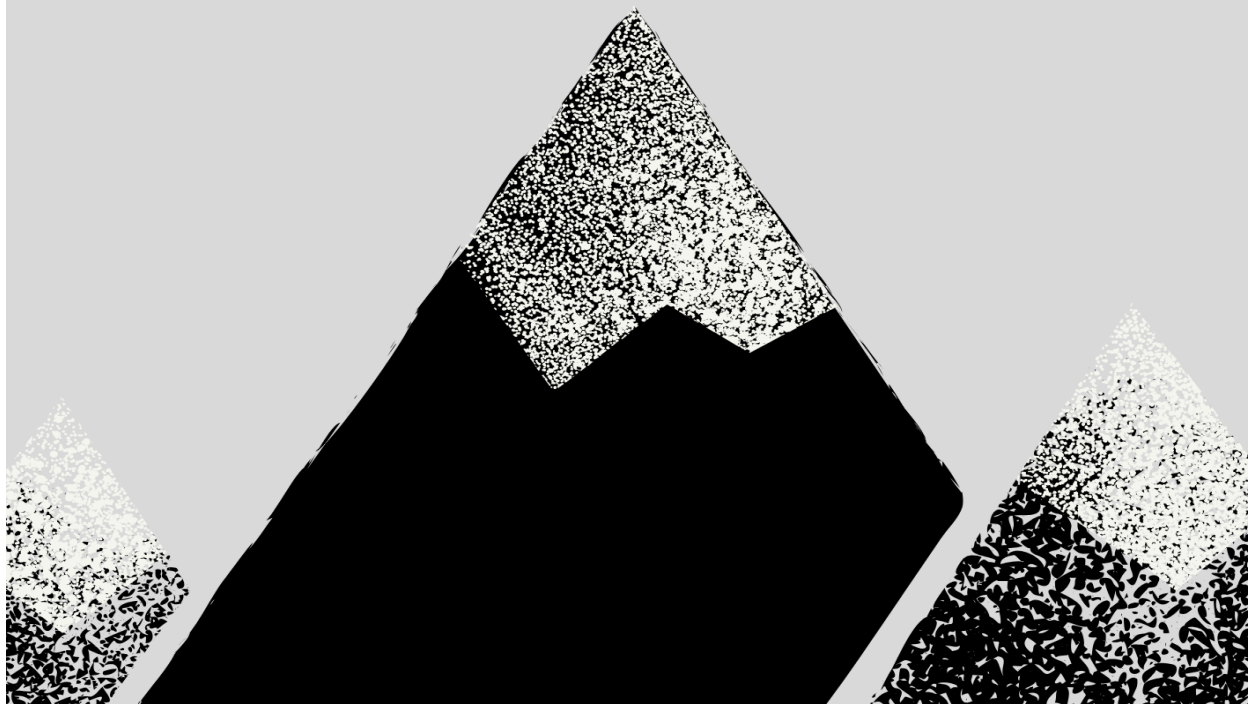


CANADIAN ATHEIST:
SET XV

Scott Douglas Jacobsen



In-Sight Publishing

Canadian Atheist: Set XV

IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

Publisher since 2014

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

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This first edition published in 2020

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Independent Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

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

Names: Jacobsen, Scott Douglas, author

Title: Canadian Atheist: Set XV / Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Identifiers: None (epub).

Subjects: | BISAC: PHILOSOPHY / General (PHI000000)

Classification: LCC (None) | DDC (None)

p. cm.

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

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Designed and implemented by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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Acknowledgements

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

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Scott

Canadian Atheist

Updates on Raif Badawi with Ensaf Haidar

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Melissa Krawczyk

April 28, 2019

The Arabic script is at the bottom.

A prominent case of a writer shunted into jail within the freethought community, especially writers, is Raif Badawi.

Badawi is a writer and dissident in Saudi Arabia, who is 35-years-old. He founded the website entitled Free Saudi Liberals. As a blogger, Badawi was charged with insulting Islam through electronic channels.

In January of this year, he was flogged 50 times. This took 5 minutes. The lashes were described as “constant and quick.” This was done in public.

Badawi, as per the charge interpreted in a secular human rights context, is a prisoner of conscience for the use of the Article 19 right, via the UN, in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* to freedom of expression.

As with many of these cases of prisoners of conscience, or even those tortured, they do not exist in a vacuum. Badawi has a wife and children. His wife, Ensaf Haidar, lives in Canada and is a prominent, in a Canadian context, human rights voice based on the case of her imprisoned husband.

She took some time to talk to me. I am grateful for the opportunity. It should be noted: Haidar is a Canadian citizen who came from a conservative family in Saudi Arabia.

As a younger person, she had to memorize the Quran in studies. Then, as a college student, Haidar specialized in Islamic Studies, which makes her voice uniquely situated to speak on some of the issues of some Saudi interpretations of Islam with authority.

She described the situation, as follows, “My name is Ensaf Haidar, wife of prisoner of conscience Raif Badawi, imprisoned in Saudi Arabia, mother of three children, and a Canadian citizen living in the Canadian province of Quebec.”

Haidar, noting Badawi is 35 now, has been waiting and hoping for the release of her husband for 7 years now. Badawi’s case is important for a number of reasons. One is the fact of the impact on other writers or bloggers.

That is, it creates a climate of fear, where the Saudi prisons are, in fact, “full of writers.”

On Canadian leadership’s assistance to persecuted writers, Haidar stated, “I think that the politicians in Canada are doing a wonderful job. Canada has always been strong and open about defending human rights, not only in Saudi Arabia, but all over the world.”

I asked about the theocratic fear of writers with the implicit assumption of the full use of the right to freedom of expression mentioned before.

Haidar was reminded, by the questions, about the famous Saudi writer Abdullah al-Qasemi. Abdullah said the worst trait of the religious is the toleration of the corrupt but not the intellectuals.

On the distance in space and time from the man she loves, Haidar said, “There are no words in the world that can possibly describe my feelings about Raif and what is happening to him.”

On the actionables for the rights of dissidents and writers around the world, Haidar said speaking loudly and having the conversation wherever possible is important, in addition to placing pressure on politicians to embrace human rights issues.

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

Ensaf Haidar: أنا امرأة كنت سعودية قبل أن أصبح مواطنة كندية، ولدت لأسرة محافظة في السعودية.

Jacobsen: What is your personal background?

Haidar: أنا اسمي انصاف حيدر، زوجة معتقل الرأي رائف بدوي المسجون في السعودية، أم لثلاثة أبناء، مواطنة كندية. أحيش في مقاطعة كيبيك الكندية.

Jacobsen: How did these influence development?

Haidar: بالتأكيد لدراساتي في مدرسة لتحفيظ القرآن تأثير كبير، حتى على تخصصي الدراسي في الكلية، لقد كان دراسات إسلامية.

Jacobsen: For those who may not know, who is Raif Badawi?

Haidar: <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/what-did-raif-badawi-write-to-get-saudi-arabia-so-amery>.

How long has he been imprisoned now?

Haidar: It's around 7 years now.

Jacobsen: How are other writers affected?

Haidar: ثلاثين الكل خائف والسجون مليئة بالكتاب.

Jacobsen: How is Canada's leadership helping persecuted writers in some ways and not in others?

Haidar: أنا اعتقد بأن السياسيين في كندا يقومون بعمل رائع، وقد كانت كندا دائما وبكل قوة وصراحة إلى جانب الدفاع عن حقوق الإنسان ليس فقط في العربيه السعوديه ولكن في كل العالم.

Jacobsen: Why do theocracies fear writers?

Haidar: سؤالك هذا ذكرني بمقولة شهيرة لمفكر سعودي ملحد يدعي عبدالله القصيمي، والتي يقول فيها، إن أسوأ ما في المتدينين أنهم يتسامحون مع الفاسدين ولايتسامحون مع المفكرين. إن القلم في العالم العربي والإسلامي أقوى من الرصاص.

Jacobsen: How are you feeling given the distance of the man you love?

Haidar: لا توجد كلمات في العالم من الممكن أن تصف شعوري تجاه رائف وما يحدث له.

Jacobsen: What else can be done to save the lives and protect the rights of writers and dissidents around the world?

Haidar: رفع الصوت عاليا. الحديث في كل مكان ومناسبة، حب السياسيين على تبني قضايا حقوق الإنسان.

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

Ask Rob 2 – Freethought Can Be Free

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

April 29, 2019

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What costs in history have come with freethought in print?

Rob Boston: In the 19th century and into the 20th, publishers of freethought periodicals and books ran considerable risks. Some states were still prosecuting people for blasphemy then. In addition, the U.S. postal service often refused to handle freethought material. There was also a social cost. Freethought was uncommon at this time and was often equated with immorality. I'm sure a lot of people whom we would consider freethinkers today had to stay in the closet.

Jacobsen: How have the costs diminished in some contexts and increased in others?

Boston: Freethought publications are widely available now, and the internet has made it possible for people all over the world to access them, so that's a very positive change. But there can still be social costs for coming out as a non-theist. A lot depends on where you live. In some parts of the United States, mainly large urban areas in more progressive regions, you can be an out freethinker without much difficulty and freely read freethought publications. But I know people who live in small towns and rural areas in the Bible Belt who continue to experience problems. Some are afraid to have these magazines even come in the mail. There is a lot of social pressure in these areas to go to church, and there's bias against atheists, agnostics or humanists. It can be difficult for these people to find work or make friends and social connections; being perceived as the "village atheist" does not help.

Jacobsen: What publications have been leading the charge in the work to advance freethought?

Boston: There are many good publications in the world of freethought, but *The Humanist* and *Free Inquiry* are, in my opinion, two of the most important magazines published in this area. Each publication has its own style and way of presenting information, but I believe anyone who considers himself/herself a freethinker will find these publications to be interesting and thought-provoking. I've written for both magazines so maybe I'm biased, but I think both are doing a great job explaining the tenets of humanism. I just wish they were more widely read.

Jacobsen: Who has been less acknowledged, but deserves more credit, for their contribution to the early 21st-century work and world of intellectual freethought?

Boston: I think Susan Jacoby deserves more credit than she gets. Susan has written some really great books. In *Freethinkers*, she examines the history of freethought in America and explains its intellectual lineage. Freethinkers who read this book will better understand the proud intellectual tradition of American freethought. She also shines a light on some figures that have been forgotten. Susan's biography of Robert Ingersoll is top notch, and *Strange Gods* is also well worth a look. What I like about Susan's work is that it's firmly grounded intellectually but also very approachable. That's a rare combination these days.

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

Interview with Peggy Loonan – Founder & Director, Life and Liberty for Women

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

April 30, 2019

Peggy Loonan is the Founder and Director of Life and Liberty for Women. Here we talk about her life, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you develop into an activist for the liberty of women, the autonomy of women?

Peggy Loonan: I think my desire to make legal abortion my focus grew out of an abusive relationship I experienced in my early 20's. I managed to escape the relationship but took with me a determination that I would never again allow myself to be, in any way, shape, or form manipulated and controlled by a man. The me before this man had been somewhat of a rebel. That rebel arose to eradicate myself from the relationship and became the guiding factor in how I moved forward.

The renewed rebel in me became overwhelmingly incensed at the nomination of Robert Bork, a strict constructionist and opposed to Roe vs. Wade. I had never before been political but I was angry that an old white man would sit on the Supreme Court and decide whether women had a right to decide if and when they would become a mother exerting that male control over women and women's bodies.

I began to write letters on an old typewriter – this was before personal computers – to Senators and my supportive husband and 3-year-old daughter attended a Pro-Choice rally in D.C. I felt empowered and accomplished that my part – though a small part – helped to stop Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court.

Abortion became a symbol to me for the ultimate autonomy of women to direct their own lives.

Jacobsen: What tasks and responsibilities come with founding a 501(c)(3) organization? What tasks and responsibilities come with being its Executive Director?

Loonan: I began Life and Liberty for Women in 1999. I had been on the Board of Directors of CO NARAL for four years. I had become disheartened and frustrated with the safe message box they and other mainstream abortion rights groups were stuck in.... and in my opinion...are still stuck in.

It was a daunting process to collect the necessary paperwork to submit for founding a 501(c)(3). It took a few months.

The most important responsibility for founding a c-3 and being its Executive Director is what are our goals, methods and most importantly our message. I didn't start LLW to be just another pro-choice organization. I had a more direct, in-your-face, fight fire with fire message. I dared to talk about God, Bible, and abortion. I dared to debate anti-abortion people because I was sure and clear of my message. I felt the message had to show many new generations aware of what illegal abortion looked like in this nation. I dared to put side-by-side with anti-abortion 18ft high pictures of alleged aborted fetuses' graphic pictures of what illegal abortion looks like. I dared to challenge anti-abortion GROUPS to state the legal conclusion that is obvious to their decade's old mantra

that “abortion IS murder,” which now they finally are doing. That consequence: criminalizing abortion again means making criminals out of women and teens; subjects them to life in prison or the death penalty. There is no way out of that mantra.

Jacobsen: As an abortion rights educational group, what myths exist around abortion? What truths dispel them?

Loonan: The biggest myth spun is that women wait until they are about to deliver to decide that they just don’t want to become a mother and seeks an abortion in the 9th month of pregnancy. Out of that myth has come dangerous legislation to curtail and stop necessary and life saving third trimester abortions. Statistics bear out in neon that the myth is an outright lie. The anecdotal information out there belies that myth. And from the outset, the mainstream abortion rights groups response to this myth, was never adequate and as a result, in my opinion, the myth became so out of control so uncontainable as to unleash legislation across the country.

Jacobsen: What aspects of public information about abortion are misunderstandings? What parts are misrepresentations? What components are deliberate and cynical lies for political, financial, or religious gain?

Loonan: First, there are, of course, right leaning media outlets, TV and print, that as a matter of practice distorts, lie, and omit to push their anti-abortion anti-contraceptive agendas.

I am constantly frustrated by mainstream media. I’m sure that most mainstream media, TV and print, do not intend to mislead or lie but the fact is that the media’s 30-second sound-bite world, TV and print, lends itself to propagating misinformation. The media doesn’t get it right because they aren’t educated enough on the specific topic, they only reach out to mainstream abortion rights groups who are stuck in old message boxes, and they have no clue on how they report something will be seen through the eyes of anti-abortion groups or persons not well educated on the subject.

Jacobsen: When abortion is not safe, free, and equitably accessible, as a fundamental human right, what happens to the health and wellbeing of women?

Loonan: We can look to other countries where today abortion is illegal or highly restricted to see how illegal abortion and lack of contraceptives affects women’s overall health and reproductive health. Being unable to plan and space children harm’s women’s overall health and ability to have healthy children. Women who are forced into the underground to terminate a pregnancy places her life in jeopardy. And when abortion isn’t legal, women risk punishment even death at the hands of a government.

What would be different today if abortion was illegal? Misoprostol aka: Cytotec and mifepristone aka: RU-486. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/07/after-abortion-is-illegal/565430/>

If we criminalize abortion again, investigations will take on a new face. Abortion drugs by mail, in the underground, like buying heroin on the street corner. We could see women seeking underground surgical abortions later in pregnancy because the drug in the mail was not what it was sold to be. We could see women hurt and die from contaminated abortion drugs. We could also see women troll the Internet for old fashioned ways of aborting.

Then you have the coming out of radical anti-abortion legislation like in Texas, that would punish women for an illegal abortion including putting them to death. <https://ijr.com/texas-pro-life-bill-punish-women-abortions-death-penalty/>

What we should be doing is leaving abortion safe and legal and then come together to reduce the need for abortions with abstinence-based comprehensive sex education, more birth control research, better access to contraceptives like with Obamacare, free birth control, and men and condoms.

Jacobsen: Who tend to be the main opposition to women taking control of their lives, in general, and their reproductive lives, in particular? What seems to be the fundamental, bedrock reason for wanting to restrict women's right to choose?

Loonan: The religious right rose to political power as a response to gay rights, women's rights and Roe vs. Wade. The Bible talks about women being in subjection to a male god and to husbands. Organized Christian religion is the world of men in which men are made out to be kings.

Christianity has never, at heart, been a friend to women. If you control women's reproduction options you can control women's ability to participate in American society outside of being someone's wife and someone's mother. When men, white men particularly, are elevated above all other human beings, women specifically, by their God and religious writings which found a woman to be the one who let evil into the Garden of Eden, it should not surprise us that men attempt to control women's fertility even in civil law.

Jacobsen: Any recommended authors or organizations?

Loonan: I would urge people to read about our own history of illegal abortion.

- *Doctor's of Conscience; The Struggle to Provide Abortion Before and After Roe vs Wade, Carole Joffe*
- *The Abortionist; A Woman Against the Law, Rickie Solinger*
- *When Abortion Was A Crime; Women, Medicine and Law in the United States, 1867-1973, Leslie J. Reagan*
- *The Story of Jane; The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service, Laura Kaplan*

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Loonan: Several generations have grown up with a guaranteed right to safe legal abortion and access to contraceptives. But those generations have no historical context of how they got those rights because they aren't taught in school. The Supreme Court and the Federal courts are, at this very moment, being stacked by the right wing that could bring about the demise of Roe vs. Wade. Without a federal recognition of the right to abortion and access to contraceptives, we will once again have a hodge-podge of abortion/contraceptive laws across the US. And we will once again have to begin a grassroots hand to hand combat to win back a nationwide recognition of a woman's right to make her own reproductive rights decision based on her own set of religious and moral values.

Access to modern female hormonal birth control has been under attack by the right through so-called Personhood Amendments that mean to overturn Roe and restrict birth control methods to religiously acceptable contraceptive methods.

We must begin to debate (not a strategy of mainstream abortion rights organizations) those determined to take away a woman's right to an abortion and contraceptives and not cower from such debates. How else will generations who were never here to fight the first fight understand how to fight for it a second time around?

We must keep in the public conscience the horrific pictures of how illegal abortion hurt and killed women then and would now.

Current generations of women who have been told by parents that they can be whatever they want to be, do whatever they want to do from serving in the military, to serving in government, to being a CEO, a scientist, a biologist.....but that cannot happen if women can't be in complete charge of their reproductive lives including access to legal abortion and all contraceptives on the market.

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

Interview with Jenny McQueen – Administrator, Animal Rights Toronto

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 1, 2019

Jenny McQueen is the Administrator of Animal Rights Toronto. Here we talk with about non-human animal rights within the context of her personal narrative.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become involved in non-human animal rights?

Jenny McQueen: I was gifted a subscription to a Vegetarian UK magazine back in the early 90s, and started reading about animal agriculture and the dairy and egg industries. I had no idea before that – nothing was taught in school, and there was no social media at that time.

Jacobsen: What is the basic ethic behind non-human animal rights?

McQueen: The basic ethic is that animals are sentient, and that it's absolutely unjust to kill them and torture them for their flesh, secretions, for entertainment, research and to use as clothing. The injustices meted out to animals is often hidden from view. Wildlife is being decimated for animal agriculture and the pollution of the earth's water and air by animal agriculture is out of control. Horrendous mutilations and confinement have become industry standard, as has the commodification and ownership of animals.

Jacobsen: How did you find Animal Rights Toronto?

McQueen: I helped found Animal Rights Toronto with a small group of activists in 2015/16. We wanted to provide a guide to all the events happening in Toronto and beyond, and a link to useful resources. We created a resource for people who weren't already connected to activists on social media, hence the website and Facebook page with a calendar of events.

Jacobsen: What is your current role within it?

McQueen: I'm one of the admins of ART. We have a small team of people who look after the Facebook page, the email and the website. We have provided speakers for schools, have attended vegan events with information booths, and write letters in support of animal rights campaigns.

Jacobsen: What have been important successes and failures to learn from, in the history of Animal Rights Toronto?

McQueen: We're very proud that we're able to maintain a calendar of events from many different organizations in the Toronto area, and that we provide a link to resources. We also share important campaigns on our Facebook page which now has thousands of followers. A failure? Being disappointed in the numbers of people still unaware of the issues faced by animals. We're against an industry that receives subsidies, that has millions in advertising dollars and that has managed to keep its practices hidden. We hope to change that.

Jacobsen: Who have been the opposition to advocacy for non-human animal rights?

McQueen: The usual negative remarks are people who don't consider animals worthy of campaigning for. We remind them that you can care for human rights and animal rights, and that one is not mutually exclusive of the other.

Jacobsen: For those with an interest in becoming involved in activism for non-human animal rights, how can they do it? How they donate money, time, or effort, specifically to Animal Rights Toronto?

McQueen: We don't ask for donations, but we do encourage people to attend the events listed on our pages. If we were to accept volunteer time, it would be for matters of research or of data entry to our website.

Jacobsen: Any recommended books or speakers?

McQueen: This year, Liberation TO is planning a conference in August, and will have a roster of speakers. If you were looking for a local speaker for a specific event, please contact us. Notable internet vegans? James Aspey comes to mind. TheVeganJunction.com has a list of 15 top animal rights books to read. My current book is "The Pig in Thin Air" by Alex Lockwood.

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

McQueen: Animal Rights is something that everyone can become involved with. Every meal is a choice whether to eat animal flesh or not. Vegan options are now everywhere and are healthier for the human body, for the planet and obviously help to spare an animal from a life of misery, from confinement, transport to slaughter and an early, nasty death.

Animal Rights is a social justice movement, one that focuses on animals.

Activists are currently challenging laws that protect the industries of animal agriculture. In Canada, I (Jenny McQueen) am facing criminal charges for documenting the conditions inside a pig breeding factory near London, Ontario. #PigTrial2 has been featured in the media and highlights the difficulties experienced by those working to expose the horrors inside the many white sheds now blighting our countryside.

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

Interview with Carl Baker – External Volunteer, Washington State Organizer, Pro-Truth Pledge

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 2, 2019

Carl Baker is an External Volunteer and Washington State Organizer for the Pro-Truth Pledge. Here we talk about some of his work and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We have a mutual contact through the Pro-Truth Pledge. It is a good initiative to raise awareness on the importance of facts and substantiated theories as the background to proper and reasoned conversations in the modern world. How can we advance this form of conversation?

Carl Baker: I think that listening and asking questions are the two key skills here. Modeling the behavior by changing our minds when presented with compelling evidence is also key.

Jacobsen: Liberals and conservatives are divided a lot now. What are some areas of common ground for them?

Baker: This is a tough question for me. We have our shared humanity and the wants and needs that go along with it. But our fears and concerns seem very different to me.

Jacobsen: What are some commonsense ways to learn to listen more rather than assert or yell over someone, outside of basic patience?

Baker: Practice. Role playing can be helpful. And build a relationship before tackling divisive issues.

Jacobsen: What are the pressing truth-based issues of the time now?

Baker: Our climate is threatened by a lack of acceptance of climate science by our elected officials. And the United States government has been subverted in ways that prevent it from responding to the people or to facts.

Jacobsen: For issues of climate change and denial of basic theories in biology and medicine – evolution by natural selection, how do we increase knowledge there?

Baker: These are identity issues for a lot of people. Many folks believe that if they change their position on these issues their identity and community will be at risk. We need to show people that they needn't lose their relationships just because they change their minds about a topic.

Jacobsen: How can we make PTP and other endeavours fun, in the sense of positive reinforcement to the activities the PTP and similar initiatives encourage?

Baker: Good conversations where both parties learn something are inherently fun. It may be fun to share stories about such productive conversations as well.

Jacobsen: What are some good blogs on science education?

Baker: Skeptics guide to the universe, science based medicine, NCSE.

Jacobsen: What are some good books on effective communication and outreach with the public?

Baker: A manual for creating atheists.

Jacobsen: Who articulates the spirit of humility and empirically-based open-mindedness well?

Baker: Julia Galef, Tracy Harris, Dan Dennett.

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

Ask Mandisa 20 – Black History Month and African-American Freethinkers

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 2, 2019

***Mandisa Thomas** is the Founder of **Black Nonbelievers, Inc** (**Twitter** & **Facebook**). One of the largest, if not the largest, organization for African-American or black nonbelievers & atheists in the United States.*

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 Black History Month and African-American Freethinkers.

This interview session conducted in February.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: With Black History Month ending, who are some important African-American freethinkers in history?

Mandisa Thomas: Let's start with Dr. Carter G. Woodson, who was a historian. It was because his founding of Negro History Week, which later became Black History Month; that we even have this celebration.

While we can't make claims entirely, it is important to note that the month has its roots in secularism, and critical thinking. And our presence in should definitely be raised every time.

Jacobsen: Who were, also, important secular freethinkers in American history who had an impact on individuals, such as yourself, to come forward, found organizations, and continue to build and maintain a community?

Thomas: In addition to Dr. Woodson who was a freethinker, we can look to Thelma "Butterfly" McQueen, who was an African-American famous actress. She starred in *Gone With the Wind*. She was honored by the Freedom From Religion Foundation in 1992.

Also, Lorraine Vivian Hansberry, who is a famous playwright who wrote, *A Raisin in the Sun*, which was featured on Broadway, and adapted into three different film productions. The character Beneatha Younger, is a staunch atheist, much to the dismay of her mother Lena.

Jacobsen: Who are others making their mark now, in terms of secular and freethought communities in America? What makes them stand out to you?

Thomas: Not so shameless plug, my colleague, Sikivu Hutchinson, who has written a few books including *White Knights*, *Black Paradise*, which is a novel about the Jonestown tragedy.

There's also Bridgett Crutchfield, who is the head of the Detroit affiliate for Black Nonbelievers, and Candace Gorham, author of *The Ebony Exodus Project*, which details the reason black women are leaving the church and religion.

What makes them stand out, is that like myself, they focus on the black atheist demographic. Especially women, and how we are affected in today's society. We have taken the bull by the horns to make sure that our demographic is being represented.

So, these are my modern day pioneers and heroes. I am glad to be working alongside them this movement.

Jacobsen: If you were to be approached or asked by a young African-American girl who is questioning the religion of her parents, likely, or simply does not take seriously the faith claims of her community, what would your advice to her in terms of starting a student group, finding community, and books to read?

Thomas: First, I would say that it's okay. She is not alone. I think that's something many people within the community need to hear, especially of other black folks. It is still an isolating experiencing to find that you're a non-religionist.

Finding like minded folks can, at times, be very difficult. So I would assure her that she is not alone; that she is not crazy. That there are more like us out there. I would also recommend reading up on the women mentioned.

I would also offer my own support, as I have done for many in the community. Finally, if there is a young person who has activism capabilities, I would encourage them to do research and look into work with the Secular Student Alliance.

They are doing very good work with students. They are working with historically black colleges and universities. I would encourage them to start participating with them, and start a group if necessary.

It can be a bit intimidating. However, it is also very rewarding. It would be a great experience to connect with other students and people willing to support, and getting to the place where they can also be support will be crucial for the future.

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

Thomas: No problem, thank you, thank you.

Interview with Dale Hemming – Founder, Sioux Falls Free Thinkers

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 2, 2019

Dale Hemming is the Founder of the Sioux Falls Free Thinkers. Here we talk about his work and views, and billboards.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you come to a freethought position? What is the background in freethinking?

Dale Hemming: I have been fighting for the rights of others since 1960, as a junior in high school. I was against the sexual double standard. You know what that was. I argued against it as a junior in high school. I lost. Nobody was interested. The girls did not like it; the guys did not like it.

The sexual double standard is that the guys try to make it with the girls, the girls would refuse to do it. And if they did do it, they were sluts and then you did not want to marry them. I told them, “Listen, if you like sex, then you do it. If you do not like it, then do not do it. It should be the same for everybody.”

Boy, that was not a popular position [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing] How did you come into a freethought community or a freethinking community? Because there is a wide range of secular communities. Maybe, I should take one step back. What differentiates a freethinking community from other secular communities?

Also, how did you find a freethinking community?

Hemming: I came to Sioux Falls in 2008. I found an outfit called Siouxland Freethinkers. I was, certainly, a freethinker. I was open to new ideas. I wanted to look for the evidence however. So, I joined them.

But it did not take me long to find out; they were really anti-religion. I mean, extreme. The guy who oversaw the atheist group within the Siouxland Freethinkers was an ex-evangelist. He would preach against religious people, just like he used to preach against the atheists [Laughing].

No difference! [Laughing] I had my arguments with these people over their positions. The straw that broke the camels back was when they had a meeting out in Brookings, South Dakota. A guy by the name of P.Z. Myers, I think the name was, talked about converting from religion to atheism.

It was a long lecture. It was an auditorium full of people. As soon as he started speaking, all he did was rant and rave against religion. He did not offer any reason to change. He spoke to how horrible it was, how bad it was, and how bad you were for being a theist!

Half of the audience walked out before the lecture was over. they walked out in the first half hour. We were not learning anything. We had a man ranting and raving against religion. I told the leaders of the group; that I did not think this was very effective in converting people this way.

They said, “They just have to go to class.” I almost walked out because it was so bad. So when I decided to form my own groups, I could not call it Siouxland Freethinkers. I cannot travel very well. I am crippled. So, I decided to call it the Sioux Falls Free Thinkers.

I also established Sioux Falls Atheists, Sioux Falls Feminists, and Sioux Falls Zoologists, and Sioux Falls Scientists. I made websites for all five of those groups. I released those December 26, 2013. I did not drop out of the group Siouxland Freethinkers.

But said, "I am glad you're here. But I want to do my own thing." They had a secret board meeting. Next thing, I was excommunicated [Laughing]. There is no other word for it. It is a secret board meeting. They threw me out.

All I was doing was expressing my free thought. So, that pretty much cured me of the Siouxland Freethinkers. The Sioux Falls Free Thinkers is alive and well. We do not get a lot of people at meetings. But there is 150 on the mailing list besides 300 in the meetup group.

I get feedback occasionally. But, you know, they pretty much know my message by now. I have five websites with 1,830 pages or something like that. They have had 1,150,000 page views since the inception of those groups. That is a lot of page views.

I really dispense knowledge about these various subjects. That is what I really want to do. I am not really into arguments. I am saying, "This is what science tells me. This is the way in it is."

Jacobsen: What are the differences within a secular community? Which, by their very nature, it might simply be a necessity, as we remain a non-dogmatic or aim for this.

Hemming: I will be honest with you. As far as I am concerned, freethought should become the definition. Freethought is a philosophical viewpoint that will be formed on logic, empiricism and reason rather than authority, tradition, and dogma.

It is freethinking comprised of freethinkers. This does not include religion. There is no logic and reason in religion; it is about a supernatural creature. They say, "You don't let us come in." I do let them come in. Freethought does not include religion. It cannot.

Because that is simply supernatural. There is nothing in the freethought definition that says, "Accept the supernatural." Wikipedia has a very good definition of this. It is in-depth. Next question.

Jacobsen: What do you see as positive contributions in writing and in speaking to the freethought community, either individuals or simple subject matter in the modern period?

Hemming: Well, I want to convince people that logic, reason, and empiricism are the right basis for freethinking. This is pretty much the accepted basis. I want to convince people that supernatural things, when it comes to religion, are just bogus.

There is no supernatural: never has been and never will be. It is just human weakness. I do not know exactly why. Therefore, they accepted a supernatural being and started burning people at the stakes, and then the Crusades, and the just awful things done by religion are unbelievable.

The number of people that have died supporting god. they fought for hundreds of years in Europe. It was just a horrible thing. When it comes to women, like I said, back in the 1960s, I realized that women were second-class citizens.

They are treated as second-class citizens so men beat them, and rape them, and rape their children. They can get away with it. The worst penalties are just a couple of years. Even then, they get off, sometimes. I hate that.

I hate injustice. That is really a lot of my feminist activities. When it comes to science, Science, to me, is the only answer. Science is always right. It may get some things wrong for a brief period of time. But it is self-correcting.

It is not like all-of-the-sudden we discovered the laws of gravity because of Newton. We simply understand it. We got a better understanding of gravity. We did not throw out the laws of gravity or of evolution.

Evolution was proven when Darwin proved his theories. It has been proved so many times since then that it is ridiculous. I follow this stuff, daily. I have been following this stuff daily since 2013. I had records going for these various subjects going back to 2,000.

The evidence is so overwhelming for evolution and global warming. It is unbelievable. Out of 13,950 peer-reviewed climate articles. Only 24 have rejected climate change or global warming. That is 0.17%. That is the number of accredited scientists.

I am not stalking these guys on the internet. But there are only 24 out of 13,950. That is 0.17%. Where would you place your money if you got odds like that? Then also, animal intelligence, animals are so intelligent that you cannot believe it.

They even have moral code and moral values. They behave like we do to a great extent, because we evolved from them. We are nothing more than the continuation of what animals were or are. We have a better brain for making decisions outside the boundaries of our genetic code.

But they do a real excellent job. These are not dumb machines; these are intelligence animals, e.g., crows are the second most intelligent animal on the planet. We are number 1. They can solve problems that cannot be solved by a 4-to-5-year-old child.

They do not need to be trained. They can simply solve it by looking at it. Somebody should really think about that. There is a young girl in Seattle. She has a trading relationship with crows. She brings out dog food. They bring her human trinkets.

They do not bring sticks, stones, and dead birds. They bring out of the kinds things that you would expect. This creature understands things that are human and might be useful to the girl, in return for dog food. It turns out that that is an old thing.

They have been trading things with us for centuries. People do not want to believe it, especially religious people. I go to church by the way. I go to church because they are good people; they are trying to help others. I am trying to help others.

That is one of my objectives. I contribute to the homeless, to feminist causes, to immigration issues. I am not a member of their community. Even though, I know they are religious; they know I am not. They understand this.

We are here to help people.

Jacobsen: There is some discussion about passing on values to the next generation. What is a proper way in which to pass on the intellectual aspect, as in critical thinking, science, empiricism, and reason, as well as the ethic in terms of some of things you mentioned? Something developed akin to some of the sentiments some in the freethought community unbound by supernaturalism can adhere to often.

Hemming: My parents passed it on! [Laughing] I did not know they were passing it on. You teach them. You explain to them. Bullying is bad. This is not a good thing. Attacking women is bad, because it is usually that way. Sometimes, a girl is attacking a guy. But that is rare.

You pass it on by educating them. You educate them as to the value of science, to the value of respecting other animal life. I know we must eat them to survive. Other than that, we can certainly respect them as much as we can.

Respect other people's beliefs, even though, we disagree with them. Unless, they are trying to hurt us or other people; that is when respecting them goes out of the window. So far, in the last year, the Catholic Church has admitted to horrible crimes against women and children.

The Baptist Church [Laughing] and did the same thing! In one state, it was a vast number. The number of children that were raped. The Baptist leader encouraged the little girls to get an abortion. Can you imagine that? A Baptist encouraging abortions [Laughing]; it is so evil. It is unbelievable.

The Boy Scouts have also been caught in the act, thousands of them. Thousands of boy scouts' leaders were helping themselves to little boys. It just makes me sick. I am sorry. I am an old moralist. I think they should be taken out and throw into a valley. Lock them up, wait 20 years, then let them out if they come out okay.

There is no reason to treat these people as humans. Anyone who deliberately hurts another human being has lost the right to be called human.

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

Hemming: I do not know if I have any concluding thoughts. I am running a big atheist campaign starting in May, which prompted me to call you. May 13th, I am going to be putting up 4 billboards. They attack religion for the various fallacies

Number one, I will attack the idea of the supernatural.

Number two, I will attack the idea of the end times coming. It has been coming for 500 years.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Hemming: The bullshit drives me crazy; how can people believe this? I am going to attack the idea of praying on your knees and going to hell. I have been told that, because I used the word "God damn." That is a sin according to the Bible, or to the Baptists' anyway. I will have to burn in hell forever.

Unless, I seek forgiveness and redemption. It is crazy. I am not going to seek redemption from something that does not exist. I do not believe in being subservient to anybody for any reason. I said this in my billboards. Stand tall.

We should all be our own people. We agree to work with others to gain benefit for us both. But, as far as being obedient to them, forget it, it is not in my nature.

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

Interview with Gideon Levy – Columnist, Haaretz

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 3, 2019

Gideon Levy is an Israeli Author and Journalist, and a Columnist for Haaretz. He has earned several awards for human rights journalism focusing on the Israeli occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories or the OPT.

Language recognized in the work of the OHCHR, Amnesty International, Oxfam International, United Nations, World Health Organization, International Labor Organization, UNRWA, UNCTAD, and so on.

Here we talk about his health, Israeli elections, Palestine and Israel, OPT, journalism, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let us start on a personal note. You have been subject to, unfortunately, cancer and, as a requirement of that, cancer treatment, as well as all the complications that come with that. So, just checking in, how are you doing?

Gideon Levy: I am very, very well. It is not my first cancer. Maybe, it is not my last one. But I am doing very well.

Jacobsen: When was the diagnosis of the most recent one?

Levy: Exactly 1 year ago, or 11 months ago.

Jacobsen: How have treatments been going well and smooth?

Levy: Yes, it is behind me. I just came back from jogging.

Jacobsen: So, with regards to some of the more recent political news in Israel, what are some of the overviews for those who may not be aware of the implications of the recent election outcomes? And how this will be reflected in attitudinal stances of the general population?

Levy: On the one hand, those were not very crucial elections because there was hardly an alternative, a real alternative. On the other hand, they were quite significant, not simply on a personal basis. A prime minister who gets into his fifth term is not something usual, in Western democracies.

That is the case here. But I think we are facing a new development in this government with Donald Trump who will bring us to a new era in the history of the occupation. Namely, the annexation is behind the door. This has many, many implications.

Some of them positive.

Jacobsen: With regards to the five terms, what other precedence is there?

Levy: First of all, it will only be in July when Prime Minister Netanyahu will be in power longer than the founder, Ben-Gurion. He was in longer than Netanyahu, but he was the founding father. In any case, after July, Netanyahu will be the longest acting prime minister in Israel.

There are many examples. Erdogan has been one. I just saw President el-Sisi guaranteed himself until 2030. Five terms are quite rare, I guess.

Jacobsen: In your view, you have mentioned seeing the two-state solution as being non-viable at this point and argue in favor of a one-state solution.

How is this election, this fifth term, going to be impacting this sort of discussion within Israel as well as within the wider Western cultures' discussions on the Israel-Palestine conflict?

Levy: It is a direct contact between the elections and the one-state solution. Because if it is going to become an annexation government, annexation is for the creation of Israel, then the occupation IS something that will last forever. The occupation is not a temporary phenomenon.

If it is not a temporary phenomenon, then we are facing a one-state now. If this is a permanent phenomenon, then there is no intention to remove it. Then we are facing already one state. There is no room for a two-state solution, obviously. Then the only question will be what kind of regime will be in this one state.

This should be the main discourse from now on, in my view. Will it be a democracy? Or will it be an apartheid state? That is the only open question.

Jacobsen: What about in the parliament? There has been a commentary about the Israeli Knesset. The vast majority being supporters of apartheid, in your own terminology and many others as well.

What will be the general impact on the attitudinal stances of the general public with this vast majority and firm support of the stance towards this annexation?

Levy: I am not sure there is a majority for annexation. There is a majority for the status quo, maintaining the status quo. That is for sure. 80-90% of the Israelis, whether they know it or not, are for maintaining the status quo, which means continuing the occupation for an unlimited time.

Each of them has its own justification and rationalization. There is violence. There is terror. We need security. The excuses are many.

But the outcome is one. 80-90%, maybe 95%, of Israelis – Jewish Israelis for sure – are in favour of maintaining the status quo. In other words, they are in favour of maintaining the occupation for an unlimited period.

Change, therefore, cannot come and will not come from within Israeli society. Because there is no incentive for any change. Israeli schools' brainwashing system is very efficient. Do not expect any change from within, it puts the whole weight on the world's shoulders.

Which means, it is really about the world. Does the world accept a second apartheid state in the 21st century? Or is the world ready to do as it did in the first apartheid state, namely South Africa?

Jacobsen: With regards to external pressure, what would be a good argument for an economic boycott? What would be a good argument for an academic and cultural boycott?

Levy: Exactly like with South Africa, it should be everything. The outcome must be only one. The Israelis will start to pay and be punished for the occupation. Any Israeli in any field. As long as this doesn't happen, there is no incentive to put an end to the occupation.

Therefore, it should be everything. In South Africa, even sports were very, very crucial, you cannot say this or that is more important.

Are the Israelis willing to pay the price for the settlements? Right now, there is no price.

Jacobsen: For those potentially unaware of media bias, when you are interacting with others from other Western states and with those in the media from non-Western states, what is their general image of this conflict, of this annexation, and of this apartheid situation, in either case?

Levy: You cannot generalize. Israel has still a lot of supporters. Zionism has a lot of supporters, mainly in Europe but not only. The occupation has many supporters, as you know. Islamophobia, xenophobia, nationalism, racism, are gaining power in many countries, including in the United States.

All this plays to one direction. The opposite direction, there are more and more civil societies that are not accepting or are not ready to accept the continuance of the status quo for forever. They are contradictory movements in the world.

I do not know which one will take over.

Jacobsen: For those who tend to be on the more dissident margins within the society, they are, in a real way, taking on the more patriotic status.

They are critiquing the power and the privilege of those who are implementing certain policies that the general population might not necessarily know about.

In terms of your own service to Israeli society in regards to providing some awareness about what is being done in their name, what would be a proper response to those who would see you as not a patriotic Israeli?

Levy: It is not about patriotism. It is about looking for justice and obeying international law, and looking for accepting the resolutions of international institutions. Those are totally forgotten in Israel.

If Israel would obey international law, like any other country, and obey endless international resolutions, then there is no question.

Why would we get this point of being a patriot or not being a patriot? First of all, basic things must be implemented, which Israel totally ignores. There is no excuse for this. It does not matter if you judge it from a patriotic motivation or not.

Finally, and first of all, obey the law. Then we can talk about other things. But Israel ignores international law.

Jacobsen: If you're looking, as a journalist for *Haaretz*, at the information that is coming, basically, to a general audience in Israel, not necessarily as an indictment of the general population, what are some of the main points of misinformation that is fed into the public media stream?

Levy: The Israeli media is a very free one. It is almost private owned. Ideology plays very little role there. What really plays the role are commercial arguments and interests, this is so destructive, because what is so strong in Israeli media is there is no censorship.

No *governmental* censorship, nobody tells the media what to write or not to write. The media is a total slave of its own commercial interests, of its readership, of the viewers. They do not want to know the truth. Nobody wants to bother them.

Journalism has a role. It is not another economical business. It should be something else. There is a role in a democracy. This role is being betrayed by Israeli media, almost all of it. Not telling the truth, ignoring the occupation almost totally, totally, the occupation is not covered in Israel.

Except for my newspaper, the occupation does not exist, as if there is no occupation. If you follow the Israeli media, there is no suffering; there are no crimes. This is criminal from the point of the media. It does it voluntarily.

Nobody tells the media to be like this, except the readership and the economic interests.

Jacobsen: Who are reporters who you admire reporting the same issues that you are reporting on now?

Levy: For me, it is hard for me to admire, but I highly appreciate Amira Hass who dedicates her life to the struggle against the occupation much more than me – because she lives under the occupation. Before, she lived in Gaza. Now, she lives in Ramallah.

I think that is the highest level of sacrifice, of struggle, of real journalism, which really has a moral core. So, I can only point out her. I cannot forget the publisher of *Haaretz*, Amos Schocken, who enables all this. He gives Amira the freedom, me the freedom, total freedom and support.

There are no publishers like him. I do not think there are any other publishers like him in the world.

Jacobsen: How does he, as a publisher, stand out in that way?

Levy: He is a modest man. He always says that he does it for business considerations. But I know he lost much, much money because of me, because of Amira, based on certain articles that we wrote. He really believes in what he does. He really believes that *Haaretz* has a role. It is not only a business.

He is ready to pay any price. As long as *Haaretz* continues to exist, he is not suicidal. He does not want *Haaretz* to die. None of us want *Haaretz* to die. He will not let *Haaretz* to die. None of us want *Haaretz* to die.

He does anything possible to let *Haaretz* to live. He gives us this unbelievable freedom and courage.

Jacobsen: Along with some of the work that you have done, you have received death threats. Are you still receiving them? What is the general content of them aside from the obvious threats?

Levy: I think Israel public opinion got used to me. But I really do not know. I cannot judge. Look, many times, you get many threats. The situation seems very frightening, but it is not really frightening at all. When it dies, it seems really peaceful, then it can't be the worst danger waiting for you.

It is very hard for me to judge. Right now, it is always hard in times of war or bloodshed, of soldiers being killed. Then it is much harder. More people are being killed, so it is much easier. But you never know.

But I do not live in fear if that is the question.

Jacobsen: For those who are outside of Israel, who are living in Western and non-Western countries, and if they are looking to become more aware of the situation as well as to

anticipate some of the developments after the election, what should they be expecting or, potentially, predicting with some of the derivative outcomes from the election?

Levy: I think the combination of Donald Trump in Washington and Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem can become a really very explosive combination. They go hand to hand. It is unbelievable support, and fuels the Israeli nationalism and Israeli racism.

He might get to very unpleasant places. It is not only about annexation. It is also about all kinds of legislations in Israel. Israel will change. The United States seems to support those changes. For those of us who live in Israel, it is not very promising.

It will be much harder for me to function as a journalist if their plans will be implemented. They have plans, indeed.

Jacobsen: On a similar note to a more recent interview published in *Canadian Atheist*, the situation in Gaza has been reported as being unlivable by 2020.

As we are moving more into 2019, and then into 2020, what will be the political and the social fallout and the international relations fallout of the situation if it continues to develop along that trajectory of unliveability into 2020?

Levy: Everyone covers his eyes in the belief that if they do not look to the corner of the room, where the elephant sits; there will be no elephant, but the elephant is there. It is a non-issue here. It is a non-issue in the West and the world.

Gaza, unfortunately, only has one way to remind of its existence and remind of its problems. This is by launching rockets. If they do not launch rockets, who cares about Gaza? Nobody cares about Gaza. This really will end up in a terrible catastrophe.

It's really a question of whether people will die, but nobody seems to care: not in Israel, not in the West, not in the Arab world. People believe that doing nothing will bring some help.

Jacobsen: Why the shrug from the international community?

Levy: Because Gaza doesn't interest anybody. Because the world takes no interest in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Because Gaza is Hamas; and Hamas are fundamentalist. And the world doesn't like Islam right now.

Then many make the comparison or an identification between Hamas and Daesh. So, they are almost the same in the eyes of most of the world. So, people don't care. The coverage is very limited. Everyone lost interest about Gaza. Two and a half million people starving.

When there is a catastrophe, then, maybe, the world will wake up, but it might be too late. People will really die by the hundreds and thousands of people. This will not stay in Gaza. This will pass to Israel if this is about the water, the sewage, the air. All sorts of questions like this.

Kids cannot stay in Gaza. I must remind you. Gaza is one hour away from Tel Aviv, by car.

Jacobsen: For those who may not know, you live in Tel Aviv, in Israel.

Levy: Right.

Jacobsen: It becomes not only geographically close, but also a very personal question.

Levy: Yes.

Jacobsen: What is Amira Hass's opinion of the international shrug?

Levy: This you will have to ask Amira Hass, and not me.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] Okay. A common example or comparison is made between South Africa and apartheid and Israel and apartheid.

What are other comparisons on different issues in terms of the conditions in which the Israeli-Palestine conflict is had, and in terms of the internal culture of Israel in history?

Levy: People tend to think that if you compare something, then it should be identical. [Laughing] That is by all means not true. The apartheid system in South Africa was different than the apartheid system in Israel. But the basic principles were basically the same.

Namely, two peoples living on one piece of land. One people gain all the rights in the world. The other people don't get any rights whatsoever. This is apartheid *by definition*. The fact that in South Africa there were things that were not here.

Here, there were things not in South Africa. You can ask, "Where was it worse, and why?" I know many South Africans who thought what was going on here is worse than what they had. That is really open. But by the end of the day, it is not about comparing.

It is really about looking at the picture without prejudice and seeing the truth. The truth is that the very brutal tyranny is ruling a people of four and a half million people in Gaza and the West Bank in a very brutal way.

One of the worst tyrannies today. The worst because Israel is one of the only democracies in the Middle East. This masquerade is unbelievable.

Jacobsen: As a historical question, personally, when did this become a moral mission for you in terms of the journalism and the reportage? When did this awareness come to you?

When did this become ethically charged in order to pursue this for much of your life?

Levy: It is a very gradual process, which is still ongoing. It is not as if one day; I saw the light or the darkness. In the late '80s, I started to travel to the occupied territories as a journalist. Then I decided to dedicate my professional life to covering the occupation.

The more I saw, the more radical I became, the more disturbed I became. This is really a process that never ended. You cannot find a certain point. Except, one day, I decided to go for a day trip to the West Bank, as a journalist and to seek some old trees that were uprooted by settlers.

It was my first story about the occupation. But it was really a gradual process.

Jacobsen: Is that a common story or pathway in terms of those who come to this consciousness and awareness of it?

Levy: I know very few who came to this consciousness. If I talk, for example, about Amira, it is a different story. It is a different story. Because she grew up in a communist house, a very ideological house. I was brought up in a different home. So, I didn't get it from home.

Maybe, she got more from home than what I got in terms of more judgment and looking for justice. So, this was my process. It is very individual. You cannot generalize.

Jacobsen: We have been witnessing more prominent awareness of the murder of journalists and harm to journalists, as this represents a threat to journalists.

Not in any particular nation, but around the world, the severity of the threats will differ depending on the region and the country, and the culture.

However, this is an issue. For those who are wanting to enter into journalism, what are the pluses and minuses in terms of the life that one will lead as well as the threats that one will come across in their life, or in their professional life?

Levy: First of all, I can just highly recommend it. I think it is one of the most fascinating jobs that anybody can dream about. It is going through many changes now, because of social media. It is really going to change really rapidly.

The old school of journalism is really dying. But in any case, it is not really about the threats and the dangers. Most of the journalists in the world do not face life threats. Even me, I do not feel as though I am in life danger, not daily anyway. It is about courage.

The courage to tell the truth. But what is more noble than having this courage?

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

Levy: Thank you very much, thank you.

Anonymous Interview with a South African Ex-Muslim

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 3, 2019

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?

South African Ex-Muslim: I grew up in Durban, the third largest city in South Africa on the east coast and home to a large community of origin (the first wave of Indians come with the British as indentured labourers to work on sugar cane fields in the mid-1800s they came from South India and are mostly Hindu. The later waves were North Indian and mainly Muslim traders, business people or people hustling for any kind of work opportunity). Apartheid created strong boundaries between each of the countries cultural groups and even within the Indian community there was further spatial segregation along religious and class lines. I grew up in an Indian Muslim community to working-class grandparents and lower-middle class parents (they were able to get university degrees and thus better work opportunity than my grandparents but still limited by apartheid). The area I grew up in and especially the area where my grandparents lived and where we spent a lot of our time was home to a large Indian community. I grew up speaking English as my mother tongue but my grandparents spoke Urdu and Gujarati – they conversed with my parents largely in their mother tongues but they spoke to us primarily in English and my parents spoke to us solely in English.

I was fortunate to not have attended Islamic schools. My grandparents would have favoured it and all of my second cousins were in Islamic schools. My parents decided to send us to regular government schools but with madrassa (Islamic educational institutions) every day after school. Further, even though I attended a secular primary school and an Anglican private high school – my mother wanted me to get the best education possible and so with a scholarship I headed off to this school, she wasn't keen on the Anglican part but she believed that the educational experiences would overall be better than the Islamic schools. It was also acceptable to her because there were a group of other Muslim girls attending this school too. But outside of school at madrassa and with family – religion played a huge role in my life.

My grandparents played a major role in raising us and they were conservative Muslims. They would help fetch us from school when they were able to and give us lunch after school and before madrassa. My siblings, cousins and I spent every afternoon after school and before madrassa and after madrassa before I parents came to fetch us at my grandparents flat. When I think about my primary school years and time my grandparents and at madrassa, I feel a sombre, solemn haze thicken the air and suffocate me, imprison and though I wasn't fully alive to it then, I feel it so strongly now when I reflect on those times. Every weekday Monday to Friday after school from about 2-5pm we went to madrassa for 7 years of my life (age 6 – 12). My parents and grandparents wanted us all to carry on with the same routine while at high school and my siblings did for a while but by the time I reached high school I managed to escape the iron grip somehow. It wasn't conveniently located near my new school and car rides would be difficult to arrange plus I'd have a heavier workload. But if I still believed in hell, those 7 years of madrassa would be it! The rules of God were relentless and infinite and they were oppressive. I didn't question it then though. I simply sat there, wide-eyed, stewing in fear and shame and guilt. And no one to ever express it to.

It didn't even really ever occur to me to talk to my siblings or cousins about it or my friends at madrassa. Precisely because you were encouraged to never question or doubt and were threatened with hellfire if you did so. I will give you a taste of the litany of ludicrous stories we would be bombarded with:

- Every time a natural disaster broke out anywhere in the world would be told it was because it was all the people in the world (and not just the Muslims) were sinning – particularly dancing and clubbing and drinking and this was Allah's way of punishing them. The more we do these things, the Allah will unleash his wrath
- As women, if we left any part of our skin uncovered, wrists or ankles, those parts of our bodies would burn would extra special punishment in hell
- Once we girls reach puberty we aren't allowed to interact with boys if they are not male members of our family. The only male non-family member we're allowed to be in the company of is our husband (before you get married, you have to be escorted by male members of your family if you wish to be in each other's company)
- Dancing and listening to music is completely haraam and we would pay for it in hell along with everything else we've sinned for

My parents didn't buy all of this but they didn't remove of us from the madrassa either and they didn't resist everything we were taught. My grandparents wholeheartedly believed it all and would reinforce and reaffirm the stories, beliefs, and practices.

Though they were more progressive than their parents, they were still conservative and still maintained a monopoly over knowledge. My dad more than my mum would encourage us to think and question. He wasn't always like this but he started to read and question more at some point in his life and loosened up on many of the very oppressive beliefs and practices that he held. But I never ever felt that I was allowed to develop my own opinions especially when they were dissenting ones. And there was always a limit – if my learning, my views were too radical and contradictory of their world view, there was no space for them. And you certainly weren't allowed to keep questioning all the way to the point that you dismantled it all! And in fact as a child and teenager it didn't even occur to me that I could question all the way.

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

South African Ex-Muslim: I attended a government primary school and thereafter high school up until my Masters have been by academic scholarships.

Jacobsen: What has your role been with the Ex-Muslims of South Africa and what tasks and responsibilities come with it?

South African Ex-Muslim: Ex-Muslims South Africa is still nascent, unstructured, informal and kind of in limbo to be honest. When I got in touch with the group there were about close to 20 people and some of them had met face to face, like one on one meetings but there was no one organizing anything at a central level. When I joined the group I actually found them because I was starting to establish regular face to face meet-ups but I didn't know how any exMuslims at this point! So I set out trying to find them and it turned out this group already existed. But it's an informal group, not a formally constituted organization. I started to arrange regular meet-ups in one city and then for work and personal reasons I travelled to other cities and then moved to a

different city so in the end, I coordinated meet-ups in the 3 cities. Before leaving the country I created a way for the groups in each city to easily communicate so that they can arrange their own regular meet-ups. I also manage to intake of new requests coming in through one of our virtual platforms – it requires careful vetting.

The current reality is that majority of the group just want a space to connect (and at the moment most of the connection takes place on a daily basis and is virtual) – there is so much comfort, joy, celebration, relief that comes from this community connection – outliers, outcasts re-creating a community where we can be 100% our authentic selves. Further, only a few of us in this country-wide virtual group are actually out to our families. Most still live complete double lives and are still quite deeply embedded in their family lives and Muslim communities. And even if you are out to your family it doesn't mean you want to get politically involved at all. So there are basically only two of us willing and able to commit to getting actively involved, politically and publicly which means we burnt ourselves out very quickly, trying to do too much too fast. The two of us led the process of writing manifestos, building a website (with huge help from two normally non-politically active members of the group who are in IT) and starting to generate content for the website (some people started writing articles that would be published anonymously, we created a resource list of books, articles, podcasts, websites that people could turn to). But after a couple of months of this we kind of just crashed because we were very overwhelmed by the time and energy investment and the emotional toll it takes because this is all very raw for us. I also had a lot of personal stuff going simultaneously including just coming out to my parents and some other family members about being atheist and announcing a marriage to someone who wasn't Muslim or religious at all.

At the moment I'm not even in the country anymore and I'm trying to figure out how exactly I want to continue being involved.

When we dreamt big at the beginning (and I do hope we get to see this through in time) – we would like to write regular articles, hold public talks and exhibitions and have someone in each major city coordinating regular social meet-ups. We would also like to work with women specifically – arranging workshops and support groups as they tend to struggle far more having to face a deluge of challenges that men don't have to contend with or not to the same extent. We also desperately want to start engaging with the formal Muslim establishments – the madrassas (educational institutions), the Tabligh Jamaat (Sunni missionary movement of Indian origin – I can give more info here if you want more) and the Darul Uloom (Islamic seminaries) and other Islamic councils. These establishments have immense power and in our opinion, espouse damaging and detrimental values that pertain to all aspects of living daily life.

Jacobsen: Of those writers and speakers, who have been the most articulate as to the concerns of ex-Muslims?

South African Ex-Muslim: People like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Maryam Namazie, Sarah Haider, Ali Rizvi and even people who don't come from an Islamic background such as Sam Harris.

Jacobsen: With the general stigma and fear of ex-Muslims, in a way, this reflects the untapped potential and power of quiet defiance of ex-Muslims around the world. How could this be harnessed for powerful activism around the world?

South African Ex-Muslim: I think its already being harnessed. I think the stigma we experience and the fear that we seem to generate is emboldening the ex-Muslim community to speak louder,

to stand united, to keep building membership bases. Rather than being pushed deeper underground, I think we are seeing more and more people come out, more and more ex-Muslim organizations being formed and I find that so heartening.

Jacobsen: What are some tragic stories of ex-Muslims who didn't escape?

South African Ex-Muslim: For the most part I don't think we hear about the ex-Muslims who don't escape because they live in silence, they are not able to speak out about what is going on. And if they do speak out, I'm not sure they always have an outlet for their voice to be heard. Also, I think that it's not necessarily that about ex-Muslims not escaping (at least in South Africa) but rather them trying to still live and work within their communities if they come out. For most people, they just don't come out because doing so means being completely cut off from everything and everyone they know and most likely facing violent physical attacks. And so they continue to live in that world but struggle to reconcile their double life, to continuously censor their true selves and to have to by and large, participate in practices they don't believe in and that they find oppressive and ridiculous. They lie, they pretend every day and they live in shame and fear. They feel isolated. Islam is a prominent feature in everyday life for most Muslims in South Africa so it becomes a heavy burden to bear when one leaves the religion but can't express it.

If they were to come out publicly in South Africa, unlike countries governed by Sharia law they would have the full protection of the law and one of the most exemplary constitutions and Bill of Rights in the world but in practice, many of the norms and rules of the Muslim community don't actually imbue that spirit and would not be protected from the wrath of their communities if they were get a whiff of atheism beings announced openly.

Jacobsen: What are some heartwarming narratives of ex-Muslims who found asylum?

South African Ex-Muslim: The most recent is Rahaf Alqunun's story which was covered by the media. That was quite a significant case as it drew global attention and ended with support and acceptance by Canada in a time when ex-Muslims tend to demonized.

Jacobsen: What would be a unifying way, in 2019, for the international community of ex-Muslims to use their voices of dissent to bring about large-scale change in the world? Something like an international civil rights movement to instantiate respect for and implement fundamental human rights in addition to activism to remove blasphemy laws once and for all.

South African Ex-Muslim: This is very tricky and something I spend *a lot* of time thinking about. There is certainly a need for more awareness and more nuanced understanding of the position that ex-Muslims find themselves in. There is most definitely a need for greater pressure for oppressive and archaic laws to be repealed. And there is a need for skeptics on the left – who are sensitive to the right-wing bigotry that Islam is currently victim to and therefore are afraid of further demonization of the religion by ex-Muslims – there is a need for them to understand that yes, Islam is under attack sometimes unfairly but that doesn't mean that the countless ex-Muslims around the globe who are suffering and who raise legitimate concerns about Islam should be silenced so as not to fuel the right-wing bigotry. Ideally, they ought to be able to hold that complexity and condemn the right-wing bigots while supporting the ex-Muslims (who are actually a minority within a minority!)

However, I also think this is just one part of it. This battle is not going to be won only through large-scale protest and policy and legal changes (though this is of course invaluable). Those aspects

of Islam that I find damaging – the values and mores that drive these damaging world views – are so deeply ingrained in the fabric of these societies and a full-frontal attack on this is an assault on identity, on heritage on everything familiar and comfortable so a change in laws doesn't necessitate a change in practice within Muslim communities and in fact might further enrage these communities. South Africa is a great example of that. Our Bill of Rights is outstanding. And I believe that attitudes, beliefs, practices with many segments of the Muslim communities in our country are deeply problematic and in no uncertain terms, incompatible with our bill of rights but the conservative characters and establishments in the Muslim community will most likely claim that the Bill of Rights is incompatible with their religious laws! So I think that extensive slow, long-term community work is needed to try to help people understand why what is going on within our communities is deeply problematic when it comes to things like freedom of belief and another issue that is very close to my heart – gender equality and women's rights in Islam.

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?

South African Ex-Muslim: I think exposure through interviews is definitely needed, this issue needs to move out of the fringe and into the mainstream media which is slowly happening and it also a great way for ex-Muslims to find out more about what kind of support exists. All the information I found out in my initial search about ex-Muslims in the UK was through online newspaper articles most notably in the Guardian. Money for support of hosting and maintaining websites and for organizing conferences and public talks would definitely be beneficial and when public events are arranged, security is of utmost important so funds towards that would be welcome, I'm sure. But ultimately what is needed is careful and compassionate listening from everyone – from the Muslim community as well as from everyone outside of that community.

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

South African Ex-Muslim: I think for ex-Muslims in South Africa – I'm looking forward to extending this conversation out both within the Muslim community and outside of it. It is going to be risky and challenging but it's imperative. My most serious concern is about the religious establishments I mentioned earlier on. They are never challenged by any government authorities or civic society groups because post-Apartheid South Africa is a very respectful and tolerant one. But they are insidious and gravely detrimental. We celebrate and tolerate our religious and cultural diversity in the country but while this is beautiful and welcome it also seems to have come with a side-effect of not every prying or engaging as someone outside of that group. I have almost no Muslim friends left in South Africa and when I engage with my friends and acquainted and colleagues in my new world and we discuss these issues I realise that they have absolutely no idea what goes on within the confines of the Muslim community even though they work and sometimes live near Muslim people and we even though we celebrate this rainbow nation of ours.

Thank you for the opportunity to share!

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time.

Interview with Min-hee Janet Yoo – Coexistence of Animal Rights on Earth (CARE)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 4, 2019

Here we talk with Min-hee Janet Yoo from Coexistence of Animal Rights on Earth (CARE).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is personal background, e.g., geography, culture, language, and religion or lack thereof?

Min-hee Janet Yoo: I'm Min-hee Janet Yoo. I'm originally from Gangwon Province—where the recent wildfires were—in north-west South Korea, however, I lived abroad for about 10 years, first in the US and later in Australia while I attended the University of Queensland majoring in Wildlife Biology. I'm not religious in any way, nor would I consider myself a 'spiritual' person.

Jacobsen: How did you come to work in non-human animal rights? (How did you become involved in Coexistence of Animal Rights on Earth or CARE?)

Yoo: I've always loved animals, but it wasn't until 2015 when I went to a Greenpeace Open Boat day that I seriously thought about working in the non-profit sector. I volunteered for Greenpeace Korea a little later that year and then applied for a job as a street fundraiser. While working for Greenpeace Korea, I heard about a job at CARE, talked to the President, was offered a job, and started on the Monday after the Friday my year contract with Greenpeace was up.

Jacobsen: How important are non-human animal rights in a period of massive extinction precipitated by modern human global civilization?

Yoo: In the current period of extreme stress that the human population is putting on this planet, animal rights, and specifically those pertaining to the vast number of food animals kept and killed in factory farms and slaughterhouses, a simple way to combat climate change, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and public health problems caused by factory farming and its subsidiary and supporting industries is to drastically cut down, or cut out completely, the consumption of animal-based food. Even something as simple as a household halving the amount of animal-based food they eat and replacing it with plant-based foods can have a significant effect.

Jacobsen: As the Operations Director, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Yoo: I am responsible for overseeing all activities within CARE. This includes campaigns and fundraising, the adoption centers and shelters, and our social media outreach. I'm also responsible for the direct management of the staff at the head office.

Jacobsen: How can individuals learn more about the organizations and its activities?

Yoo: We have an [English website](#), a [Facebook page](#), and we're [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). You can also sign up for our newsletter on the website.

Jacobsen: What will be its work moving further into the 2019/2020 period?

Yoo: Our main campaign focus for the foreseeable future is the ending of the dog meat industry in South Korea. This will be obtained through public awareness campaigns and putting pressure on lawmakers to amend and strengthen the Animal Protection Act. Other than that, normal rescue,

shelter and adoption operations will continue. We'll also be looking to develop relationships with overseas organizations to help get the larger dogs liberated from dog farms adopted abroad.

Jacobsen: How can people donate time or money to the organization if interested in non-human animal rights?

Yoo: If you'd like to donate time and you live in South Korea, you can volunteer at our adoption center or at an event. If you're not in South Korea, you can support us with a direct donation, or fundraise for us using our integrated fundraising platform. And here, I have to give a shout out to Charitable who developed the Donation Management System plugin that we use on our English site. If you're a smaller non-profit without a huge fundraising budget, this plugin will help enormously.

Jacobsen: Any recommended organizations, authors, or speakers?

Yoo: CARE works with World Dog Alliance in China, and DoVE in the US. I would recommend these two organizations for their dedication to animal rights, and they're really nice people, too.

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

Yoo: Thank you for the opportunity to tell your readers about CARE and get our mission out to a wider audience.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Min-hee.

Interview with Kristine “Tin” Chan – Reproductive Health Advocacy Director, Filipino Freethinkers

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 5, 2019

Kristine “Tin” Chan is the Reproductive Health Advocacy Director for Filipino Freethinkers. Here we talk with about her life, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let’s start from the beginning. What are some familial and personal background?

Kristine “Tin” Chan: I am the youngest of three siblings. We grew up in Metro Manila, Philippines. Not sure what else you’re interested in.

Jacobsen: How did you come to the Filipino freethinking community?

Chan: My husband, Red, started the Filipino Freethinkers group and started having meetups. It all started when we would host overnight hang outs with two other friends and we’d watch movies and often talk about ethical questions, philosophy stuff.

We’d often stay up till morning just talking! And we thought if we enjoy talking about these things, perhaps there are other people out there who are similar Red found some atheist mailing lists and found out that they’re not really active in terms of meeting in person.

So, he decided to organize the first FF meetup. At first, I wasn’t so well-versed in philosophy terms and names and those were the common discussions there, so I didn’t join the discussions as much. But I’ve always helped in terms of organizing. As I learned more over time, I’m now very much involved.

Jacobsen: What are important lessons for the Filipinos and Filipinas in terms of the advancement of equality within the general culture, and, perhaps, starting with the secular community?

Chan: The Philippines is a mostly Catholic, very religious and superstitious country. Much of the oppression, especially those experienced by women and the LGBT community, is justified using religious dogma. I believe that promoting critical thinking, logic, empathy, and secularism will help a lot of people question these sources of inequality.

Jacobsen: As the Reproductive Health Advocacy Director of Filipino Freethinkers, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Chan: We were recently elected to the National Implementation Team of the Reproductive Health Law, so our responsibilities include high-level planning and advocacy. Other responsibilities include attending gatherings of the Reproductive Health Advocacy Network and collaborating with other groups for SRHR related events and activities.

Jacobsen: For the RH Bill (The Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10354)) in the Philippines, which is important for the guarantees universal access to women’s healthcare in a variety of ways, how was this important to the role of the Reproductive Health Advocacy Director?

Chan: During the time of the fight for the RH Bill, I wasn't an advocacy director yet, but I was in charge of coordination. I was in charge of mobilizing volunteers and creating various props and materials they would use for our activities and demonstrations. They usually need to be eye-catching to get the media's attention. We even used fake blood! During the rallies, I take photos and hand press releases and coordinate with media.

Jacobsen: How has this RH Bill assisted in the acknowledgement of, respect for, and implementation of reproductive rights for women in the Philippines?

Chan: It's a big win for SRHR and secularism because the Catholic Church here has been trying to stop it for more than a decade. The fact that it's now a law validates that every citizen should have access to the proper education and services. However, the fight is not over yet. The Catholic church tried to get it declared unconstitutional. And when that didn't work out for them, they were able to influence conservative legislators to limit the budget supposedly allocated for its implementation. Keeping an eye out on how it's implemented will be crucial, and being part of the NIT helps.

Jacobsen: What are some important initiatives of the freethought community in the Philippines?

Chan: Our main initiative for members is hosting meetups twice a month and an online discussion forum for over 20,000 people. For the wider society, we are involved in various human rights advocacy issues, reminding everyone involved that the secularism enshrined in our constitution should be respected. We believe in being visible. We've been told numerous times before that some nonbelievers felt so alone that if they didn't find out that there are other atheists or freethinkers out there, they would've killed themselves already. In certain cases, we try to be of help as a sort of support group.

During controversial topics like the RH Law, Sogie or anti discrimination bill, divorce bill, marriage equality, etc., we always make sure to bring up secularism or to show people where the prejudice comes from or what is used to justify it (religion usually). We also try to monitor these topics and try to inform people about it through our social media channels and our video podcasts.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved or donate money/time to Filipino Freethinkers?

Chan: They can check us out by going to our meetups. Our next one is a Cafe Humaniste this April 27. They can also email us at secretary@filipinofreethinkers.org if they wish to volunteer. We also have a PayPal link on our website for donations. <http://filipinofreethinkers.org/support>

Jacobsen: Any recommended public intellectuals on Filipino or Filipino secular issues?

Chan: Check out my husband, Red Tani. He has a lot of articles on our website <https://filipinofreethinkers.org/author/red/> and several articles on one of our national newspapers, the Philippine Daily Inquirer <https://opinion.inquirer.net/byline/red-tani>.

Let me know which other personalities you're looking for.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts?

Chan: The Philippines has been dominated too long by conservative, Catholic narratives, and it's about time people considered alternatives. With our focus on reason, science, and secularism, we hope freethought will be one alternative Filipinos seriously consider.

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

Ask Mandisa 21 – Helping Versus Saving: Leading and Being Led to Water

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 5, 2019

***Mandisa Thomas** is the Founder of **Black Nonbelievers, Inc** (**Twitter** & **Facebook**). One of the largest, if not the largest, organization for African-American or black nonbelievers & atheists in the United States.*

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 helping versus saving.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is the difference between helping and saving? Why is one approach more respectful and efficacious within the nonbelieving community?

Mandisa Thomas: To me, the difference between helping and saving: when you help people, help is an action verb. It is something that you do, for one. You are, hopefully, helping people to help themselves, where they can be physically, mentally, and emotionally able to have a sense of at-ease.

They can have a sense of stability and happiness in their lives. It is to carry on in a way that is helpful to themselves and others around them. We have members, and those who have encountered us, saying that we have saved their lives.

But it has always been within them. To save someone, it means they are looking for drastic help. It implies a sense of urgency, and that you have to completely go in and pull them out of a dire situation. Which isn't a bad thing if it's absolutely necessary.

However, there is an overall implication of chronic co-dependency. I try to stay away from that, simply because of one aspect of helping is encouraging people to do more for themselves. Saving implies someone doing this for you, whether it's on behalf of the individual or the institution/entity.

Jacobsen: What are some ways in which this plays out in the non-religious community?

Thomas: When people leave, many, they may let go of the god concept and the religious institutions. But there are so many other characteristics and aspects that people bring with them. For example, this sense of male dominance.

There are many religions and religious leaderships based on male dominance. It is based on controlling and subjugating women. So, many cultural and societal norms are similar. When people come out of religion *per se*, as well as the secular community being male-dominated, there are many still holding the men as the go-to's and leaders within the community.

Much of this tends to obscure the role of women. The fact that we have created organizations. We have been the backbone as far as community work. When people bring this mentality of these

harmful notions, which can be very harmful, there is still an aspect of seeing women as inferior or the ones who can be controlled in some way.

It's as if women are the ones needing saving. It is very harmful, especially where we see how women have been treated, how our voices have been silenced and ignored, especially with regard to how some men have treated us.

Jacobsen: Some will respond with the naturalistic fallacy. They will point to hierarchies of men in dominating positions in religions across societies. Then they imply a similar argument for the secular community.

That is, it is men at the top. Therefore, it must be men at the top, where you're noticing this carryover. What would be the response for you?

Thomas: First of all, the response would be that it's not true. We can also point to times during the Middle Ages in Europe, where the Church sanctioned the torture and murder of midwives. They branded them as witches because they were so powerful during that time.

We can also point to a time in Egyptian history, where the bloodline went through the women. It was matrilineal rather than patrilineal. Some cultures and societies are still that way today. Women are very powerful and very able to carry the bloodline.

There's historic documentation of queens ruling as leaders throughout the world. So that assertion is simply not true. The idea of men as only the ones who can rule is based on this very religious, very misogynistic, way of thinking – and unfortunately, actions.

I think that it shows that there are many people who are ignorant of not just historical facts, but also misconceptions of gender roles. They have fallen into binary ways of thinking.

It can be very, very harmful. And to be clear, women can be just as evil as men. It is the general idea that men are the ones who rule everything that is very archaic and problematic. It is extremely toxic to our movement, especially when we pride ourselves on education and progression.

When we try to help people and try to explain or show the previous way of thinking was wrong, we can only do so much. If they are unrelenting, then this means that they do not belong in the community. It is that plain and simple.

Jacobsen: What would be an example of a way of talking and speaking by a man in which a man believes he has power over the woman to “save them”?

Thomas: The worst way to continue to do this in my opinion, is to continue to talk about equality and women's rights, but keep men at the forefront, and women at their side doing the grunt work.

The men are the ones doing most of the talking. The women are the ones doing. That says a lot about the leadership and the hypocrisy of this dynamic.

We see this happen quite a lot in many movements, and it has previously been ignored. But now, it must be called out as much as possible. We have an opportunity to set a better example as a community.

Interview with Izzy Posen – President, Bristol Free Speech Society (University of Bristol)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 6, 2019

Izzy Posen grew up in an Ultra Orthodox community in Stamford Hill. He attended numerous Charedi yeshivas. He left the communities. Now, he is a Jewish educator in the wider Jewish community while continuing university studies. He is the President of the Bristol Free Speech Society at the University of Bristol. Here we talk about freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's talk about freedom of speech in a colloquial sense and freedom of expression in a civil and legal sense. How do you understand the distinction – not in their gross or coarse manifestation but in their nuanced way – between freedom of speech and freedom of expression?

Because there can be a blanketing of the two as the colloquialism “free speech,” as one branch of modern social justice movements (human rights and equality, where this means the equal provision of the right to freedom of expression).

Izzy Posen: That is a very important distinction. I have never used that exact terminology, but to go along with your definitions, I think that Freedom of Expression is a purely negative principle, whereas Freedom of Speech has negative and positive components to it. Let me explain what I mean by this.

Freedom of expression is the basic *negative* idea that governments should – generally speaking – not interfere with the expression of their citizens. I call it a negative principle because it is about what should *not* be done.

Free speech in the colloquial sense means much more for me though. Besides for including the negative aspect of free expression, it also includes *positive* principles about constructive and civil dialogue. I call this positive because it is about what we *should* do.

Free speech for me consists of the following two *positive* principles:

- Open mindedness: we do not censor others' speech because we want to hear what they have to say. We see value in dissenting views because they help us find the mistakes in ours. Listening to an opposing position will make our own position more nuanced and balanced
- Respectful dialogue: we want to construct the kind of society where disputes and disagreements are settled through respectful dialogue, rather than through violence. If we do not like what others say, we want to speak with them to flesh out our disagreements, rather than silencing them

But there is a point of nuance here that people often overlook. Free speech does not mean that all opinions have equal weight or validity. It also does not mean that everything that could be said should be said. In fact, a great deal of what is said should not be said and we should actively discourage people from engaging in hateful and divisive rhetoric. This is why free speech has to be kept distinct from free expression because we need to be able to criticise bad ideas without

allowing for the government to censor them. The principle of *respectful dialogue* in the category of free speech means that we should discourage certain kinds of speech. But, as far as the government is concerned, free expression ensures that these opinions should not be banned top down.

Another point of confusion is when people make the argument that when universities no-platform speakers they are not going against free speech since they are not a governmental organisation and are thus just not providing a platform, rather than silencing speech. This argument also results from a confusion of free speech with free expression. It is true that when universities and other non-governmental organisations no-platform speakers they are not violating *free expression*. By definition (according to the present terminology), free expression pertains to the law and to government only. However, they are going against *free speech*, as the principle of *open mindedness* means that we should be open to dissenting views. Banning views from campus just because we find them offensive goes against this principle.

These examples show that we need both paradigms. The *free expression* paradigm ensures that speech will not be censored by law. Then the *free speech* paradigm states that we should 1) be *open minded* in being willing to listen to others' views, and 2) be *respectful in dialogue* and encourage the kind of speech that is constructive and civil.

Jacobsen: What are some modern freedom of expression issues in Bristol?

Posen: We have had several instances this year where there was an attempt to stifle speech and shut down events, sometimes successfully. Last year students passed a motion that would effectively mean that speakers critical of some ideas within the transgender movement would not be able to talk on campus, under the claim that they are transphobic. The motion was later found by Student Union trustees to violate the SU's constitutional and legal obligations and the motion was as a result softened. However, there is still the worry that speakers can be banned on the basis of their views on transgender issues. Moreover, the fact that students voted to ban speakers is in itself worrying, as it shows that intolerant attitudes abound on campus.

Just a couple of weeks ago we had an event of ours cancelled. A speaker was scheduled to present her research into extremism on UK campuses. She found that many campuses host speakers who are considered extreme by the UK government. As most of the speakers in question were Islamic, the Bristol Islamic Society saw her talk as islamophobic. They organised a big protest outside the event – something that we welcomed – but also called for the event to be cancelled. Just hours before the event was scheduled to happen the university caved into pressure and cancelled the event. They also said that the speaker cannot talk on campus in the future unless there is a speaker opposing her at the event and there is an independent chair hosting the event, chosen by the SU. What is shocking is that the speaker, Emma Fox, who has not uttered an islamophobic comment in her life, has been labelled as this extremist who cannot speak unless opposition is present.

These and several other recent cases on our campus show that we still have a lot of work to do, both on an institutional level, to make sure that the university does not censor students' speech, and on a student level, to change intolerant attitudes.

Jacobsen: Does this seem widespread or more marginal but growing? In terms of either of those ways, what are the statistics to support this claim?

Posen: Last year the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights published a report on free speech in UK universities, which can be found [here](#). In it they write that they did not find a 'free

speech crisis' in universities, but are worried that there might be a chilling effect on free speech from intimidatory behaviour and excessive bureaucracy. That is largely consistent with my experience. Universities do usually want to protect students' free speech, but they often face strong pressure from the student body to censor speech. The bureaucracy is also really off-putting, as most of the work with organising events nowadays goes into the paperwork of the SU and in satisfying very stringent security demands. It is pretty clear to me that the problem of free speech on campus stems, not from the institutions themselves, but from intolerant attitudes within the student body.

Jacobsen: What seem to be the more common forms of violations of freedom of expression?

Posen: I would separate them into two categories: the *institutional* and the *attitudinal*.

As I said, universities as institutions usually do want to protect free speech, although we have at least on one occasion been told by the university that we cannot hold a certain event (the one mentioned above with Emma Fox). This is on the *institutional* level.

A far more pervasive and worrying trend is growing intolerant *attitudes* amongst the student body towards anyone who doesn't fit the orthodox narrative. This intolerance may be targeted towards people who have the "wrong" views on immigration, transgender issues, Islam and even mainstream politics. Fairly mainstream conservative politicians have been physically attacked on campus, or have faced calls and petitions to be no-platformed. Students are very quick to slander those whom they disagree with. I have been called a fascist, an islamophobe and a transphobe just for my free speech activism. Of course I'm none of these.

Jacobsen: How was is being dealt in university campuses and in Bristol? How is the local community working to protect freedom of expression and freedom of speech?

Posen: Last year the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights published their guidance on free speech to universities and students, which can be found [here](#). More recently the Equality and Human Rights Commission issued its guidance [here](#). The general public outside of universities and the media are sympathetic to our cause, as are many students on campus. Free speech societies are springing up all over the country with students are sending out the message of tolerance to their colleagues. This is bound to make a change for the better.

Jacobsen: Who seem like a prominent people who are serious, and not simply jokesters and fame seekers and fire-starters, in the modern work to protect violations of freedom of expression? Often, the more informed and intelligent, they exist on the margins of this debate, especially in the era of YouTube personalities and some Reddit commentary.

Posen: Many public personas in the UK have spoken out about these issues. Stephen Fry, a much beloved comedian and author, regularly speaks out against orthodoxy and political correctness. Ricky Gervais, a comedian, writer and actor has based his Netflix show *Humanity* around Freedom of expression. Rowan Atkinson has also spoken out about this issue in a well-circulated video.

Jacobsen: How have these topics influence daily and professional life for you?

Posen: For me it's quite the other way around: my life has influenced my activism. I grew up in an extremely conservative religious cult. We believed in the wackiest of ideas and questioning got you kicked out – which is what eventually happened to me. I have experienced first hand the dangers of dogmatism. When society silences its critics and dissenters it can get lost in its thought and ends up believing in dangerous falsehoods.

But my work on campus has also impacted my student experience. It really is all consuming work and I have had to sacrifice precious study time to be on top of things with the running of the society. Thankfully, I have an amazing and dedicated committee and together we get things done and manage to leave some time for study as well. But I also view my work as an extension of my education as a philosophy student. It's a bit like philosophical field work. Being at the forefront of these debates really makes you think a lot about questions of ethics, rights and where to draw lines in grey areas. I would say that my work is as much philosophically challenging as it is challenging work-load-wise.

Jacobsen: Any recommended authors or speakers?

Posen: I am greatly influenced by Sam Harris, through his books, but mainly through his podcast Making Sense. I find him to be an example of clear thinking and someone who values respectful dialogue for its own sake. He is also a thinker that embodies the values of enlightenment liberalism – such as scepticism, humanism, individual liberty, etc. – something that is quite rare these days following the postmodernists' critiques of liberalism.

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

Posen: I think that we should all familiarise ourselves with the pitfalls of our own intellect. Modern psychology has converged with what philosophers have been claiming for millennia, that our mind is constantly at work to deceive us. A recent book exploring these issues from the psychological angle is Kahneman's Thinking Fast and Slow. But philosophers from the ancients through Descartes and Hume have been cautioning us for scepticism and humility in our capacities. The only conclusion that we can draw from what we now know about our minds is that it makes no sense to be dogmatic. We should always be aware of the fallibility of our own thought process and that amongst our strongly held beliefs some are likely to be false. Recognising this, one should be very weary of silencing others, as we really cannot know when we are silencing someone who might be helping us get closer to what's true.

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

Posen: Was my pleasure!

Interview with Omar Shakir – Israel and Palestine Director, Human Rights Watch (Middle East and North Africa Division)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 6, 2019

Omar Shakir is the Israel and Palestine Director for Human Rights Watch (Middle East and North Africa Division). Here we talk about Israel, Palestine, human rights, international law, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start from a general overview. What are the basic facts in the modern context with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Omar Shakir: The major human rights issues stem from Israel's near half-century-long occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. That occupation has been characterized by systematic rights abuses and institutional discrimination, particularly targeting Palestinians.

It includes abuses like settlements. Israel has established over 200 Israeli-only settlements in the occupied West Bank. It has over 600,000 Israeli-Jewish settlers living in these settlements who are subject to a separate and unequal system of laws, rules, and regulations.

So, they are treated under a legal system that is different than the legal system of the Palestinians living in the same territory are ruled under. Israeli settlers are citizens of Israel, vote in Israeli elections, move freely; whereas, Palestinians are not citizens, do not vote, and do not have free movement.

Even to get to East Jerusalem or Gaza, which is part of Occupied Palestinian Territories, they are not able to do so presumptively. In addition, Palestinians are treated under military law. Whereas, Israeli settlers are treated under Israeli civil law.

Palestinians receive inferior access to electricity, health, and water. That military court system is replete. It has a 98% conviction rate. It is replete with due process violations. Of course, in addition to that, Palestinians live under a very brutal occupation, which means regular excessive force by Israeli soldiers.

It also means that Palestinians: thousands are held for politically motivated charges. Some are held in administrative detention without trial or charge.

Of course, the situation, in many ways, in the Gaza Strip is harsher in many of these respects because Israel for the last 12 years has imposed a full closure or blockade around Gaza, which means there is a generalized travel ban.

Nobody is allowed to travel into and out of Gaza, except unless if you exist within a list of narrow exemptions.

Even food as well as Palestinian exports, being able to go to the West Bank, which is part of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, are limited in their exports, the economic situation in Gaza is quite desperate in addition to the services, electricity, and water being more dismal.

In addition, in many parts of the West Bank, Palestinians are effectively not allowed to build. It is impossible to build in most of the West Bank and all of East Jerusalem. It means Palestinian homes that are built are at risk of demolition.

In fact, many Palestinian homes have been demolished. The legal status of Palestinians, especially those in East Jerusalem, have the status of the stateless, which can be revoked on a wide variety of parameters including moving out of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. It puts them in jeopardy.

Whatever geographical area that you look at, especially around the Occupied Palestinian Territories that we're talking about here, whether status, land and building policy, access to resources, even social aspects like marriage, you find really serious discrimination with Palestinians facing serious rights abuse.

Of course, it also applies in Israel itself, where Palestinian citizens of Israel who are 25% of the population face very serious and entrenched discrimination.

Jacobsen: There is another urgent fact. UN reports stating that with Gaza. It is going to be unlivable by 2020. That has been stated for at least a couple of years as far as I understand.

What are the current conditions in terms of demographics as well as some of the strong facts spoken before? Gaza in terms of the unliveability.

Shakir: In Gaza, look, you have about 2,000,000 Palestinians who are living in a 25×7 mile narrow strip of land. It is one of the most densely populated areas on Earth.

A huge percentage of the population is actually youth, are young people, who are educated and struggling to find jobs and basically live.

There are no Israelis in Gaza. Israel withdrew its settler population in 2005. However, there are Israeli towns and villages a kilometre, 2 kilometres, sometimes several kilometres away.

The discrimination is quite clear. They have access to healthcare, freedom of movement, basic civil and political rights, not given to Palestinians.

Jacobsen: What has been the longstanding international consensus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Shakir: Look, internationally, every country, there is a consensus that the West Bank and Gaza are part of an entity of Palestine. The UN has recognized Palestine as a non-member, observer state.

More fundamentally, every state in the world recognizes Israel's occupation of these lands under international law, the West Bank and Gaza.

There is virtual universal agreement outside the Israeli government basically recognize Israel's occupation of these lands.

Under international law, the West Bank and Gaza, there is universal consensus outside the Israeli government that the settlements the Israeli government has are war crimes and violations of international law. The international peace process has been on finding a two-state solution.

In terms of legal and human rights issues, the key concern has been about Israel's violations of international humanitarian law. Both the law of occupation and human rights law.

Jacobsen: With the violation of rights law, of occupation, with regards to domestic things you're talking about such as marriage, in addition to the lack of resources, the vast differential there. What is the basic misrepresentation of these straightforward facts about this conflict?

Shakir: I think what Israel would say in response, "Well, settlers are part of Israel. They are Israelis. Palestinians are part of something else. They have some limited level of Palestinian self-rule."

In fact, the 1993 Oslo Accords did establish a Palestinian Authority. The issue here is the Palestinian Authority have limited actual rule.

Most everyday decisions on fundamental things Israel controls; the air space, the water space, the borders, the entry and exit of people and goods. They even register every Palestinian baby born in Gaza. They control tax collection.

In practice, the Israeli government is the one that controls the lives of all 13 million people that live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. In other words, the modern West Bank, Israel, and Gaza.

In that land, you have about 6.5 million Jews and 6.5 million Palestinians, because some Palestinians are Israeli citizens. Palestinians receive unequal treatment, as compared to Jews, throughout this area.

Israel would say, "In the West Bank and Gaza, we don't control them. They are left to rule on their own, which doesn't match the facts on the ground. Within Israel, they vote in elections. They receive the same treatment at hospitals. While there may be issues, they, certainly, don't amount to systemic discrimination."

Even though, that as been documented by the UN and others.

Jacobsen: If you look at the Western media in terms of Western Europe and North America, there are systems of public relations that just misreport the facts, selectively report facts, or, sometimes, outright lie about the conflict.

How can people who are more critically minded about their news sources pierce through that, basically, occlusion of the facts of the matter?

Shakir: Yes, I think in this day and age. There are alternative sources of information. I think social media. I think the diversity of news sites available makes this easier to find alternative perspectives for the situation on the ground.

Unfortunately, in the West and in Europe, there is a pretty strong effort to silence those who are critical of Israel's policies.

The efforts to label critics of Israel and of the occupation, and Israeli policy, as being anti-Israel or even anti-Semitic – or attacking methods used by activists of civil disobedience like boycotts, labelling them as anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, or anti-Semitic.

When, in fact, those are the same tactics used throughout the world. I think that those who are concerned seek alternative sources of information.

If you are a citizen who relies on Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International for U.S. human rights abuses, or about the situation in Saudi Arabia or in China, then you should also rely on their reporting on the situation in Israel, Palestine, or Egypt.

I think it is important to be consistent and, likewise, to seek out Israeli NGOs including human rights work like B'Tselem, Gisha, or Breaking the Silence, or Palestinian groups like al-Haq, or Palestinian Center for Human Rights, or international groups, or even UN bodies.

If you look at direct sources of information rather than relying on media sources that have other influences, then I think that you're more likely to get at the reality on the ground.

Jacobsen: For those who want to find some other direct human rights organizations as resources, what other reliable sources of information would you recommend for them?

Shakir: B'Tselem is a great human rights organization that does work around the occupation. I think al-Haq, which is a Palestinian human rights organization based in Ramallah. It does really fantastic work.

Gisha is an Israeli human rights group based in Tel Aviv. It does really great work around Gaza and the closure of Gaza. I think if people are concerned specifically about Gaza, I think that is a great source of information.

On the Palestinian side, I think the Palestinian Center for Human Rights or the Al Mezan Center For Human Rights. Both provide great information about the situation in Gaza. I think people should avail themselves of multiple sources of information.

I think those are among the many, many groups – Israeli and Palestinian – that provide a fair review of the abuses of all parties.

All these organizations, for the most part, are not shy to talk about the Palestinian Authority and the Hamas authority and the rights abuses that they carry out as well.

Jacobsen: From the perspective of the Palestinians in the next year or two, what are their concerns?

Shakir: The closure of Gaza, I cannot emphasize that enough. It's 12 years of closure. You have unemployment rates over 50%.

For youth, it is close to 70%. In addition to unemployment, you have 80% of the population reliant on humanitarian aid at a time when humanitarian aid is being cut by humanitarian bodies, including the countries United States.

Electricity continues to be a pressing issue in Gaza. There's been a recent increase. But for the most part, people have more many, many months having 4-6 hours of electricity per day. It has slightly gone up.

But it is still not enough to meet the needs of the everyday population. In the West Bank, you have Israel continuing to expand and annex settlements in parts of the West Bank including worsening the everyday conditions for Palestinians that live in the communities, which is almost every community in settlements in the West Bank.

You have, in addition, developments with Hamas and the Palestinian Authority being divided. There has been an effective split between the West Bank and Gaza over the last few years.

We have seen both authorities arbitrarily arrest supporters of each side and put punitive pressure, especially the Palestinian Authority, on Gaza.

So, I think that combination of Palestinians stuck between multiple authorities that are intolerant of dissent. I think the everyday citizen is facing a precarious situation.

Jacobsen: What would be the perspective of the Israelis on this, as you were noting? Some would be taking any criticism of Israel as either anti-Zionist or anti-Semitic. Why resort to these assertions? What is their general perspective here?

Shakir: Look, like anyone else, I don't think the Israelis speak with one voice. I think, in fact, the human rights community; there have been some very courageous Knesset members and journalists, and other activists who have spoken very honestly about the human rights abuses that this government is perpetrating, particularly in the occupied territories.

I think a position that is more defensive of the current Israeli government. Often, you will hear that the attacks are anti-Israel or anti-Semitic. Unfortunately, I think this is an attempt to change the conversation, to attack the messenger as opposed to the substance of the critique.

It is a way to shutdown the conversation, muzzle criticism of Israel's human rights records. Many different arguments like this have been used: sometimes, terrorism, or sometimes, antisemitism, or bias altogether.

I think the reality is that these are all ways to divert from dealing with the matter in hand. The occupation and the serious rights abuses that are characteristic of it.

Jacobsen: There can be idealistic solutions in the world, "I want peace. I want to end hunger." Things like this. In terms of practical, immediate steps, such as removal of the blockade, what are ways forward for Palestinians?

Shakir: Sure, ending the closure of Gaza is step one. Without free movement, all other rights – the right to health, right to water, right to electricity, so many fundamental freedoms – are impeded.

I think dismantling settlements and the two-tiered discriminatory structure that goes along with it is critically important.

Palestinians for over five decades, or 52 years, have been deprived of their most basic civil and political rights. Their socioeconomic rights are restricted too. Ultimately, Israel needs to lift its closure. There needs to be a formal removal of settlements and an end to institutional discrimination.

There are many ways this can be done: one-state, two-state, and so on. There can be many solutions to protecting rights. The bottom line: there is no solution that does not at its core action to end the rights abuses that have continued for too long.

Jacobsen: If we're looking at the largely young population, especially in Gaza and the highly densely populated area there, I recall some commentary stating that it is more densely populated than Tokyo, Japan.

Let's say the blockade is lifted, what then can international support do to basically provide the things that kids need, e.g., education?

Shakir: I want to be clear. When we say to remove the closure, we don't mean open the doors. Israel has the right to allow an individualized security assessment. The problem now is the policy now is that it is not based on that; it is a travel ban.

No one, even my colleague, who covers Gaza for Human Rights Watch, was for the first time in her life in 2018 given a permit to leave Gaza, she left and came back. She doesn't pose a security threat.

She has been denied a permit more recently since then because it is a generalized travel ban. It is not an individualized security assessment.

If you lift it, and people and students can go abroad for study and professional opportunities, and goods are allowed to be exported, people can move between the West Bank, Gaza, and Ramallah.

International investment can come in. Who is going to invest in a territory where there is no private sector because it has been crushed by the closure?

Taking the West Bank where the situation is relatively more open than Gaza, the World Bank in 2013 estimated that the restriction in Area C of the West Bank, a part of the West Bank alone, cost over \$3 billion to the Palestinian economy.

You can imagine, if the blockade is lifted, the opportunity this would allow for everyday people.

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

Shakir: No, I think you covered it all!

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

Interview with Giovanni Gaetani on the Graphic Manifest of Intersectional Humanism

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 7, 2019

Giovanni Gaetani is the Growth and Development Officer of Humanists International, and the Creator of the Graphic Manifest of Intersectional Humanism. Here we talk about the recent work of the Graphic Manifest of Intersectional Humanism.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Out of Italy or in Italian online, you have the new Graphic Manifest of Intersectional Humanism. Obviously, this builds on the intersectionality analysis framework of Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Why use this framework of analysis for humanism?

Giovanni Gaetani: You say “obviously”, but I don’t agree that this reference is that obvious for everyone. Indeed, many feminist and progressive activists use the adjective “intersectional” without knowing its academic origin, and this is not a bad thing. On the contrary, this was actually Crenshaw’s goal, who coined the term “intersectionality” as “an everyday metaphor that anyone could use”, outside the inner circle of academic research. 30 years later, we can say that her goal is achieved.

Going back to your question, I decided to talk about “intersectional humanism” to overcome the common criticism for which humanism is just a mere lack of belief in God or, at best, the mere defence of few “atheist values” (if I may use this weird expression) like secularism and the fight against religious superstition.

Humanism is more than that: it’s a 360-degree philosophical worldview which implies a 360-degree political activism. I wanted to highlight this feature because I often hear some self-proclaimed humanists saying that, for example, feminism is not a humanist issue, or that LGBT+ rights are not a humanist issue, and so on. This is a really claustrophobic and short-sighted way to conceive humanism.

Jacobsen: We can see some of the general values including science, democracy, empathy, feminism, and so on. How does the Graphic Manifest work?

Gaetani: The Graphic Manifest is divided in two intertwined sections: values and fights. On the top there are the eight values:

- 1 Immanence (that is, the idea that life is a earthly matter to be regulated by human beings without the intervention of any transcendent entity)
- 2 Self-determination
- 3 Reason
- 4 Science
- 5 Freedom
- 6 Democracy
- 7 Meaningfulness

8 Empathy

Below the eight values, and strictly interconnected to them, there are the eight fights of intersectional humanism:

- 1 Secularism
- 2 Feminism
- 3 LGBT+ rights
- 4 Anti-racism
- 5 Non-violence
- 6 Ecologism
- 7 Liberalism
- 8 Justice

At first glance this seems just a long list of names, but actually each value and fight is precisely defined in the Manifest. The problem is that I wrote everything in Italian, because the whole project is indeed addressed exclusively to an Italian audience. Perhaps one day I will find the time to translate it into English.

Jacobsen: How can one use the graphic manifest method to represent the fundamental premises and supports of the belief structure of humanism?

Gaetani: The Manifest is a sort of graphic *memorandum*. It visually reminds us that all humanist values and fights are interconnected, thus we must defend all values and carry on all fights at the same time. Limiting oneself to one single value or fight is both naive and counterproductive: this was exactly the disruptive and revolutionary idea of intersectional feminism. The Graphic Manifest of Intersectional Humanism lies on this premise and tries to visually represent it.

Jacobsen: Why create this in the first place? What spawned the idea?

Gaetani: On top of what I said above, I wanted to create a graphic manifest because I'm convinced by Marshall McLuhan's idea that "the medium is the message". This was true already in 1964 and it is valid even more today. We live indeed in the era of social networks. Communication is absurdly fast nowadays. Images and videos took over words and long texts. And you have up to 3 seconds to get people attention while their scrolling their timeline. We can either decide to ignore this fact, keeping on communicating in the old-fashioned way, or we can try to adapt to it, creating new original ways to share the same humanist message through the media we have at our disposal today.

I chose the second option. Not because I don't like long texts (it's quite the opposite) nor because I want to over-simplify things. On the contrary, I value the importance of the humanist message and the urgency to reach and attract as many people as possible. The Graphic Manifest was one of the most immediate ways to do it in my opinion.

Jacobsen: Do other graphic manifests exist? Or is this a wholly novel idea?

Gaetani: Not that I am aware of, but I doubt that this is a wholly novel idea. Anyway, it was for sure something new for Italy, where few people know the actual meaning of the word "humanism" and even fewer people define themselves "humanist".

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in relevant humanist organizations?

Gaetani: On the website of Humanists International there is a long list of humanist organizations around the world. I believe that the best way for people to get involved is to volunteer for their closest humanist organization. It's important that we all do our own small bit of activism, because in the end is the sum of all those bits that will eventually make the world a better place to live in.

Humanist activism is indeed effective only in the long run and provided that everyone will do their own part. For regressive and conservative movements around the world the task is easier: they fight to slow the advancement of human rights and to deny the recognition of those rights to new groups of people (women, LGBT+, atheists, etc.). We are here to do the opposite: we want to foster the advancement of human rights and to recognise those rights to each and every human being as such, to protect all aspects of their holistic identities from any discrimination. The task of intersectional humanists is way harder, yes, because we promote inclusiveness where other promote discrimination. I don't know if humanism will succeed in the end, but this doesn't matter, because, as William of Orange said, "it is not necessary to hope in order to act, nor to succeed in order to persevere." I think and act as an intersectional humanist because it's simply the right thing to do right now.

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

Gaetani: It was my pleasure!

Interview with Dr. Gad Saad – Professor of Marketing & Concordia University Research Chair in Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences and Darwinian Consumption (2008-2018), John Molson School of Business

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 7, 2019

Dr. Gad Saad is a Professor of Marketing, and was the Concordia University Research Chair in Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences and Darwinian Consumption (2008-2018) in the John Molson School of Business.

Here we talk about evolution via natural selection, behavioural science, freedom of expression, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start with some brief background for those who may not know who you are, of course, many well, just given the Canadian context. So, what is your general story – family, personal background, and some the general context being geography, culture, language, and so on?

Professor Gad Saad: Sure, I was born in Lebanon, in 1964. A family of Lebanese Jews. We were part of the last waves of remaining Jews in Lebanon. At one point, there were several thousand Jews that lived in Lebanon.

But with each conflict that typically arose between Israel and the Arab countries, it became less and less desirable to be Jewish in Arab countries. Not only because of Israel, but because of the usual antisemitism stuff. By the time the civil war started in the mid-70s, then it was really impossible to be Jewish in Lebanon.

We had to flee while running for our lives. We moved to Canada. I was 11-years-old. I saw the first year of the civil war. Then, for the next few years, my parents kept going back and forth from Montreal to Lebanon, because they still had some business interests in Lebanon.

In 1980, several years after officially emigrating to Canada, they were kidnapped in Lebanon by one group called Fatah. One of the Palestinian terrorist groups. Luckily, we were able to get them out, to free them. They were able to get about 8 days in captivity.

After that, once they were able to leave Lebanon, no one from my immediate family has returned back to Lebanon. It has been since 1980 that no one has gone back.

Jacobsen: How did you develop an interest in things like behavioural science, things like evolution and evolutionary psychology?

Saad: Right, it had been a long time since I had been interested in behavioural sciences in general. I did an undergraduate in mathematics and computer science, so very technical and very quantitative background. I had always had a side interest in the behavioural sciences.

At one point, I thought about going into clinical psychology, even psychiatry. I was also very interest in criminal psychology. But then, I decided that, instead, I would go and study human behaviour, but specifically within a less dark context, not criminal behaviour and so on.

I didn't think I had the right personality to do clinical work, because I felt that I wouldn't be able to disassociate myself from all the misery that I might hear. And so, I decided to do an MBA after my undergraduate, and then I did an M.Sc. and then a Ph.D. I planned on being a mathematical modeller of human behaviour.

In other words, I would be applying my quantitative background on decision-making. I connected with a supervisor, doctoral supervisor, at Cornell, who himself was a well-known psychologist. He suggested or recommended that I take some psychology courses in my Ph.D.

During that first semester as a doctoral student at Cornell University, I took a course titled "Advanced Social Psychology" with a professor by the name of Dennis Regan. About halfway through the semester, he assigned a book called homicide written by two Canadians.

Now, we're going back to my criminal interest. It was by two Canadian evolutionary psychologists from McMaster. In the book, they demonstrated that there are certain patterns of criminality that happen in a similar way across cultures and time periods. The reason there is this universal reality is because of some of these evolutionary mechanisms.

So, that was my first exposure to the burgeoning field of evolutionary psychology. That's when I had my eureka moment. I decided that what I would do with my scientific work is to take this evolutionary lens and then apply it to consumer behaviour. That is how I became an evolutionary behavioural scientist.

Jacobsen: I have been told by a chair of a psychology department that, in essence, one good thing about psychology courses for those who may have an interest in taking those courses in their early years or more advanced years in undergraduate.

Basically, students are given epistemology courses, but they don't call them epistemology courses. They're called "Statistics" and "Methodology."

Saad: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing] so, this quantitative background I could see being very applicable to some of the work that you were doing during your training.

Saad: Exactly.

Jacobsen: When we're looking at criminality and the evolutionary origins of this criminality, how do we build this universal sense of criminality into the varieties of social conventions to be able to then label something criminal behaviour?

Saad: So, I will give two very explicit examples form the readers, to how you would apply the evolutionary lens to criminal behaviour. Take, for example, the dreadful reality of child abuse, which is, of course, a criminal reality. There are endless possible variables that one can study related that might predict child abuse.

Are you born on the wrong side of the tracks? Is there a characteristic of your parents? If they were abused, does that mean that you're more likely to e abused? Is there alcoholism in the home?

There are all sorts of economic reasons, sociological reasons, possibly psychological reasons, issues dealing with reasons, historical reasons.

Some of these might have some predictive power. As it turns out, there is one characteristic that is 100-fold a greater predictor of a child being abused in the home. Do you know what it is? No idea. Watch now how incredible the power of evolutionary theory is going to, if there is a step-parent in the house, there is a 100-fold increase.

The reason I say this with such emphasis: because, usually, in statistics, if you say something has an odds ratio of 1.2, it means that it has a 20% greater chance.

That 1 to 1.2, not 1 to 100! To say something is 100 times greater predictor is unheard of in science, having a step-parent in the house is by far the greatest danger that a child faces, the reality is that the reason that happens is the exact reason for that happening in another species.

Take, for example, lion species, there will be 2 or 3 dominant males who will be protecting a pride. All of the sexually mature males that arise from that pride will be kicked out, eventually.

You will have a whole bunch of sexually frustrated young males running around the savannah looking to encroach on new prides in order to take over the females.

For many years, they won't be able to do it, because the resident males will be bigger, stronger, younger, more experienced. Eventually, reality catches up to you. Those younger males are no longer young. They're weak. They face two choices. Either they will be killed by the encroaching males or they will be kicked out.

What is the first thing the new prides do when they take over? They systematically go around and kill every single cub of that pride. Why do they do that? Because lions are the only social feline species. It means males will be investing in cubs. They don't want to be wasting their investment in cubs not sired by them.

In other words, many species where you have a heavy investment by the parents, usually females invest a lot. But sometimes, males invest a lot. You do not want to invest in those who are not your biological offspring. Therefore, we have evolved this psychology that is discriminating in its solicitude.

We are not invested as much in our step-children as we are in our biological children. This doesn't mean that most people who are raised by step-parents haven't been raised by lovely people.

It doesn't mean that every step-parent is an abuser. It does mean that if you have a step-parent, then you're much more likely to be abused.

Hence, the Cinderella fable, it is a universal story precisely because it speaks to a universal truth. A second quick example, the most dangerous person in a woman's life throughout the world and all time is not the serial rapist behind the tree about to pounce on you.

It is your long-term partner. It is your husband, your long-term mate. That is by far the most dangerous person in a woman's life. He is often driven to homicidal rage, either kill or beat you, if he suspects or knows for sure that you have been sexually unfaithful to him.

The reason is very simple. To the extent that human males are biparentally invested in their children, they do not want to raise somebody else's child.

Therefore, they have evolved, behavioural, cognitive system to not tolerate cuckoldry, “I do not want to raise the sexy gardener’s baby who comes to rake our leaves. Therefore, I am going to be territorial over my woman.”

You and I are both the descendants of males who really did care that their women did not go around. It did not mean women went around cheating. It doesn’t mean, by the way, that if you explain something scientifically that you’re condoning it.

A lot of people think that if I explain child abuse, or if I explain infidelity, or if I explain rape, that I am condoning rape or child abuse, which is, of course, ridiculous.

These are two examples whereby I have shown you how with a beautiful stroke of evolutionary theorizing; you can get rid of all the bullshit explanations that social scientists come up with.

Jacobsen: I like the heuristic there of description does not mean prescription.

Saad: [Laughing] of course.

Jacobsen: At the same time, if you’re looking at some of the evolutionary explanations that were being provided in terms of behavioural analysis as well, whether in criminality or in the ways in which child abuse can occur across species, e.g., lions, humans, how else does this play into some of the dynamics, the sexual dynamics, that people notice rather obviously upon reflection between the sexes and between the genders?

For instance, I am told, by watching some of David Buss and reading some of his stuff, university students love his material based on some of those dynamics.

Saad: How do we apply the evolutionary lens to explain the sex differences? Basically, am I rewording your question properly?

Jacobsen: That as well as the dynamics between the sexes as well.

Saad: Nothing exists outside of biology. Nothing exists outside of evolution. For all sorts of reasons, usually, always ideological and never to do with science, people have an aversion to the application of the evolutionary lens in explaining the human conditions.

Let me give you just a couple reason for these aversions, then I will answer the question fully, people hate the idea that the principles that explain the dog, the mosquito, and the zebra, also explain the behaviour of humans. Sure, the zebra is behaving because of these evolutionary reasons.

But surely, we transcend our biology. Surely, what makes us human is that we are cultural animals who not defined by our basal biology. That’s the argument that is typically given.

So, when it comes to sex differences or when it comes to the dynamics between the sexes, people think that these are driven by socialization, by learning, by culture.

Learning, socialization, and culture do not exist as a contra to biology; they exist in their form because of biology. Nothing is outside of biology. It isn’t either walk in biology world or walk in socialization world. It is not a coincidence that across all religions that I am aware of.

It is the women who are taught through whatever god you prefer that they should be chaste in their behaviour, they should be sexually restrained. Very, very different religions always seem to always come up with the same gods that are uniquely concerned with female sexuality.

So, everything, whether it comes to why men are the way they are, why we interact the way we do, it is all related to evolutionary dynamics. Feminists will hate that. Because they think that if you explain the biological bases of sex differences, then this allows the sexist status quo to persist.

Post-modernists hate evolutionary psychology. Because, to the extent that you argue that there are human universals, they'll say, "No that can't be because there is no such thing as a universal truth." Religious people will hate evolutionary theory. Because if evolution is correct, "Where does my god fit into all of this?"

So, for all sorts of idiotic ideological reasons, people simply have a visceral hatred of evolutionary theory. The reality is that there is no other game in town. You can't understand sexual differences. You can't understand sexual dynamics. You can't understand anything without the evolutionary lens.

Jacobsen: How does this inform or should this inform the evidence-based structuring of policy, of politics, and the like, or at least an understanding?

Saad: You got about four hours for that answer?

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Saad: Look, think about a marketer, if he or she is a good marketer, then he or she is a good student of human nature. You can't come up with products that are going to be successful if they are antithetical to some fundamental principle of human nature.

A company decides, "We no longer wish to create romance novels where it is the toxic masculinity stereotype that's describing or depicting the male hero. He is tall. He is a count. He is a surgeon. He is physically aggressive. He wrestles alligators with a six pack. But he can only be tamed by the love of this one woman."

I basically described almost every single story of every single romance novel that has ever been written. Let's say a company comes out and says, "We no longer want this antiquated sexist stereotype of masculinity. We're going to come up with a new type of male hero.

One who sucks his thumb while crying in a fetal position in a corner while listening to Taylor Swift music. Because we want a new sensitive definition of masculinity. What do you think the women readers around the world who consume this product are going to say?"

They will say, "I don't think so. I want to be reading about the tall, reckless, aggressive, socially dominant male. That is what I fantasize about. Whether developing products, to answer your question in a roundabout way, or developing economic systems or sociopolitical systems, these have to be congruent with basic elements of human nature.

Socialism and communism, I love this quip by E.O. Wilson, the famous Harvard biologist.

Jacobsen: Oh right, I remember this.

Saad: You know who that is, yes. Do you know the quote?

Jacobsen: It was 'nice theory, wrong species.'

Saad: [Laughing and clapping] excellent! Well done! Did you get that from me, or did you read it from the original source?

Jacobsen: Oh gosh, it was years ago. I am having source amnesia. But it is one of those things from a long time ago, but yeah.

Saad: Okay, that's it. You got it. You pre-empted what I was going to say. Wonderful idea, great system, wrong species, for social ants, it is a beautiful system. He studies social ants. He is an entomologist.

You've got one queen. It is not so for humans. So, anything that you do. Whether you are designing health intervention strategies, let's take an example, if I am trying to convince young men to stop heavy smoking because heavy smoking has all sorts of health consequences, 40 years from now you're going to get heart disease and lung cancer, and so on.

The 21-year-old young guy who thinks he is invincible and immortal is not going to pay attention to that, "Who cares? It doesn't apply to me. I am a 21-year-old buck."

But tell him, and it takes much of an evolutionary psychologist to understand this point, the only group of people who are of his age who are likely to suffer from erectile dysfunction are heavy smokers.

Suddenly, you're got his attention. In other words, target an evolutionary relevant message. If you are trying to target women to stop suntanning so much because women suntan more than men, even though they know the ill consequences of suntanning more than men, you cannot tell them about melanoma in 40 years.

Show them the aesthetic ravages to their skin. So, using evolutionarily relevant messages increases the efficacy of the health intervention, everything in politics, economics, in fiscal policy, in anything you want.

You're only going to have a better outcome if your policies are evolutionarily informed.

Jacobsen: Let's transition more now into some of the current affairs.

Saad: Sure.

Jacobsen: So, there are issues in America – some conversation at least – around freedom of speech as per their First Amendment. In Canada, it is around Article 2(b), as we both know, in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* for freedom of expression.

Internationally, it is Article 19 in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* for freedom of expression. So, there is a framework of understanding here. There are conversations around it.

The first question would be, "Does this seem like a serious problem or a moderate problem at this time in terms of the ability for those that are in professional positions, such as yourself, or those who are in a laypersons position, like a regular Canadian citizen, to utilize their freedom of expression rights?"

Saad: Yes, it is a civilizationally important problem. Contrary to what many people think when they have a very myopic view of the greater issue, freedom of speech is not simply restricted to whether the government allows me to say what I want to say or not.

Although, that is a conversation to have. The United States has the First Amendment protection. Canada and Europe doesn't. That's a separate issue. Let's talk at a much broader level, the fact that most students in a classroom are hesitant to speak their minds about issues that are truly important, and are certainly part of a conversation that should be had at a university.

Is Donald Trump a good president or not? That shouldn't be such a controversial conversation to have. Certainly, by functioning normal adults in a university setting, but try to be a university student and simply say, "I really liked Donald Trump. Here's the reason why I like him."

Look what happens to your grade when your professor, who is likely to be completely leftist, grades your paper, many professors, many students, many staff members, many parents of students will refrain from speaking their minds.

Not because the government stops them from speaking, but because they are afraid of a wide range of repercussions. It might be that my good friends on Facebook will unfriend me, because I like Donald Trump.

It might be because they think I am a Nazi because I support evolutionary psychology. So, the freedom of speech issue in, at the least the way that I frame it, is much broader than does the government allow you to do x or not.

So, for example, when social media companies are deplatforming people and demonetizing YouTube channels and so on, that is not the government. When some idiot writes to me and says, "Come on, Dr. Saad, you know that YouTube is not the government."

I know that. But the fact that you're creating a chilling environment everywhere you turn where people are afraid to speak freely is a real problem.

To answer your question in the broadest possible sense, I think the attacks on freedom of speech are coming from many, many different sources; and we shouldn't only be thinking of the government as attacking our freedoms.

Just the zeitgeist of society is currently very anti-free speech.

Jacobsen: In a professional context, in Canadian society, what have been negative consequences to those who are probably the most, or in theory, the most protected in society, tenured professors?

Saad: It's great that you ask this question. I have a section in my book about the erroneous idea, "Oh, because I am protected by tenure, it is really not so courageous that I speak out." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Sure, tenure in a very, very limited sense protects me tomorrow from the dean coming and firing me because I said, "Radical feminism is bullshit." But I suffer professionally in endless other ways. I applied in the past two years for chaired professorships, which I should have easily gotten.

I didn't. I could have predicted that I would not have gotten them. There were endless professorships that I wasn't going to get, but I didn't. Because someone complained that the Jewish Nazi Gad Saad is going to be applying to come to our university."

There are many costs to bear, where tenure will not protect you. Let me give you another example, in the fall of 2017, I had to go into the university and always check in with security. They would lock the door from the outside; so, that if the student left, they could leave freely.

But then if they wanted to come back in, you had to unlock the door because of the number of death threats that I had received. The university asked me very forcefully to file a report with the Montreal police based on those death threats.

So, to those who think, “Oh, you are tenured. You have this cloak on invincibility around you.” To those people, I say, “Why don’t you give me your home address and speak against Islam the way that I do and then you can get back to me and tell me whether tenure protected you or not?”

So, again, the dangers are much more than simply if you have tenure or not. It goes from as banal as “I don’t want to say anything on Facebook because my friends will unfriend me” to “someone is threatening to boil you alive you dirty Jew.”

So, there is the whole gamut of possible repercussions. Frankly, I have had to bear all of those consequences.

Jacobsen: What is an evolutionary-behavioural solution to this?

Saad: To what? To getting people to speak out?

Jacobsen: To feeling and actually enacting more free behaviour in terms of expression.

Saad: It is a tough question. I think for many phenomena. We are pulled by different Darwinian pulls. You see what I mean? I have an evolved gustatory preference to eat fatty foods. But I also know that if I eat too much of that in the environment of plenty, then it can have downstream health consequences.

So, I also have the evolved capacity to think about the consequences. I have an evolved desire as do all people to stray from my monogamous union. But I also have an evolved moral calculus that stops me from doing so, because I have committed to this individual.

There isn’t this panacea evolutionary answer. Humans are cowardly, regrettably. Most humans are. Therefore, one could argue that it is evolutionary appropriate to not want to martyr themselves, to be part of the herd.

But there is also the evolutionary imperative to be the one who has the highest status. The one who takes the greatest risks becomes the one. All the ladies will line up to the one who takes the big reward. I do not think there is a singular answer.

That’s why I think it is so challenging. I think there are multiple evolutionary pulls pulling most people. So, regrettably, most end up being apathetic in their cowardous. One of the things that I try to do in my public engagement is to try to convince people that if they ignore the problem, then it is not going to go away.

That’s what I call Ostrich Parasitic Syndrome. It is going to catch up to you. Maybe, not in 5 years, maybe not in 50 years, maybe in the time of your children; but if you do not doggedly fight for freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, every single moment of every single day, you will lose it.

I come from a culture where we lost it. I do not want it to be repeated here in Canada.

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

Saad: Oh! Thank you so much! Cheers.

Ask Rob 3 – Contributing to Freethought Publications: Do What You Do All The Time, Use Words

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 8, 2019

Rob Boston is the Editor of Church & State (Americans United for Separation of Church and State). Here we talk about contributing to freethought publications.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Mentoring remains important. It becomes important for developing as a person as a mentor and as a writer as a mentee. How do you mentor folks?

Rob Boston: I have not formally mentored anyone, but over the years I've done that on an informal level. I've been asked for advice by junior colleagues and others who are interested in working in the field of publications as a profession. I've always tried to play it straight with people: writing can be a tough way to make a living these days, but if you manage to pull it off, it's very rewarding. These days, being able to write often isn't enough, which I think is unfortunate. In the age of social media, a writer must work on developing a "brand" and learn how to market oneself on social media. I'm not fond of this, but it's a reality and anyone who aspires to write for a living must deal with it.

Jacobsen: With mentoring writers, one part comes from providing encouragement to their strengths. Another big part: simply convincing them to do what they do all the time but on paper or a computer screen, which is use words. Do you find the same? People have more innate writing ability than they think, but just don't trust themselves.

Boston: Some people are great writers and just need a little help polishing the edges and making their prose more user-friendly. I was trained as a journalist, so I learned to write in a concise manner and in a way that is accessible to the average reader. A basic course in journalistic writing is useful for anyone who wants to work in any facet of communications. But having said that, I do think writing is in some respects like art or music: some people have the skill to do it, and some do not. I don't believe everyone can be trained to write well. Some people will master technical proficiency but never really have a flair. There's no shame in that. We all have different skills and talents.

Jacobsen: Has the digital era changed the means of mentorship, e.g., Skype, Google Hangout, Zoom, email, and so on?

Boston: It's a lot easier now to mentor people, formally or informally, than it was before the rise of the web and email. For one, you don't need to meet face to face, which means you can offer support to people pretty much anywhere and at any time.

Jacobsen: How do you incorporate your mentoring methodology to the newer, younger generations of writers – 18-to-35-year-olds?

Boston: I try to be as honest as possible: My approach to writing is decidedly old school. While I write lots of short pieces for Americans United's blog and can crank out a brief press release in no time, I also produce a lot of articles for *Church & State* magazine that might run 2,000-3,000 words or more. I'll admit upfront that I'm not terribly clever on Twitter, and I'll never be a master of

memes — although I admire people who are. If your goal is to be a social media wizard, I'm not your man. But for young people who see the value of in-depth writing and long-form journalism, I'm always happy to share my ideas.

Ask Herb 7 – God May Play Dice With the Universe, But Human Beings Need to Ethically Calculate Nonetheless

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 9, 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 ethics.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Given the response about Giordano Bruno and others in the previous session, and given the universe does – so to speak – roll the die with its lonesome self, this does not remove the classical middle world in which we inhabit, where things in the social world of evolved creatures come with impacts – both positive and negative to the evolved creatures.

In this sense, ethics becomes inevitable, in a sense, or unavoidable. The question becomes what ethic or morality best fits this apparent neutral operator for the world of social creatures including human animals or, rather, human primates. What ethic sits behind the activism for you? Obviously, you have been highly motivated in personal and professional history.

Herb Silverman: We live in an uncaring universe, so I think is up to humans to do what we can to make the world a better place for us, for other species, and for future generations. To do that, we must try to prevent an apocalypse.

I used to enjoy making fun of televangelists who talked about an imminent apocalypse in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil and raises the righteous to life in a messianic kingdom. The signs, they said, were everywhere—hurricanes, tornados, floods, droughts, wildfires, famines, and a general collapse of civilization. I no longer make fun of these apocalyptic signs, which of course have nothing to do with a deity.

Some people are predicting a climate apocalypse in our lifetime. And what we do about it might be the moral problem of our time. By “we,” I don’t necessarily mean you and I as individuals. I do what I can, like recycling, using paper instead of plastic, eating a vegetarian diet, driving a small Prius, and generally trying to leave a low carbon footprint. But this is more an issue for what countries are willing to do and how much influence people like us can have over public policy. We know that our use of fossil fuels emits too much carbon into the atmosphere, heating the world and apparently pushing us closer to mass calamity.

The science is clear. Climate change is real. There is a 97% consensus among climate scientists that humans are contributing to climate change, along with a dangerous rise in sea levels putting our communities and the world at risk. Some prominent climate deniers make money from the fossil-fuel industry. To take environmental issues seriously, we are led to the need for government regulation of some kind, so rigid free-market ideologues don’t want to believe that environmental concerns are real. Many who acknowledge climate change and that humans are at fault say economic costs in change would be too great.

Before turning our way of life and economy upside down, we need a well thought out roadmap for success. There is room for disagreement about the best way to address climate change. The United Nations International Panel on Climate Change, and even President Trump's own administration, have confirmed that we are facing human-caused extinction if we don't reduce our carbon emissions by 50 percent in the next twelve years and bring them to near-zero by 2050. We need some combination of wind, solar, and nuclear energy, which I think requires an enforceable global treaty to get us off of fossil fuels, onto renewables. We need some version of a Green New Deal, with the United States leading the way.

Despite public statements of support, the political establishment has not agreed that the long-term stability gained by curbing emissions would be worth a painful cost of short-term changes to a society built on fossil fuels. We all have a personal duty to leave Earth in good condition for future generations. To deny the science is to deny responsibility for future generations and the future of our planet.

Sadly, some Evangelicals recognize the dangers of climate change and welcome it as the biblically predicted apocalypse. They believe that God is using climate change to enact his wrath on the world. To quote 2 Peter 3:10: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up."

Secular Americans believe that policy should be driven by reason, evidence, and science. Unfortunately, this common-sense approach to policy is at odds with many American politicians who have rejected the scientific consensus on climate change. As atheists and humanists, it is crucial that we recognize that the responsibility to create and maintain sustainable methods of living is a collective one. We acknowledge the damage done to our environment has been caused by human action and constitutes an existential threat to humanity and many other species that have not already been wiped out. We understand that only humans can save ourselves from the climate crises we have created.

You might wish to check the websites of the American Humanist Association, the Secular Coalition for America, and other atheist and humanist organizations to see how you can work collectively to help prevent an environmental apocalypse.

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

Interview with Monika Mould – Former Financial Secretary, Humanist Association of Ghana

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 10, 2019

Monika Mould is the Former Financial Secretary of the Humanist Association of Ghana. Here we talk about her life, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How was early life for you, e.g., geography, culture, language, religion or lack thereof, political views, educational attainment, and so on?

Monika Mould: My early years were rocked by chaos. I lost my mother at the age of 1 but my sister and I were fortunate enough to be raised by our loving grandmother and aunties. However, this meant that we typically moved from home to home and became very exposed to different families and ideas at a very early age. I think this influenced our shared lack of attachment to any specific ideology and instilled a natural skepticism in us. I remember questioning the existence of God at age 10, debating with an older friend who later became a pastor. Clearly, my arguments weren't strong enough but it foreshadowed the uphill battle to come of trying to combat deeply held religious beliefs with reason even with the most otherwise rational people. I grew up having very liberal views because I my upbringing wasn't very conservative by Ghanaian standards. I spoke three Ghanaian languages Fante & Ga because I lived with both sides of the family and two is largely spoken in Accra. I attended all catholic schools up until high school but attended a secular liberal arts university also in Ghana.

Jacobsen: When it comes to secularism and humanism, when did these become important philosophical views for you?

Mould: I first became exposed to the idea of humanism through our freethought Ghana group. An old schoolmate of mine called me one day and said "I heard you're an atheist". I immediately became defensive because this statement is usually an accusation but he surprised me by inviting me to join the then newly formed Facebook group of Ghanaian Freethinkers. The group agreed to start meeting in person and before long, we started discussing humanism because the underlying concept of atheism or freethought did not in themselves hold any ethical value or guidelines for interacting with others and for contributing to society in a meaningful way. We later became the founding members of the Humanist Association of Ghana. In hindsight, I always identified with secular and humanist principles to some extent which contributed to why I abandoned religion.

Jacobsen: Many humanists would identify as one form of feminist or other. What seems to ally various streams of feminist thought with humanism?

Mould: The concept of equality and fairness is key here; humanism is concerned with reducing suffering and one of the greatest injustices in our world today is the oppression of a majority based on their gender.

Jacobsen: What have been your executive roles, and associated tasks and responsibilities, with the Humanist Association of Ghana?

Mould: I first served as a council member, tasked with ensuring that the team stayed true to our values and the original goals of the organization, and subsequently became the Treasurer for a brief stint before leaving Ghana.

Jacobsen: How does empowerment and advancement of women in Ghana help with the advancement of humanistic values?

Mould: Well, that's more than half of the population contributing more to our economy, and including more voices in our political, professional, educational, entertainment and social spaces! Humanist ideas across the globe can only evolve by empowering women and listening to more diverse voices. Most humanist forums tend to be male dominated so we do need more representation to ensure that women's interests are being prioritized as well.

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for the youth humanist community moving into 2019/2020 more?

Mould: That we are able to collaborate with more societies that share some of our common goals, and reach out to young people who have open minds but do not have an avenue to openly express their ideas or a community to support them. Our executive teams have been very proactive in reaching outside our community to collaborate with feminist and LGBT activists, governmental and international orgs as well as other humanist groups both in and outside Ghana. Our members have also been very vocal on social media and participated in events to condemn oppressive voices in Ghana who are touting homophobia and misogyny in the mainstream media.

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

Interview with Robert Peoples – Founder and President, Affinis Humanity Coalition

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 11, 2019

Robert Peoples is the Founder and President of the Affinis Humanity Coalition. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When did humanism become the proper life stance for you?

Robert Peoples: Well, before I embraced humanism, I was raised in a Baptist Church in central New Jersey. I even sang in the choir. I attended church ever since I had a rattle in my hand and a pacifier in my mouth. I was naturally curious; as most children are. Although I participated in church, my thirst for knowledge was not satisfied by the clergy. At the age of 13, my cousin Harold introduced me to, “The Age of Reason” by Thomas Paine. By the time I was 18 years of age, I fully embraced my humanist and atheist position. The writings of Thomas Paine changed my life.

Jacobsen: How is humanism incorporated into the work of the Affinis Humanity Coalition? Also, what is the source of the title of the organization?

Peoples: I’ve always believed advocacy is visibility. One of the various ways I incorporate humanism is visually displaying people through the Secular Faces project: an online photography campaign that seeks to normalize humanism one face at a time. Going into high schools is another venue to incorporate humanism through our nonprofit. Let’s face it; the youth today aren’t exposed to various philosophies until college. That’s too late. They’re still using the amygdala (emotional part of the brain) to attempt to rationalize their experiences. Adults utilize the prefrontal cortex (the rational part of the brain) to think with and understand the consequences of their actions. Humanism fosters critical thinking. It’s about teaching our youth how to think and not what to think.

The name Affinis [uh-fin-is] is the Latin derivative of the word, affinity: a natural attraction/liking to a person or thing. I choose the name because of the attraction to humanism. The proclivity of humanity is to depend on itself.

Jacobsen: Who have been important partners of the Affinis Humanity Coalition?

Peoples: The Secular Coalition for Arizona has been a pertinent partner of our organization. They are a 501(c)(4) nonprofit advocacy organization that works to ensure a secular state government. Mandisa Thomas, CEO of Black nonbelievers and Monica Miller, senior counsel for the American Humanist Association have partnered up with us to promote non-theistic dialogue through the Secular Faces project.

Jacobsen: What have been milestones in its efforts to advance humanism?

Peoples: On April 1st and April 9th of this year, I delivered two humanist invocations to the Arizona Senate and House of Representatives. Secular Coalition for Arizona invited me to speak. Neither Senate nor House of Representatives opposed the invocation. Based on the recent negative pushback for secular invocations statewide and the deliverance of “fire and brimstone” prayer, it was surprising and refreshing that my state accepted it well. Recently, being elected to the board

of directors for the Secular Coalition for Arizona Communities was a great honor. I'm excited to serve my secular community.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in Affinis Humanity Coalition?

Peoples: People can get involved by participating in our Secular Faces photography project and Secular Voices video campaign. Both platforms can be accessed online via our website. Our supporters can also purchase our humanist apparel where proceeds go towards facilitating school/business presentations, materials, and equipment management. Donations are always welcomed and needed.

Jacobsen: What should be some new endeavors of the work of humanists around the world now?

Peoples: I believe integrating philosophical curriculum in high schools is imperative to establishing critical thinking in America. There's an agenda in our nation to promote theocratic principles in public schools. The most vulnerable demographic in our country is youth. It should be about teaching our children how to think and not what to think.

Another critical endeavor is marketing. Generation Z is the least religious demographic than any generation before its time. For a time, the millennial generation was the least religious generation ever. Now, atheism has doubled amid Generation Z. The question is, how do we invigorate engagement with the younger generation? Like the comic con and anime events that draw hundreds of thousands of participants, how can the humanist community create an attractive model that fosters high levels of interest?

The youth is our future foundation.

Jacobsen: What are the threats to the global humanist community?

Peoples: Theocracy leads the way in global humanist threats. Wherever there is fundamentalism, there exists an oppressive aspect towards marginalized groups. Women's rights come to mind. Fundamentalism breeds contempt towards the LGBTQ community. A peer-reviewed meta-analytic study stemming back from the civil rights era entitled, Why Don't We Practice What We Preach, discloses the more overtly religious people are, the more racist they are. We can no longer afford to turn the other cheek and allow tenets of bigotry to rule under the guise of fundamentalist religion.

Jacobsen: How can humanists stand more strongly for human rights with various forms of activism?

Peoples: Activism in the cyber realm has, spread awareness regarding human rights issues. However, local community events pose the greatest immediate effect. I believe, collaborating with human rights organizations in one's city and connecting joint efforts with humanism provide visibility. It's one thing to post on social media with likes and comments. However, it's another thing to be visible in your everyday community. I'm thinking of humanist community centers.

Jacobsen: Any recommended authors or speakers?

Peoples: Godless Citizens in a Godly Republic: Atheists in American Public Life is a book written by historians R. Laurence Moore and Isaac Kramnick. It explores the plight of atheists in America stemming back from the early 17th century pilgrims up until today. It's a provocative written work.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Peoples: My final thoughts are with women. Religion is a tool to covet a more sinister identity—patriarchy. Controlling fertility under the fictitious auspice of God is truly about controlling the physicality of women. The Handmaid's Tale comes to mind. A vast majority of women feel compelled to submit to their husbands. This notion is echoed in Ephesians 5: 22-24:

“Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”

The religious, psychological exploitation of wife's devotion to their husbands keeps the Stockholm Syndrome continuing. Women are the key to a free society and religion is the last domino standing.

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

Interview with Jack Norris, R.D. – Executive Director, Vegan Outreach

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 12, 2019

Jack Norris, R.D., is the Executive Director of Vegan Outreach. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How does one get into a vegan world?

Jack Norris: There are many reasons why someone becomes interested in being vegan. Research indicates that most often people try a vegan diet for health reasons. Research also shows that people who are vegan in order to avoid killing animals are more likely to stick with being vegan. And many people list the negative impact that animal agriculture has on the environment as a reason for becoming vegan.

Research shows that the best way to enter the “vegan world” is to do it gradually, and I encourage anyone who’s interested to sign up for our free [10 Weeks to Vegan](#) program to learn more about vegan food and receive tips to make exploring a vegan lifestyle convenient and delicious!

Jacobsen: How did you become involved in Vegan Outreach? What is the story there?

Norris: After trying many forms of animal advocacy in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, I settled on the idea that I could make the most difference by widely promoting a vegan lifestyle to the general public. I co-founded Vegan Outreach in 1993 with that purpose. We focused on doing outreach to college students who seemed to be the most interested in our message of compassion to animals and our college outreach program continues to be our largest campaign, reaching millions of students with our booklets at over 1,000 colleges a year.

Jacobsen: With reference to reliable sources, robust, and large, hopefully international, studies, what are the health outcomes of a plant-based diet compared to the more modern emphasis by some online YouTube commentators or unqualified people arguing for an all-meat/all-beef/ketogenic diet?

Norris: A lot of scientific research supports the benefits of vegan diets, including two large observational studies that have followed populations that contained a large number of vegetarians and vegans:

The Adventist Health Study-2 of Seventh-day Adventist Church members. This United States-based study has followed over 75,000 people, including about 5,500 vegans. The Oxford branch of the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition (EPIC-Oxford) has followed 65,000 people, including about 2,600 vegans. Among the findings:

- Diabetes—Adventist-Health Study-2 found vegans to have the lowest risk of having or developing type-2 diabetes than other diet groups with only 1/3 the risk of meat-eaters (a).
- High blood pressure—Adventist-Health Study-2 also found that vegans had only about 1/3 the rate of high blood pressure (b). In the EPIC-Oxford study, 6% of male vegans reported having high blood pressure compared to 15% of male meat-eaters. For women, the numbers were 8% for vegans and 12% for meat-eaters (c).

- Cancer—Both studies found a consistent 15–20% reduced risk of cancer in vegans compared to meat-eaters (d, e).
- Cholesterol—EPIC-Oxford found that vegan men to have an average cholesterol level of 170 mg/dl compared to 204 mg/dl for meat-eaters, while vegan women had an average cholesterol level of 172 mg/dl compared to 195 mg/dl for meat-eaters (f).

Here are references if you would like them:

- a. Tonstad S, Stewart K, Oda K, Batech M, Herring RP, Fraser GE. Vegetarian diets and incidence of diabetes in the Adventist Health Study-2. *Nutr Metab Cardiovasc Dis*. 2013 Apr;23(4):292-9.
- b. Fraser GE. Vegetarian diets: what do we know of their effects on common chronic diseases? *Am J Clin Nutr*. 2009 May;89(5):1607S-1612S. Epub 2009 Mar 25. Review. Erratum in: *Am J Clin Nutr*. 2009 Jul;90(1):248.
- c. Appleby PN, Davey GK, Key TJ. Hypertension and blood pressure among meat eaters, fish eaters, vegetarians and vegans in EPIC-Oxford. *Public Health Nutr*. 2002 Oct;5(5):645-54.
- d. Key TJ, Appleby PN, Crowe FL, Bradbury KE, Schmidt JA, Travis RC. Cancer in British vegetarians: updated analyses of 4998 incident cancers in a cohort of 32,491 meat eaters, 8612 fish eaters, 18,298 vegetarians, and 2246 vegans. *Am J Clin Nutr*. 2014 Jun 4.
- e. Tantamango-Bartley Y, Jaceldo-Siegl K, Fan J, Fraser G. Vegetarian diets and the incidence of cancer in a low-risk population. *Cancer Epidemiol Biomarkers Prev*. 2012 Nov 20.
- f. Bradbury KE, Crowe FL, Appleby PN, Schmidt JA, Travis RC, Key TJ. Serum concentrations of cholesterol, apolipoprotein A-I and apolipoprotein B in a total of 1694 meat-eaters, fish-eaters, vegetarians and vegans. *Eur J Clin Nutr*. 2014 Feb;68(2):178-83.

Regarding the ketogenic diet, it can aid in weight loss, at least for a short period—and note that there are vegan versions of a ketogenic diet. Most research has shown that long-term, high-meat diets lead to more chronic disease.

Jacobsen: As the Executive Director what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Norris: My job is to make sure Vegan Outreach follows our mission, of working to end violence towards animals, as effectively as possible. I work with our board of directors and executive committee to implement and assess our programs and to raise the funds necessary to keep them going.

Our two current goals are to maximize the number of signups for our 10 Weeks to Vegan program and to educate a generation of college students about the concept of speciesism. Speciesism is the idea that individual animals should be treated with regard to their characteristics, such as the capacity to suffer or feel fear, rather than according to what species they belong to. We accomplish this through our team of about 35 outreach staff in the U.S., Mexico, Canada, India, and Australia who are out every day doing in-person outreach to college students and other audiences.

Jacobsen: What is the impact of non-human animal agriculture on anthropogenic climate change or human-induced global warming?

Norris: Animal agriculture is one of the largest contributors of human-made greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, water pollution, and air pollution.

A 2018 report from *Science* found that worldwide, meat and dairy production uses 83% of farmland and produces 60% of agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions while providing just 18% of calories and 37% of protein.

The study's author, Joseph Poore, said, "A vegan diet is probably the single biggest way to reduce your impact on planet Earth, not just greenhouse gases, but global acidification, eutrophication, land use and water use."

Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers. Poore J, Nemecek T. Science. 2018 Jun 1;360(6392):987-92.

Jacobsen: How could a vegan diet or a more but not entirely plant-based diet leads to better health outcomes and outcomes for the reduction of carbon emissions?

Norris: A 2019 report from *The Lancet* compared models of changes in food production and estimated reduction in greenhouse gases and found that a shift to plant-based diets could reduce food-related emissions by up to 80% by 2050.

Willett W, Rockström J, Loken B, Springmann M, Lang T, Vermeulen S, Garnett T, Tilman D, DeClerck F, Wood A, Jonell M. Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. The Lancet. 2019 Jan 16.

Jacobsen: Who tends to be opposed to a more plant-based diet? Why?

Norris: Eating animals is the norm, and it can be difficult to stray from what your peers are doing. Certain people are better suited than others to recognize and stand up against harmful cultural norms like speciesism. At Vegan Outreach, we focus on reaching the people who are motivated enough to make changes—of which there are always many in our target audience who just need some additional encouragement. The changes they make by becoming vegan often ripple out to their peer groups, families, and communities.

There are now plant-based meats widely available—such as the Beyond Burger, Beyond Sausage, Tofurky, and the Impossible Burger—that are as delicious as their animal-based counterparts without the cruelty to animals. We think it's only a matter of time before we reach a tipping point and society moves away from killing animals for food.

Jacobsen: How can ordinary people become involved in Vegan Outreach or other organizations?

Norris: If you're interested in exploring vegan eating, please sign up for our free [10 Weeks to Vegan](#) program or go to VeganOutreach.org and click on the Try Vegan tile. There's also a tile there for donating and volunteering, depending on how you'd like to become involved—you'll find everything you need!

Jacobsen: Any recommended authors or speakers?

Norris: *Liberation* by Peter Singer does a great job of explaining why we should care about animals. *Vegan for Life*, co-authored by myself and Ginny Messina, RD, MPH, will tell you all you need to know about getting the proper nutrition on a vegan diet.

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

Not-Moot Zoot on Clergy Coming Oot

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 13, 2019

Winnipeg Free Press commented on Zoot Pictures and its work on non-believers.

Leslea Mair, who is a filmmaker based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, worked on a project through Zoot Pictures, where she is the CEO and President. She wants to know about the ways in which, the processes, in other words, clergy lose faith.

This becomes an important question in the growing arena of research into the secular communities around the world, especially in some of the nations where the research can be conducted more comprehensively and in interesting ways, i.e., a documentary.

Mair was raised in The United Church of Canada. As a prominently recognized progressive church, this seems like a pattern, of individual members of The UCC able to leave without qualms – even become an atheist.

Mair stated, “But I had never thought about it from a minister’s perspective. What do you do if you find you don’t believe, but being a minister is your job?”

Some of the answers about the reasons for clergy leaving the faith, often Christian in popular reportage, can be found in some of the narratives within the documentary *Losing Our Religion* co-directed by Mair and Leif Kaldor. What are the challenges faced by clergy who leave the institutional churches?

On May 18, 1 p.m. at the Carol Shields Auditorium at the Millennium Library, there will be a screening. As with most ex-religious commentary on Christianity, the main countries will be Canada, England, and the U.S.

Some of the clergy are reported as undercover. Others are open. Mair interviewed a woman named Catherine Dunphy from Toronto, Ontario. Dunphy was studying to be a Roman Catholic chaplain at the time. The time of leaving the faith

Dunphy said, “It was an accumulation of things... There was a disconnect between what I had heard from the pulpit and what I learned at seminary... When you put things like that under a microscope, it’s enough to turn anyone into an atheist.”

Dunphy became a humanist chaplain at the University of Toronto. She published *From Apostle to Apostate* and co-founded The Clergy Project. Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola may be familiar names to some of the audience here in relation to the project. It amounts to support for those who left their previous life’s work.

Dunphy continues to grieve the loss of a lifetime of belief in the institutional church. She found relief in it, though.

On the difficulty of leaving the church, Mair said, “When they tell people they’ve lost their faith, the rejection can be swift and mean... It’s like being gay in the 1950s — you don’t dare tell anyone.”

Centre for Inquiry-Manitoba will be sponsoring the showing of *Losing Our Religion*. Kaldor and Mair will take part in a Q & A. Duly note, the admission is free. But there has to be reservation of tickets through Eventbrite.

Interview with TJ Dudeman – Member, Secular AA (Nashville, Tennessee)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 14, 2019

TJ Dudeman is a Member of Secular AA in Nashville, Tennessee. Here we talk about secular AA, his background, and more.

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

TJ Dudeman: I was born in a small town to a mother who had moved from small town to small town. My grandmother was a devout Christian woman who practiced Pentecostalism. Growing up I was exposed to a lot of different cultures and religions. My mother having had a rough upbringing wanted to provide different ideas and opportunities for her children, so she exposed us to a lot of different ideas. She was married when I was around 8 or 9, and we converted to Catholicism. We eventually left the church when the big molestation scandals came out in the late 90s. In my teenage years I began practicing Pentecostalism like my grandmother, but there was always this lack of commitment to the religion for me. Later I came to realize that it was because I didn't have that belief that those around me did, but at the time I self-flagellated, thinking it was because I was a dirty sinner. As far as my familial environment, I have a lot of what we refer to as "rednecks" in my family, and although that was our family's basic identity my mother always tried to provide us with a way out of that set of ideas. It was only within recent years, when I came out to my family that I was an atheist, that my mother told the family that she was too, and that she never wanted to force that on any of us, and she wanted us to make our own decisions.

Jacobsen: How did this impact outlook on life?

Dudeman: My outlook on life was skewed to say the least. Religion taught me to hate my basic human nature. And I believe that those religious views fed into my self-hatred and drug and alcohol use. I remember times being so afraid of what god was going to do to me, that using drugs and alcohol were the only means I had at the time to anesthetize that fear. I couldn't have sex without some sort of guilt and working through the AA program was extremely difficult. I would say I have recovered from many of those false ideas today, but the process to get there was one of the most difficult experiences I have undertaken. I was actually very lucky, because I got sober in a small town, and my sponsor was the one of only 2 atheists in what felt like the entire state. He has been a major role model for me in letting go a lot of my self-hatred and guiding me in this recovery process in a way where I could be true to myself.

Jacobsen: How did you become a part of the Secular AA community?

Dudeman: My sobriety story doesn't have as much zing as many others. My mother and father had exposed me to AA as a child, due to both of their own addiction issues. My father has 28 years sober, and my mother bounced in and out of the rooms of AA for most of my life. My mother got sober this time about 2 months before me, and she remains sober to this day. For me, the long line of destructive behavior led me to a strange epiphany. I always had a tendency for destructive drinking. Ever since my first drink I remember being completely taken by the drink and being a chaotic and troubled drunk. One morning around 6 am, I woke up in the parking lot of me and my

now ex-wife's apartment complex, my truck was still running, I was covered in my own piss and had about 20 missed calls from my ex-wife. Compared to many of the scenarios that had come before, this was probably the most innocuous. But it hit me harder than anything else. I just realized I could not live like that anymore. This was 2 days before my birthday and my mother and sister ended up coming into town that night and both had gotten sober about a month or so before. They begged me to try staying sober for a while. I obliged and remain sober to this day. I fought going to AA for a while though. I think I was sober for almost 2 months before I went to my first meeting. I just didn't want to deal with all the dogma, and from my experiences with my parents, and having been forced to go there by courts, I had a sour taste in my mouth. But I gave it a shot eventually, and if it weren't for my sponsor, and another intelligent man who was an atheist I don't think I would've made it. See, for me I went into the program still afraid of my religious identity. I didn't want to admit I may not believe. I was truly terrified, and the constant god talk on exacerbated my self-hatred and irrational fear of god. It was only through working through AA the way that my sponsor taught me, that I came to terms with my lack of faith and found the freedom to embrace my identity. I am so thankful for that experience, and hence why I am so passionate about approaching AA as its supposed to truly be worked. Eventually I found myself growing tired of the dogma in the AA rooms and was referred to some websites. One called AA Agnostica and the other called AA Beyond Belief. I ended up going to some secular meetings in Dayton, Ohio and Dublin, Ohio. From then I knew I wanted to get my own meeting started but it was never the right time. I then moved to Toledo, Ohio and after being run out of a bunch of meetings, I decided the time was right. I started a meeting and to this day it still is growing strong.

Jacobsen: What takes place at the Nashville, Tennessee, Secular AA group?

Dudeman: Well, the Secular AA meeting in Nashville is just now starting again. When I first moved here it was closed, and I called and spoke with the gentleman who started it to try and see what we could do about getting it started again. We are still working together to get it the way he sees it. This is not my first meeting startup though. Before I moved away from Toledo Ohio, I started a meeting for the secular crowd called AA Beyond Belief. When it first started, it was about 6 people. We would read a few groups approved readings and have an open discussion meeting. We try hard not to center the meetings around god and our lack thereof. Sometimes it feels like secular meetings can talk more about god than anyone else. But we worked hard to develop an environment of inclusion and acceptance. When I left we were running 30 people a week, and from what I hear from my mother the group runs much higher than that. The whole purpose was to provide a safe space for addicts and alcoholics to come and talk about their recovery without having to be fake, or without being accosted by other members for not working the program in a way that is not true to who they are.

Jacobsen: How does this community of likeminded people provide a healthy basis for recovery?

Dudeman: One of the first messages that rang true to me was "To thine own self be true". And that is the premise by which all the meetings I've ever had a hand in cultivating stand on. We want to create an environment where the addicted person can be open and honest about who they are, what it's like, and what's happening in their lives. We strive to do this in an environment where they don't have to wrestle with unnecessary arguments. I've never found it conducive to tell an addict that before he can find a way to stay sober he has to answer one of the greatest debates in the universe. I don't believe in a god. And there are many others among us who do not. But that's not the whole point here. By providing a secular means of recovery, that person can focus on their

recovery, and answer their spiritual questions on their own time by their own means. Its none of my business what you believe, and I'm only here to assist you in the recovery process. That's it.

Jacobsen: What is included in Secular AA and not provided at more spiritual, higher power, and religious AAs? Also, what is included in the more spiritual, higher power, and religious AAs than the Secular AAs?

Dudeman: In Secular AA we strive to provide safe environments for those who do not believe in a god. All are welcome, but by removing the god aspect, it allows for more people to feel comfortable in speaking openly about their recovery. I cannot tell you how many times I have laid my heart on the line in the mainstream god believing meetings, only to be met with harsh criticism for my lack of faith, instead of providing support in my recovery. I've never once watched someone be torn down like that in a secular meeting. Even the believers I've seen at this meeting have been welcomed with open arms. That just doesn't happen in higher power AA. I have been run out of higher power believing AA meetings than I can count. Its truly disturbing.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in Secular AA in Tennessee?

Dudeman: Just show up to a meeting. That's it. You're part of the team.

Jacobsen: How can donations and professional networks, and organizational support, help with the flourishing of the Secular AA communities and groups?

Dudeman: I really don't know. I have always been one who believed in attraction rather than promotion. And to be honest, outside of some of the internet pages I've seen, I don't think I've ever seen anything about secular aa anywhere I've been. Most of the time the central AA offices refuse to even list us. So, I think trying to provide material to people in recovery houses and treatment centers would be beneficial. Inmates would benefit. But outside of that I'm not sure. Id be willing to assist in any way I could though.

Jacobsen: Any recommended books or speakers?

Dudeman: Book: Beyond Belief, Agnostic musings for 12 step life.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings conclusion?

Dudeman: Being involved in starting 2 meetings in different parts of the country has been a serious challenge in my life. But I've also found that long term no matter how poorly I thought these meetings were going to do, there ended up being a significant population that needed what was being provided. So, for me, I believe my conclusion, is that as a group, we agnostics and atheists must keep working together to impact the recovery community. I don't know if I would've stayed sober without the guidance of secular men and women. And I want to provide that same hand to the next sick and suffering alcoholic. We all have an obligation to carry that message. And I look forward to watching more atheists and agnostics come out of the shadows of AA and change the face of this program.

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

Ask Mandisa 22 – A Leap of Evidence: Making the Transition to Make the Change

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 14, 2019

***Mandisa Thomas** is the Founder of **Black Nonbelievers, Inc** (**Twitter** & **Facebook**). One of the largest, if not the largest, organization for African-American or black nonbelievers & atheists in the United States.*

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 making a change.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When we first met, you were excited about thinking of a transition from full-time regular work to full-time activist and administrative organizational work. Now, you're over a year out of the position. What is the feeling there? What's the general context of the transition in terms of impacting a life?

Mandisa Thomas: I remember when we first met, when we did the first set of interviews. I was still working at my previous job. I was the Event Services Manager at the conference centre in the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta.

It was March 5th of last year. It was a Monday. I turned in the resignation. There were a number of factors that came into my decision to leave the job. I actually had been putting off the decision for a couple of years.

The organization was still being developed. I still needed a paycheque [Laughing]. I am the type of person who likes to fairly contribute to my household and make sure that we have everything that we need.

When I decided to leave the job, the family situation was changing. The circumstances were more favorable for me to leave. The stress that I was enduring at the job just wasn't worth staying there anymore.

I was, again, given a certain time limit to leave. Things happen to come into place, where I left earlier than expected. Fast forwarding a year later, I already felt like a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders.

Now, more so, when I look at this past year and how once I left the job, there were still things going on, but I had more time and flexibility to do them. I am also able to spend more time at home and make sure the family has what they need from me.

Also, I am able to concentrate on activism, speaking engagements, and growing Black Nonbelievers. It is being to do that without the stress. It is a really, really great feeling. I was nervous at the time of doing it.

There were some uncertainties about where things would go. But as things have progressed over the year, I have been very, very happy with the decision and haven't looked back since.

Jacobsen: When you're transitioning, it is not a decision for anyone because more unknowns are ahead of you than knowns. However, some are at an abusive job taking advantage of them. Then they become compelled to do it.

For you, it was something at which you felt an internal drive to make the transition to running the largest atheist and nonbeliever African-American organization in America. Did you feel an ethical push internally to get on that train to get to the next stage of career and life?

Thomas: I did. Yes, it was definitely a decision. I knew that I needed to expand my growth, as well as the organization's growth. I would say; what was so difficult about the decision, the unknown and how things would go.

However, I left the job 4 months shy of my 10-year anniversary. I had been working there for quite a bit of time. It wasn't the worst place to work. There were benefits. It was Monday to Friday. It was decent pay.

Unfortunately, with some of the circumstances of the job, mostly with work environment stuff, the change is the traffic or the traffic congestion in Atlanta became increasingly worse. So, the commute, daily, back and forth/to and from home. It was increasingly worse.

It was because I knew. I had developed good relationships with some of the people who worked there. I knew I needed to step out of there if I really wanted my brand and the organization to grow.

Because I couldn't continue to work at that place. It was at a government facility. There were things that were pretty regulated, like most jobs. The way I work, and the way I like to work, through is the organization in order for it to grow, as it is now.

Also, it is to allow me to travel and speak with people and organizations that wanted to hear me. That part made the decision that much easier. It was not without hesitation or without feeling as if I was leaving something behind; that I had been a part of, for quite a bit of time.

Jacobsen: Do women have different considerations in career or job transitions?

Thomas: Yes, we have to consider, mainly, if we have children or our kids. What would life be like for them? In my case, I also have a husband who suffers from a terminal illness. I have to consider his care as well.

So, oftentimes, with women, our children's wellbeing comes into it, especially with career advancement. We often feel that we can't do certain things within a certain timeframe because we have to be concerned about our children's wellbeing.

We have to be concerned about whether we're fit for a certain choice or career path. Interestingly enough, considering that there are more men employed or gainfully employed within the movement compared to women who are primarily volunteered (as I am at this point), we need to consider our income. Our ability to maintain and generate income more than men.

That's just the reality. There are still disparities when it comes to opportunities. We are always and expected, as we should be, to consider the family portion of that.

Jacobsen: In a healthy marriage, it has a sense of interdependency between the guardians, the parents, especially when it comes to raising the children. In the context or environment of raising children described in the previous response, how do you appropriately negotiate that with a partner, especially when that partner has a terminal illness?

Thomas: We were fortunate. Even though, my husband has a terminal illness. He is well-employed, in a very good position. He is a federal employee. So yes, he was affected. Our household was affected by the government shutdown.

Outside of that, he makes enough to support the entire family. In most families, we do have to consider the idea; we have to consider the possibility that, of course, income will be diminished. We have to figure out – most families have to figure out – how bills will get paid, how much more or less disposable income we'll have, and also the emotional support.

When I told my husband that I was going to quit the job, I saw the look on his face. He was worried. He thought that I may have been overreacting, a bit. There were times when I thought about quitting before.

But it was dire enough. It was to the point where I knew I had to leave. He may or may not have considered the fact that this decision was ultimately to his best interest as well. I think in some marriages, relationships, and partnerships; there may be some hesitation and fears.

It is still unknown. You still don't know what the outcome will be. When you know your partner is determined and that there are good opportunities on the horizon, especially with the, again, increasing demand for appearances, the increasing demand for work within the community, and working opportunities, it was pretty inevitable that things would turn out okay.

I think it is important for partners to discuss this first – don't just go to your partner and say, "Hey! I quit" [Laughing]

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Thomas: It doesn't work that way. There are all these factors involved, especially with children involved. With our children getting older, our family changing, and with our health, even my own health, I had to take this into account, including the other factors taking place in the movement.

It was time to move forward from the job. It has not always been easy. But it has very much been worthwhile.

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

Thomas: Thank you very much, Scott.

Voting on the Secular in the United States

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 14, 2019

World Religion News reported on some recent Gallup poll information. In that, the electability of an atheist for the presidency of the United States of America or the most powerful position in the world for decades has been a concern for many secular Americans and secular people around the world in general.

This seems like front-of-mind fact for many secular people, as many of you know or may have discussed throughout personal and professional lives – and in reading about some of the dynamics of the perceptions of atheists, freethinkers, and the like.

In the recent Gallup poll, apparently, this longstanding disappointment in the social and political conceptualizations of the secular has shifted to a modestly more favorable position, where this becomes a record high in the United States, within the general public of the warmer place to the adjacent-south.

As reported, “...in 2012... over half of those polled said they were okay with an atheist being in influential American politician. In 2015, atheism became downgraded as being the of the worst traits in any presidential candidate. Atheists became second worst from the absolute worst.”

A tick upward, that’s not bad and not great. A socialist president became the worst possible candidate amongst those polled in terms of perceptions. This was a static last-place placement for socialist circa 2019.

The interesting data came in the work around the possibility of a secular president in the United States. An atheist president was seen as a more legitimate possibility and candidate within the nation. Again, not as a dramatic increase, however, a rise to a record number at 60%.

“The “atheist” U.S. President received a slight push up to 60 percent of Americans say they have no problem if the presidential candidate is an atheist,” the *World Religion News* stated, “It continues to be the second last on the electability list but with one big difference: there is no stigma now. The Gallup poll shows that Americans are now much more comfortable with an increasingly diverse candidate group.”

Many atheists do not care much for religion or non-religion in politics, as in an apathetic position about it. However, for those with an explicit and attentive intrigue about the entire affair, they may find this a heartwarming trend and positive sign of greater equality for individuals identifying with a major secular label in North America.

Following from the minor caveat from before, the central point is the rise in political acceptability of the atheist position. There is the justification of the smallest rise happening within the atheist categorization compared to other identifications. The larger narrative is a widening of the diverse landscape in which Americans accept the political representation in the country encapsulating all of this.

Even with the rise of the atheists within the acceptability of public office, one issue is the ways in which the even within the rise the increase remains the lowest amongst those groups. Probably not a surprise, but, still, this seems like a pleasant surprise with the record high number of 60%.

The article parsed the data and said, “When it comes to analyzing the atheist support base, then 71 percent of Democrats were comfortable with an atheist candidate, compared to only 42 percent of Republicans espousing similar views. Age matters too, with 72 percent of all voters below 34 years may support any openly atheist candidate while 54 percent of the 55 years or older voting population will do the same.”

Age and political orientation become two of the most important factors for if one supports the possibility of an atheist president or, at least, one might assume, an atheist presidential candidate.

As many of you already know, some research indicates individuals with higher levels of formal education tend to lean into or identify as atheists more often than not.

“It is apparent that religious identification is losing its weight in American politics as an increasing number of Americans are willing to vote for different groups. If these trends continue,” the article presaged, “then atheists will at one point of time shortly have electability equal to Jews and Catholics. The last two were once pariahs of the American public. The first poll held by Gallup in 1937 saw only 47 percent of Americans okay with a Jewish president. The figure is now 93 percent in 2019. The number of openly non-religious politicians have risen at the state level.”

Ask Mandisa 23 – Mother’s Day Low-Orbit

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 15, 2019

***Mandisa Thomas** is the Founder of **Black Nonbelievers, Inc** (**Twitter** & **Facebook**). One of the largest, if not the largest, organization for African-American or black nonbelievers & atheists in the United States.*

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 Mother’s Day (conducted prior to it).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We’re in the orbit of Mother’s Day. For those who are secular parents and have developed a secular family life that has worked for them, individually as a family unit, how do you work with and around difficulties with extensions of the family when one marries, for instance, parent-in-laws? Things of this nature.

Mandisa Thomas: Yes, being in a secular household, it usually means that you’re eschewing traditional upbringing. Meaning that, you’re reconsidering the whole “honour thy mother and father thing” and that “family is everything” and “blood over everything.”

I know that in my family – my husband and I – have discussed most everything objectively. We include our children in that as well. In most families, they adopt this idea that children should be seen and not heard/.

Those children should do anything and everything that the parents want. Sometimes, that extends to the grandparents as well. You are supposed to obey them no matter what. In our household and many other secular households, we teach them to speak up when something is wrong.

As parents, we aren’t infallible. There are times when we are wrong. That we must reconsider our position. When it comes to in-laws and grandparents of an older generation, it can be a little bit difficult to deal with.

As the children are growing up, the environments are becoming more conducive for them to ask questions; whereas, the older generation couldn’t do that when they were kids.

Sometimes, it is difficult for them to deal with when it comes to their children and their grandchildren. Oftentimes, there is religious and societal indoctrination. With our household, where we’re raising our children non-religious, that includes reconsidering and also doing away with those archaic ideals.

Jacobsen: If you look at the American context, by and large, for most of its history as well as into the present, though the dynamics of the demographics of religion and non-religion are shifting, the general culture will remain more or less conservative in many respects.

If you look at some of the principles many parents will take on implicitly, such as the Ten Commandments command mentioned before about honouring parents, what traditional

American values to their merit make sense? What ones to their demerit don't make sense in a modern context?

Thomas: The values that I think have some merit are trying to do things together as a family: having family time. Whether it's eating together, or doing activities that increase our family communication, in our house, we tend to encourage some individuality.

We don't always eat at the dinner table. We don't always eat the same things either. But I think incorporating some family time is always good. What I think are very, very harmful [Laughing] factors are the ones inherent in the idea of the nuclear family – not “nucular” like George W. Bush...

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Thomas: The mother, the father, the son and daughter, etc., this idea that families are heteronormative. That there must always be a mom and a dad. Coming from a single parent household myself, I see the merit and the importance of having two parents in our household.

But it is not a guarantee that a child will grow up to be a productive citizen, simply because there are two parents. I find many faults with these notions of the traditional family and American values, especially when there is a lot of hypocrisy.

There is also this false idea of the American family. Everyone should live this “middle-class dream” and have nice house and other material items; that everyone should work a regular 9-5 job.

So, that is an ideal. It has really put a lot of people in debt and made a lot of people miserable. There is a lot that I find wrong that the traditional American values and sense of family have really created this false image or idea of happiness.

Jacobsen: With Mother's Day around the corner or the bend, how do you plan to celebrate it, secularly?

Thomas: I will actually be in Albany, New York, speaking with the Capital District Humanist Society [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Thomas: So, I won't be in town for Mother's Day this year. In Atlanta, we usually host an annual Mother's Day brunch with some of the moms of BN, and sometimes the kids will come along. Then I will go to dinner with my children later.

It has been nice to celebrate Mother's Day in ways that I couldn't with my own mother. Though it will be different this year, my kids and I know that it doesn't take one day for us to realize the value of the mother still being there. I love them no matter what, whether it's Mother's Day or not.

That whatever they plan, we will eventually be able to do. I also do not want to put on that pressure on them. It is Mother's Day is very commercialized, and many are compelled to give gifts, or to show a overwhelming affection for their mothers.

I know that my kids will do that, even if I won't be home on that day.

Jacobsen: What have been some of the nicer surprises from the husband and the kids in secular Mother's Days past?

Thomas: Usually, they let me stay home and sleep [Laughing].

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Thomas: That's what I like to do. Because I do not want to be bothered. I can shut myself in the room. I can watch TV. I can watch movies or just sleep. To me, that is a great Mother's Day. They go out and enjoy each other and give me a day off.

That is a great Mother's Day for me. I do a lot of gift cards, gifts, presents. I like going out to eat. When they do those things, it's nice as well. But a nice space and tie to relax and just do absolutely nothing. It is always one of the best Mother's Day presents that I can get.

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

Ask Rob 4 – Religion as Literary Education: Holy Moly for Secular Dexter

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 15, 2019

Rob Boston is the Editor of Church & State (Americans United for Separation of Church and State). Here we talk about secular interpretations of religious literature for educational purposes, where there should be souciance over texts from the religious traditions regarding literary import.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Margaret Atwood sees three sources in Western literature. One in the Bible. Another in folktales and legends. A further one in Shakespeare, because he's good. How can religious texts provide a basis for a greater appreciation for honoured literature in the Western, and other, traditions?

Rob Boston: I think an educated person needs to be familiar with the Bible on at least a basic level. You don't need to accept its claims literally, of course, but you need to know the most prominent stories because they have, for better or worse, had a huge impact on Western culture and society.

Biblical themes are common in literature and even in everyday conversation. If I told you that someone I know has the troubles of Job, you have to know who Job is or it makes no sense. Book titles like John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* contain biblical references, and biblical allusions are common in many works of literature. Biblical themes have also inspired art and music. As I said, one does not need to accept the Bible's claims as true to appreciate these works.

Jacobsen: How are the books comprising the Bible important for the knowledge of the intellectual traditions rejecting them?

Boston: Obviously, those who aspire to subject the Bible to critical analysis need to know what it says and, perhaps more importantly, how it came to be. Fundamentalist interpretations are easy to knock down because there's simply no evidence for certain claims found in the Bible – such as the creation story and Noah's Ark. But the book also has a metaphorical meaning, and here is where I think things get interesting. What, if anything, can it teach us? The Bible is sprawling work pulled together over thousands of years, and some of its ethics reflect the pre-scientific societies that spawned it. The Old Testament contains horrific stories of war, violence and abuse, but some of the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament speak of the need to help the poor, which many people find appealing. I think we need to look at the Bible as we would any ancient text. The writings of Greek and Roman philosophers contain many disturbing things, such as sanctioning slavery and subjugation of women. They are products of their time. But that does not mean there may not be elements that still speak to us today.

Jacobsen: How can a younger person infused in a culture of popular media including social media and cheap entertainment rediscover and appreciate the literary and cultural import of religious writings?

Boston: I would push this question out a bit. I worry about the future of great literature, whether it is religious or secular. I think attention spans are dwindling, and social media is not helping.

Our schools at all levels need to stress the importance of the written word. It's not an either/or situation. There's no reason why a young person can't enjoy time on social media and action movies yet still read serious novels or works of non-fiction. The good news is that, in America, at least, most people are still reading. A 2018 poll showed that 75 percent said they read books. Parents have an important role to play. Studies have shown that children who are read to from an early age and who see their parents reading will become readers themselves. The challenge is getting people to engage with serious literature, whether classic or modern, and the humanities. Sometimes I look at the bestsellers list in the newspaper, and the fiction section is all genre works, and the non-fiction section is all self-help books or political tirades. Some of that is all right, I suppose, but a steady diet of it indicates a society that is turning away from serious thought.

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

Interview with Jacob Fortin of “Bible Stories”

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 17, 2019

Jacob Fortin is the Creator of Bible Stories. Here we talk about it.

Some parts of the transcript may be inaccurate.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, what is Bible Stories? Why did you write it?

Jacob Fortin: So, for those of are those who have not heard of me, I used to run a podcast back in 2007 called The Good Atheist. I had a few thousand listeners, nothing huge.

But over the years, I found that whenever I did a show specifically about the Bible; the listeners would double. So over time, I wanted to write a book.

If you need any marketing research, you do it among your audience. So, I thought, obviously, the problem with the Bible is psychological pain. Nobody wants to read it.

Even then, your die-hard Christian has to tell you they know the Bible. They do not even know the Bible, like they are still BS about it.

99 percent of them are still Cole’s-noting. They do not know the stories. Because, in a sense, when I am talking about the stories for me, they are more like the Greek parables.

What are the stories like? All these guys that sound like they had a seizure. But they are, nevertheless, people from the Bible that people are mostly unfamiliar with.

So, I did a Kickstarter campaign, when Kickstarter was still something that people barely knew what it was, in 2011. I thought, “I am going to try to translate the Bible.” So, that is what took me in to want to write about the rest of the crazy stories.

Jacobsen: If you take some of the more popular stories that people believe or like, what are they? Why do you think of those stories, in particular, resonate for believers and nonbelievers alike?

Fortin: Most of the stories that people are familiar with come from Genesis. The reason is that Genesis is this richer storytelling parts of the Bible, because the rest of it is interspersed with a bunch of roles.

Sometimes, there is the story. But even later on in the Bible, it becomes a giant complaining fest. The stories are great. It is all the parts of the Bible that came later. The ones obviously influenced by some Arkadian. There is some meaty stuff.

But it is also the parts of that that are at the beginning. If you look at any book, only 30 percent of people finish reading something. So, for the most part, there is no way the first story is remembrance; because people are lazy, and said that they are lazy.

Jacobsen: When you are taking to account this tendency towards being lazy, what appeals to people with certain stories?

Fortin: When you look at how the Bible is presented, the good and knowledgeable parts of the Bible have to do with the people interpreting it. Your places in the U.S., or maybe even in Canada, where people go to church.

There is actually a reading of the stories. They still bring it to life. Yet, for the most part, the problem is when you are reading any specific translation of the Bible. You have to maintain the story element.

But you also have to try to make it sound like it is super holy. All the actions of these guys are the wisest, but you lack humanity in a story when you do that. So, even in my attempt to translate the Bible, I was trying to translate the stories so that they stick with you.

Like when I talk about the story of Abraham and when he was traveling around trying to find a place to live, he was telling every one of his neighbors or the people he was visiting his wife was his sister. Because he was afraid that people were going to kill him.

Then all of a sudden, she gets married. He gets cursed. So to remove the curse that gave him all of this stuff, they tell to get the hell out of town. The funny thing, he does this twice.

Now, from experience as a human being, if someone does this twice, the second time is because it is a dumb scam. Now, when you are trying to portray these people in a good light because of religion, all of the fun humanity of the story is stripped away. It is not memorable anymore because these are the wiser inhuman characters.

I guarantee that anybody who reads my version of the Bible will not only know the stories by heart. They'll probably know it even better than people who claim to have read it. Because again, they never understood and connected with the stories the way that I have been able to translate it.

Jacobsen: What could have been other relatively noble or good attempts in the past by freethinkers to either rewrite the Bible, reinterpret the Bible, or provide an alternative interpretation more suitable to free thought meanings?

Fortin: There are a bunch of great ones. The Brick Bible was a big influence when I first started because when they were trying to make it. They were filming through the visual medium of the Legos. Because of how silly looking they are, it cuts the tension.

They can show all these decapitated heads. It maintains its humor because we realized the ridiculousness of it. There is, at least to the world there is, all that. There is because it is like a lot of scholars.

There is always primarily scholarly intent. Let me take this book and let me break it down to you, because when I came to this from a logical orientation, and the funny thing, big people read my book, even people who are religiously cunning, got a kick out of it because they do not even realize what they are supposed to know.

I try to present it, at least in my book, in a way that doesn't overtly threaten anybody who reads it because, even though I am making fun of it and I am cruel, the truth is the material is one hundred times crueler than I am.

So even though I look like a jerk, I am not the one who sent fireballs from the sky because the Jews were complaining about not eating meat. If I am being snarky, it is completely different, but it is the same thing as the Brick Bible.

If I had made a serious translation that did not try to bring out the humor, it would be depressing, especially the fact that the book is so large. It is a huge undertaking. I took on a way bigger task than expected. That was my bad.

Jacobsen: If you are looking at weaning people off supernatural wisdom, does this function in a way akin to some aspects of Monty Python?

Fortin: So, you could get Life of Brian. I remember there was a great interview, probably most people can find on YouTube, where the guys from Monty Python are debating the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Then there is another guy. I do not know this old guy. But whenever a respected man of his time did the funny thing, these religious intellectuals are trying to make cheap jokes at the jokers that are trying to make a serious point of saying, "Look, even in the material... We treated the whole Jesus thing well. You have Jesus. He looks good."

They have a serious factor. But with the whole point being multiple messiahs, that is true. It is that that makes people uncomfortable, then you are uncomfortable with their own beliefs.

Then the thing that we have to remember. This is particularly important in the atheist community. We can often lack humour.

The foundations were like intellectual and academic. These are not people used to crafting a good joke or who are a little stuffy. But we've got to entice other people to come on board.

Even in my book, I am like, "Look, by the time you finished reading it, I hope you have not changed your mind. But you should be already on your way to having changed your mind."

If this is the first attempt, then people are going to want to burn it. I have no problem making additional flammable paper. I am cool with that shit. Do whatever you want with something you buy, if you want to burn it or read it, it is cool. It doesn't matter to me.

I want people to know the details. I did almost a paragraph by paragraph translation. I skipped certain parts. But for the most part, this is why it is divided into three parts with each at like 350 pages.

I did not want to lose anything. I wanted people to not accuse me of saying that you glossed over this part. Now, I will include it all. It was a huge challenge. Because, as you can imagine, to me, the Bible is boring.

However, here is a thing that will surprise the hell out of everybody, my book is not boring. I do not know how I did it. I was desperate. It took a while to do it. But I was so desperate to impress. I was thinking, "You are going to read this book. You are going to laugh your ass off."

That is if you are interested in religion. Then that is a guarantee. Because if you like this stuff, you are going to love my fancy mouth.

Jacobsen: Last question, if you look at Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood sits among most prominent authors. She made a commentary one time. It was brief, but important in my mind.

It was about the foundation of European writing. She mentioned folktales and legends including Merlin and the sword in the stone. Another was Shakespeare, alone. A third was the Bible.

Do you think that perhaps some of the secular community enacts a disservice to their own literary knowledge and literacy by not taking the literary import of the Bible more seriously akin to the way people take the folk tales and Shakespeare seriously?

Fortin: Yes! It will be interesting. Hopefully, in a future where the Bible isn't so tied up into people's daily lives, and where we could speak about the pathology and play around with the ideas, everyone can enjoy it.

It can be a part of their heritage. But they do not remember any of the nasty statutes. They can toss them to the side because it is old memories. But when you look at me, even in my introduction to the book, I make it clear.

I still want to respect the material because the one person who wrote the majority of the King James Bible was William Tisdale. They strangled the shit out of him and then they burned him alive for trying to give poetry to the book.

Because they are like, "You cannot let anybody read this. The fear was on the part of the clergy, which turned out to be unfounded." If you expose the Bible, people read it. They are going to be like one of those fucking things I cannot believe that, but it turns out to be true.

Now, it is more important. You can hide the facts in plain sight. In a way, it has even more power when people can go around leaving the thing alone. Then others claim all kinds of power. There is a lot of beautiful language in there.

There is so much of our culture intertwined. If I tell you, Adam and Eve, and if I mention further the burning bush, there is so much tied into this, culturally, for anybody who is around here. In fact, if they denied that, then they are being ignorant.

It seems silly to never know your adversary. I have always thought that when you make a debate with someone. We should have an exercise in our culture, where, at least for 5 minutes, you should debate the opponent's side and vice versa.

Because, at least, you could show that you understand the other side. These days; nobody makes that effort to trying to say, "Yes, I understand your point of view. But I do not think you understand mine to defend me."

This is where us atheists. We have that trump card. We never use it. I am like, "Show them their arguments and then shame them when they cannot remember."

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

Fortin: Alright, Scott, you have a good day.

Ask Mandisa 24 – Mother’s Day Low(er)-Orbit

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 17, 2019

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

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 Mother’s Day, again (conducted after it).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is Mother’s Day to you?

Mandisa Thomas: Mother’s day for me is mostly about my children, and the mother that I have become. I do not have a good relationship with my own mother; in fact, I do not talk to her at all. This holiday can bring a lot, I mean a lot, of pressure for people.

There is such a push for people to forget about any childhood or emotional trauma associated with their parents, especially their mom on this day. There seems to be this pressure and this contrived idea: no matter if a parent is harmful or hurtful to you, that you’re supposed to forget it. Whatever they did, it was in the best interest of the child. When it comes to parent and child dynamics, throughout the years, there have always been points of contention.

Sometimes, it can be very stressful for a lot of people. At times, I feel a sense of disenchantment and disillusion when it comes to holiday. But I do appreciate that my children think I’m a good mom.

It can be sad not being able to celebrate fully. But I always do wish those who do have good relationships with their parents a happy Mother’s Day or a happy day in general. Hopefully, people can make the best of the day, whether they celebrate or not.

Jacobsen: What if someone wants to sincerely get over those barriers and forgive? What would be the steps for them to do that?

If someone takes this a cue in a national moment to move towards forgiveness, even if the person has not earned it in any way, what are some steps to do it – just for the individual?

Thomas: Everyone deserves that closure if they want to forgive. There is a book that I read years ago, I highly recommend it. It is called Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life by Dr. Susan Forward.

It is a good read for people who were abused as children. I also suggest therapy from a licensed professional counselor, not a religious therapist or someone who is going to tell you to pray on it.

It is important for people who have experienced emotional trauma. Because subconsciously, those things we bury from childhood can affect how we live our lives as adults and can possibly be passed down onto children and projected onto other people around us.

I would first recommend therapy. Also, the overcoming the idea that you have to have a relationship with your parent. That can be done at one's own pace. You do not have to be forced into it. It is important that you as an individual are comfortable with that position, whether you decide to move forward with a relationship or let it go altogether.

Jacobsen: For those who may not rely on, as many in the secular community don't – though, some Pew data show they do, supernatural practices or assertions around, for example, practices of prayer, and so on, what is a means by which they can do that in the community?

Thomas: Recovering from Religion has the Secular Therapy Project. It is primarily an online forum for people who are non-religious and are looking for therapists, licensed professional counselors, in their area as well.

A second resource would be to find community outlets. These can be based around a hobby. They may want to indulge that before turning to a religious organization. It is best to find what brings you some sort of peace or joy in your life and take advantage of it.

It is a huge misconception that one must absolutely depend on some god or divine entity in order to fulfill your life. Really, it is important that people understand that the inspiration and healing can come from anywhere.

The first and foremost step would be to seek out a licensed professional counselor who is secular. This can be done through the Secular Therapy Project.

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

“No, you’re not.”

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 17, 2019

[The Breeze](#) reported on some of the experiences of a Secular Student Alliance student group on the campus of a North American school or JMU (James Madison University) started by Kate Hurley.

Hurley was raised by Catholic parents. However, in early life, she came out as a homosexual and an atheist. This did not go over well with the parents.

In fact, the parents firmly stated, “No, you’re not.” Furthermore, if Hurley were to mention the beliefs going against the religious upbringing of youth, then there would be inevitable negative consequences for the explicit statements of being an atheist and gay.

Hurley started the Secular Student Alliance at JMU. It is, in essence, an educational organization intended to teach students about scientific reason and secularism.

In some contexts, this may become an issue of the finding of community for some of the students, because, sometimes, the education in these areas – scientific rationality and secular life – can lead to questioning the religious tenets of one’s upbringing.

According to the article, the parents would cut Hurley off financially if they found out about the founding of the SSA-JMU.

Hurley said, “I figured I only have one more year here... If they really do that, I think I can carry myself through the rest.” Hurley found solace in the work of the “Atheist Experience” on YouTube.

To her, this became a basis to solidify personal views on what some deem fundamental questions of life, god, meaning, and everything.

To her, this became a basis to solidify personal views on what some deem fundamental questions of life, god, meaning, and everything.

Now, Hurley identifies as an agnostic atheist. In turn, as a homosexual, she felt pushed away from the religious community. No religion and comfortable with it, Hurley looked to other places or ideas.

In a conversation over the phone with a friend, ironically in a parking lot of a church, Hurley decided to go ahead and create the SSA-JMU.

As reported, “Hurley, a junior double major in philosophy and psychology and a minor in Religious Studies, wanted a place on campus for freethinkers to share their beliefs in a school that has religious organizations since other schools have similar clubs. Virginia Tech has a Freethinkers club, while UVA has Virginia Atheists and Agnostic.”

Hurley felt as though she was living a double-life, where the need to find support as an atheist and a homosexual becomes important to her. Hurley takes the religious studies as a means by which to comprehend the religious point of view, where the religious courses in youth were insufficient.

Hurley met a junior psychology major named Alyssa Kniffin at the student-led LGBT organization of JMU called Madison Equality. (Now, Kniffin is the treasurer of the SSA-JMU while Hurley is the president.)

Kniffin stated, “A couple of people in club have already spoken to the fact that they don’t feel really feel comfortable talking about their beliefs with just the general public or their friends, because who knows who agrees or will get angry about it... So just being that safe space, being that place for people who aren’t sure or want to consider some other options.”

Hurley felt uncomfortable as a younger person with the educational system – for her – teaching that a special purpose existed for human beings without the need to care for the biosphere in any way. SSA-JMU intends to support an environmental charity as a result of this.

“The first thing that comes up to your mind with charity work is going through a religious community... If we could find ways to find people who had that same mindset and show them they can help do charity work without going through a religious group and do it through us, that is what we would like to do,” Hurley opined.

Ryan Ferrell, a junior physics major, is an atheist. He went to a discussion entitled “Pro-Life vs. Pro-Choice” hosted by the SSA-JMU. He found everyone respectful of one another’s positions. The debate came to about 50-50 for and against, according to Ferrell.

These seem like reasonable provisions amongst a reasonably diverse community of opinions held by a secular group of students. The purpose of the SSA is to simply remove the stereotypes, often bad, of atheists in the public, or the secular in general.

Hurley is looking to the future to keep the campus group alive and well past graduation for her. Most of the executives will be leaving JMU soon, too.

The reportage concluded with Hurley saying, “I think a lot of people are confused on what an atheist is and whether they are bad people or hate religious people... We’re offering this platform because it doesn’t exist anywhere else on campus.”

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