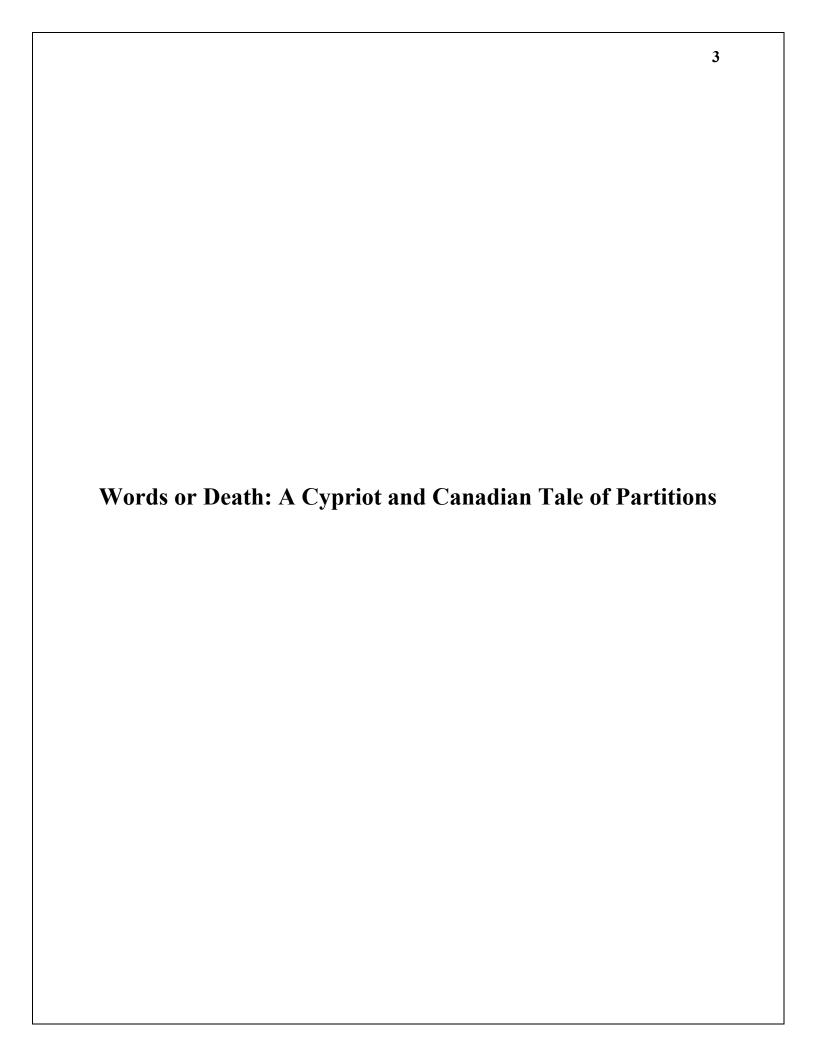
# Words Or Death: A Cypriot and Canadian Tale of Partitions

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ANGELOS SOFOCLEOUS

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Scott

# Poverty of Privilege: United Nations Critiques Morocco Over Poor Implementation of Women's Rights

#### Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Angelos Sofocleous October 30, 2016

The United Nations has been critical of Morocco recently with the respect to women's rights, and in particular violence against women. 'The 118th session of the United Nations Human Rights Committee looked into the 6th periodic report of the Moroccan government' with the delegation from Morocco undergoing tremendous criticism over the status of the implementation of women's rights within the country, according to Moroccan World News. The central examination of the Moroccan status of women's rights took place in the context of law, sexual assault or rape, housing, polygamy and child marriage, and the level of discrimination of women. The research prior to the meeting was done by the Mobilizing for Rights Associates and numerous other Moroccan non-profits. In general, the research was on women's rights with a particular focus on "women's rights in the family and violence against women." Let's run through the list of inequalities, which can mean disempowerment for women, equality and empowerment come as a package:

In law, the absence of rights for one group of people implies a separate set of rules given everything else as equal. That is, women and men are adult Moroccan citizens and should, and deserve, equal rights. A trivial statement, even a truism. When it comes to violence against Moroccan women, women victims of violence, in law, do not have civil protection orders.

In sexual assault or rape, which means sexual violence, the <u>World Health Organization</u> defines it as follows:

any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.

Victims of sexual violence within Morocco can be, if married and raped by someone other than their partner, "prosecuted for taking part in sex outside of marriage." That is, the Moroccan legal system, in an inverted ethic, turns the punishment for the crime onto the victim. To make this clear, the law is functionally equivalent to the conditional statement: if a married Moroccan woman is raped by somebody other than her husband, she will be prosecuted for sex outside of marriage.

In housing, and once more on the topic of violence against women, but in the domestic arena, female victims of domestic violence need safe havens to escape the abuse - physical, emotional, social, and spiritual - of some abusive intimate partners. This means the need to have housing centers, which remain one common solution to the problem. According the Centers for Disease Control, intimate partner violence comes with tremendous problems for the victim: society via the economy, physical, reproductive, psychological, social, and inadvertent negative effects on health behaviour for women. It is straightforward. The consequences are short- and long-term. Safe housing can help. Morocco was chastised for not having appropriate provision of them.

In polygamy and child marriage, which implies simple marital and intimate relations, the persistence of these activities indicates systemic socio-cultural problems for the country, which cannot be ignored, and were not, by the international community. In the examination of the nation, the exploitation of women through polygamy and girls through child marriage demarcates an unequal power relation and disempowerment of women and girls, across the age spectrum in other words (intergenerational sex discrimination).

In divorce cases, and so if the cases are considered of discrimination in marital and intimate relations because of polygamy and child marriage, in disproportionate violence against women and provisions for victims because of a lack of safe housing, in sexual assault or rape cases involving married Moroccan women because of full blame on them for 'sex' outside of marriage, and in law because of no civil protection orders for women, then the 'icing' to the discrimination pie (of which Moroccan women get a greater share) is general discrimination in divorce.

Historical context informs this, too. It is not only a current, ongoing phenomena with the discrimination against Moroccan women. Indeed, this continues right into the present because of the historical context, in part, with the past states transitioning into the present. Morocco was run by the French. Its citizens did not garner independence from the French until the late 1950s.

In 1958, soon after Morocco got its independence from the French, notable male scholars of the country wrote a Family Code Law (the Mudawana) which would be legally implemented by the state, and is still part of Morocco's legal system. The Mudawana was based on Islamic principles regarding marriage, abortion, divorce and child custody. Despite improvements in the Mudawana in recent years, Morocco still has a lot to cover on its way to bring its legal system to standards where human rights and gender rights are respected and protected, especially when it is still based on Islamic law and principles.

The Mudawana has indeed been updated to allow abortion in case of rape, making the legal age of marriage for both men and women equal and allowing a woman to divorce her husband. However, it is very questionable how, if ever, the reformed version of Mudawana, that was so praised by Moroccan authorities, is followed. The country does not still have a law protecting women from domestic violence, something that puts the country much behind on what can be described as a modern state. In fact, a national survey by the Moroccan High Commission for Planning showed that 62.8% of women had, at least once, been victims of physical or sexual domestic violence. What should concern one the most is that only 3% of those cases were reported to the authorities. What is more, the authorities don't seem to protect victims of domestic violence, as researchers of the Human Rights Watch mention. There is no doubt that in the absence of a strong domestic violence law, the authorities will keep ignoring those cases.

More than 10 years after the Mudawana's greatest reform, its implementation into the Moroccan society still lacks behind. A great number of people, and most importantly women, are unaware of what the law allows them to do and as a result do not seek for taking advantage of the increasing equality that the legal system allows them to. In fact, because of conservatism especially in Morocco's rural areas, women are not interested in implementing the new laws into their society but keep living on the same traditionalist grounds that they are used to. What is more, the Mudawana is limited mainly to urban areas and as a result women in rural and underdeveloped areas do not have access to justice. Thus, citizens of rural areas do not have the chance to be educated on the new law. As a result, a new kind of inequality has been created, that of the difference in implementing the Mudawana in urban and rural areas. Also, one would

expect that the judges and legal personnel would be educated at a great, if not absolute, degree about the new rules and their application to the Moroccan society but sadly this is not the case as there are financial barriers in educating them.

In addition, where a legal system gains its credibility is on its application. The reformed Mudawana, unfortunately, makes unfair exceptions in a way that it still fails to protect human rights and achieve gender equality. It may had been the case that the reformation was praised for modernizing Morocco but statistics and facts show otherwise. A concerning fact is that underage marriage still exists in Morocco. Despite that being illegal, a loophole in the system allows the judges to allow men to marry underage girls if that is 'proven' to be for the girls' benefit. According to statistics provided by UNICEF, 16% of girls in Morocco are unlawfully married by the age of 18. Proving that despite the law's changes it's difficult to change society's moral values, the 'family honour' system is still in practice in Morocco's rural areas where if a girl remains unmarried then this means that she breaks the family's honour in the community. The judicial system does not seem convinced to change that as it has approved 90% of the cases presented before it which asked for allowing a man to marry an underage girl.

Even in everyday life, the law seems unable to be put into practice. Reports of personal experiences show how sexual harassment against women is part of Moroccan culture and it's considered a norm. A form of sexual harassment of which no woman can escape from, and includes stalking, groping and catcalling. It seems that Morocco is still a male-dominated society in which men try to be dominant even in their everyday lives, showing that misogyny runs deep in them.

The women's rights examination of Morocco with respect to child marriage and polygamy as persistent practices in the culture to the present day, sexual assault and rape of married Moroccan women with the blame on the victim, the absence of civil protection orders in law, safe housing for domestic violence victims, and the level of discrimination of women in divorce in general. The Mudawana, or the Family Code Law, is an example of this in historical context as well. It is founded in Islamic Law. Gender rights and human rights are not exactly enshrined in it, in spite of piecemeal improvements - the Mudawana becoming more in line with gender rights and human rights. In addition, the pervasive traditionalism and conservatism in the country create additional barriers for the equality of women and the proper implementation of women's rights. The research by the Mobilizing for Rights Associates and other non-profits indicates the level of discrimination against women in Morocco, and the UN did not hold back. They gave direct, firm criticism of the Moroccan delegation of the status of women's rights in the country. As presented here, we do, too.

# US Women's Rights Hero: In Celebration and Appreciation of Lana Moresky

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Angelos Sofocleous November 13, 2016

An Ohioan women's rights hero has been at the forefront of the fight for women's rights for decades. Her name is Lana Moresky, who is a Shaker Heights resident in Cleveland, Ohio. She acted as the President and Coordinator for the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1972 after moving to Ohio, where she was previously living in Pittsburgh. Her fights for women's rights, and against the regressive forces in American culture and society, have been for the "legalization of abortion, employment equity and the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, an effort that failed in 1982," the Advance Ohio reports.

The tremendous, arduous, and emotionally difficult efforts have extended to work to have women elected into office through attempts to have the first woman appointed to the Northern Ohio federal bench. Moresky continues the same fight for women's rights right into the present, which is a noble aspiration, actualized, and an inspiration for many. No doubt. Women's rights in the United States began, effectively, in the 1920s.

By which we mean, American democracy began in the 1920s, as Louis CK astutely noted in the opening section of one time that he hosted Saturday Night Live, because women finally got the right to vote at that time. Moresky relates her personal experience in tears within the video (linked in the first paragraph) because at the start of the decades-long work she did not expect to see these kinds of events in her lifetime necessarily. These kinds of changes appeared too far into the future, but now girls can see a woman in power and making decisions with an impact as a leader in the most powerful country in the world. She made a powerful statement in this recent, brief, interview about finally feeling a part of the country, of The United States of America. It provides an insight to the status of women, emotionally, in that many probably felt, and sometimes likely still feel, like outsiders to the mainstream political process and socio-cultural milieu.

Women are still unfairly treated in a society that often praises itself to be one of the most democratic in the world. It is not the largest democracy in the world. India is the largest democracy in the world, but America has made significant progress compared to other countries on freedom of speech, for example. However, as noted earlier, women in the United States only gained the right to vote in the 1920s, which makes democracy relatively recent in the US. In 2016, American women fall below men in various sectors - education, job prospects, salaries, and government representation. Black and Latino American women have it even worse. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) notes that American women make 78 cents for every dollar earned by American men and also that over 1,000 public K-12 schools in the United States have single-sex education programs. What is more, women take less than 20% of the seats of the United States House of Representatives.

<u>As Jabril Faraj brings it</u>, "For much, if not all, of human history, women have been little more than property — subjected by men, bought and sold (in the name of "marriage") and viewed as not much more than vessels for procreation." Thankfully, things have changed now. But we're anywhere where we need to be on protecting women's rights and ensuring sex equality. Lana

Moresky is a notable example of people who take action against inequality and advocate women's rights by pressuring to get more women elected into office. Moresky has been a top Democratic activist and fundraiser for Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign during the last year and it's women like Moresky that brought about any change in women's position in society and their representation in the political life.

Lana Moresky stresses the fact that it's a major mistake that women are considered unable to make decisions or lead an organization. In fact, she emphasizes that when NOW pressures to get more women involved into politics it faces fierce opposition from male politicians or members of the government. A notable example is the unwillingness of the Senate to vote for the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which is an international treaty that has been signed and ratified by 189 UN states, following states like Somalia, Iran, and Tonga.

The CEDAW focuses and aims exactly on what its name says: ending the elimination and discrimination against women in marriage, employment, political participation and education. The United States of America does not have a right to be proud of respecting mothers of newborns as it's the only high-income developed country that does not offer a paid maternity leave to women. The gender gap is clear in wage inequality as the USA ranks 65th out of 142 countries in wage equality for similar work, according to the 2014 Global Gender Gap Report. These are all immediate and long-term concerns that need to addressed persistently by activists, politicians, and citizens of the US.

Lana continues her work into the current, urgent, and ongoing issues for women throughout America, and we wish her success in her pursuits, and wish this to be positive highlight and expression of appreciation for her tremendous dedication and long-term commitment to women's rights in the US. Here's, in celebration, to Moresky!

## If You Want to be Heard, Use Your Feet

#### Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Angelos Sofocleous November 23, 2016

The solution to problems identified by individuals and groups is not words alone. You have to use your feet. As we catalogued in an article entitled *US Women's Rights Hero: In Celebration and Appreciation of Lana Moresky*, it can come in the form of a lifelong struggle for the equality and dignity of women in one country by one person.

In other cases, it can take more people, which becomes the basis for social movements. Undoubtedly, one person can bring change. They always, however, necessarily need other people's support; and that's where social movements begin to form and bring change in the world. Where the frequently cited heroes and heroines of various countries and eras are cited as the catalysts, but, in fact, they might turn out to be the downstream consequence of culture.

That is, the cultural setting pitted the desires of various individuals and groups in society apart from one another, where the most viable solution seemed to come from the citizenry becoming fed up. They wanted more from something or of someone in society.

Those social movements can be seen throughout the history of the world. Indeed, right through the Civil Rights movements, and other social movements, even the blogging (writing) campaigns within Bangladesh continue, especially as things come to a head.

From the era of Ancient Greece, where masses could decide to expel (ostracise) any citizen of the city-state of Athens, to the various movements in the 20th century that managed to bring an end to colonialism around the world, and the social movements which fought for equal human rights among people of different genders, colours and religions, one might feel as though there is a periodic and cyclic nature to the continual uprisings.

Recently, there have been plans for a women's march in Washington as despite the fact that the inequality gap between various societal groups has shortened in the last century, there is still a lot to cover until we are able to praise ourselves that we have achieved equality.

It was a reflection of women among other peoples distressed by the divisive rhetoric on the American campaign trail by the, at the time, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, who is now the President-elect. For the women's march planned for January 21st, 2017 from the Lincoln Memorial to the White House, which was planned on Facebook and is meant to be after the Trump inauguration, 100,000 women planned to take part in it. Breanne Butler is an organizer for the women's march on Washington.

"We're doing it his very first day in office because we are making a statement," Butler said, "The marginalized groups you attacked during your campaign? We are here and we are watching." (Rogers, 2016). Real emphasis needs to be given on such marches: While the internet can play a massive role in getting the general public informed and involved in protests, and as it serves as a concrete means to set up, advance, and organize a social movement, there is no doubt that real change takes place in the streets where the voice of people is heard and practical action is taken.

Of course, the statements do not come to the level of the Turkish government's recent proposals about rapists being acquitted based on marrying the woman that they sexually assaulted. Despite

the recent attempts of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to establish an authoritarian regime, after the coup that took place in the country in July 2016, by imprisoning thousands of military generals and officers, journalists and scholars who opposed the Turkish government, thousands have taken the streets to oppose the proposed bill.

"We will not shut up. We will not obey. Withdraw the bill immediately!", the protesters shouted to the government, giving a very straight and clear view of what a social movement taking the streets can bring about.

Statements of the Justice Minister Bekir Bozdag that this "is a step taken to solve a problem in some parts of our country" cannot be described in any other way than being utterly ridiculous. The words, then the actions, followed by the attempts for a culmination, but each began from the catalyst of reaction to events by individuals and groups to divisive rhetoric. The divisive rhetoric on the campaign trail.

No need to reiterate details known to most. Word of mouth, social media, conversations with spouses, within families, with friends, and in communities and organizations turned into action. Actions such as the increased monetary funding and socio-cultural support for nonprofit organizations representative of particular aspects of political platforms and policies including the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the American Civil Liberties Union.

The marches planned on Facebook for Washington seem akin to the protests and marches for Black Monday in Poland over reproductive health services and rights including abortion services by tens, even hundreds, of thousands of women and the 70,000 women marching and protesting in Argentina over the high femicide, murder of women, rate in the country.

Without these marches, the above issues would be a mere headline in a newspaper or another issue commented on the news. But because of all those thousands of people that became united under a common goal and scope, the above issues have managed to get globalized.

Thus, frustration and anger caused by the above proposed laws, and pressure to the respective governments, is no longer Polish, Argentinian, or Turkish. It is global. And this is all thanks to those social movements. These feet marching and protesting are heard by the leaders and tend to create either more uproar, at a minimum debate, and sometimes substantial democratic reform to create a country more aligned with the desires of the citizenry, which is part of the international human rights movements and has been for a long time.

## 111 to 1, the Not-So Golden Ratio

## **Angelos Sofocleous and Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**December 20, 2016** 

International rights stipulations provide the basis for fundamental human rights. As Ban Ki-Moon has said, "We are all different from one another, but we all have the same human rights. I am proud to stand for the equality of all people - including those whose are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender."

Numerous resolutions, from both the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, make human rights inclusive of LGBT peoples, and LGBT rights distinct and important too (OHCHR, 2016a). These are not some distant considerations, but immediate, impacting people's lives, and violated on a consistent basis - hour-by-hour. One recent national event, from Chad, came from a distressing ratio of votes - 111 to 1 - and reiterated this perennial truism.

Last week, Chad's National Assembly voted for a new penal code which criminalizes homosexuality with 111 MPs voting for it, 1 against and 4 abstaining (<u>Duffy, 2016a</u>). This made Chad the 77th country internationally, and was the 37th country in Africa to criminalize homosexuality (<u>Fitzgerald, 2016</u>; <u>Smith, 2014</u>). Under the new law, people engaging in homosexual acts can be heavily fined (£60-£600) or serve a 20-year prison sentence (<u>Duffy, 2016a</u>).

In fact, according to a legal report by the US Library of Congress all African states, with the exception of South Africa, recognizes and permits same-sex marriage (<u>Law Library of Congress, 2014</u>). More specifically, in Nigeria, Sudan and Mauritania, homosexuality is punishable by death (<u>BBC News, 2014</u>). This action of Chad's National Assembly comes after Gambia passed a bill imposing life imprisonment for homosexual acts.

The fact that the vast majority - only 1 exception and 4 abstentions - of Chad's National Assembly supported the new penal code is worrying. This bill was also supported by the country's former Prime Minister, Delwa Kassiré Coumakoye who mentioned that "Homosexuality is condemned by all religions. We do not have to forgive something that God himself rejects because Westerners have said this or that".

There are two issues we need to discuss here: First, the fact that religion plays a role in determining what is legal and what is not. Second, the fact that the former Prime Minister considers that it is a strong point of the new penal code that it does not conform to "Western" styles and principles (<u>Fitzgerald</u>, 2016).

In an era that nations fight for secularism, supporting the complete separation of church and state, some African nations, including Chad, make decisions solely on religious grounds (<u>Jacobsen & Sofocleous, 2016</u>). What is more, Chad's cabinet mentioned that the new penal code intends to "protect the family and to comply with Chadian society" (<u>Smith, 2014</u>). It is indeed a worrying fact how nations, like Chad, commit the argumentum ad antiquitatem (appeal to tradition) fallacy and base a whole penal code on tradition, family values and religion.

There is no reason or logic involved in supporting the new penal code apart from subjective statements of this nature. And it is scary to think that because of subjective statements people are going to end up in prison or get heavily fined. The former PM even called the bill a 'fair

balance'. This leaves us wondering, however, what may ever be "fair" about the bill when it criminalizes basic human rights.

Furthermore, there is every reason to argue that anti-Westernization is not considered to be a valid reason for supporting the country's new penal code. In fact, it shows quite the opposite - its weaknesses. First of all, the issue is not even about what Western countries do. It's what humans do. As the great journalist and religious critic Christopher Hitchens has said: "I say that homosexuality is not just a form of sex, it's a form of love — and it commands our respect for that reason" ([Rodion Gurung], 2013).

Granting homosexuals the right to engage in relationships, sexual acts or marry is itself the same right we are talking about when talking about heterosexuals. No difference is or should be made. In fact, criminalizing homosexuality is itself an act that does not serve to protect people of any society or tradition as it on its very basis does not take into consideration that a respected part of the population is attracted to people of the same sex, or even to people of both sexes. Any appeal to religion or tradition fails to provide us with a logical basis on which to support the claims that supporters of Chad's new penal code which punishes homosexuality make.

Indeed, this "form of love" can be outlawed, and made extraordinarily risky and even lethal in its practice because of cultural and legal factors. Take, for example, the case of Tanzania suspending the outreach programmes for HIV (<u>Duffy, 2016b</u>). Why, why would there be suspension for outreach programmes for HIV? The reason: homosexuality is outlawed within Tanzania and, therefore, within the logic of the system seen as not worth considering for appropriate, and needed, outreach for HIV (<u>Ibid.</u>).

And it is not like there aren't campaigns devoted to the implementation of the international rights via international movements, UN Free & Equal is one such campaign, and "is an unprecedented United Nations global public education campaign for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equality" (OHCHR, 2016b). These are old prejudices, and they keep cropping up. Again, why? It is easier to hate than to love, at least in the short-term.

Which leads back to the international Moral-Educator-in-Chief, Ban Ki-Moon, who said, "It is an outrage that in our modern world so many countries continue to criminalize people simply for loving another human being of the same sex...Laws rooted in 19th century prejudices are fuelling 21st century hate."

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## **EU-Turkey relationship status: It's complicated**

# Angelos Sofocleous and Scott Douglas Jacobsen March 23, 2017

Turkey's been in the news lately, mainly because of Erdoğan, but with recent comments, detachment of Turkey from the EU, and the internal referendum of Turkey too. Why?

After June 2016's failed coup d'etat in Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the country's president, has been increasingly trying to shut down opposing voices in an attempt to dominate his position in the political scene. In fact, a month after the alleged coup d'etat, thousands of educational institutions had been shut down and thousands of academics, prosecutors, and academics had been imprisoned, arrested or sacked.

In the nine months that followed up to the present, Turkey was in a state of chaos and turmoil, with multiple terrorist attacks taking place in major cities of the country, political unrest in the Eastern part of Turkey, and the arrest of journalists, and the shutdown of newspapers and media channels in the nation. All done in the name of democracy, which, according to Erdoğan, is threatened in Turkey, and so the actions, by this logic, are justified. It is on these grounds that Erdoğan and Binali Yıldırım, the Turkish Prime Minister, have put forward a referendum, which will greatly increase the power of the President and will severely limit the power of the Parliament as well as abolish the office of the Prime Minister. Under the new constitutional amendments that have been put forward, the President will be both the head of state and head of parliament, while he has the power to appoint and sack the Vice-President and ministers of the government at his own will. What is more, Erdoğan has said that, under the new constitutional amendments, the death penalty will be reinstated and those who were behind July's coup will face the death penalty.

The European Union and its members have not been idle on the current situation in Turkey, probably the EU's most important partner in the Middle East. Recently, the Dutch government blocked Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, who is the Turkish Foreign Minister, from entering the Netherlands. Subsequently, Çavuşoğlu would address a political rally in Rotterdam in order to gain support for the upcoming referendum. Responding, Çavuşoğlu called the Netherlands "the capital of fascism" and Erdoğan said that the country will "pay the price".

The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, considered this inexcusable, and according to the New York Times, said that the Nazi comparisons must stop "without ifs or buts" because, as the attempts to send Turkish "surrogates" or representatives to Germany resulted in Turkey accusing Germany of Nazism, the Turkish surrogates were not permitted to freely campaign. Things continue to heat up.

This is not a response that comes unexpectedly, as EU-Turkey relations after the coup d'etat are becoming increasingly tense. Since November 2016, and in response to Turkey's tactics against those allegedly involved in the coup, Members of the European Parliament adopted a resolution "calling for the negotiations to be suspended until the Turkish government ended its disproportionate and repressive response to July's failed coup". Nevertheless, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seems unaffected by these claims and still supports that arrests and human rights violations are needed in order to restore democracy in the country. The restoration of the death penalty is another crucial point for the EU-Turkey relations.

While Erdoğan is determined to bring the death penalty back after the referendum, the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, has warned that the return of the death penalty in Turkey is a "red line" in Ankara's stalled bid for membership in the European Union, essentially freezing Turkey's negotiations for accession in the European Union. Turkey's relations with other EU member-states are getting tenser as well. Specifically, relations with Greece were strained after Greece's Supreme Court ruled that eight Turkish soldiers who fled to Greece after the coup d'etat would not be extradited to Turkey after fears of their human rights being violated. Ankara reportedly stated that Greece "has failed to fulfill the basics of the fight against terrorism". What is more, Turkey's southern neighbour, Cyprus, is at the moment in the path to reunification after the island was divided following a Greek coup d'etat in the 15th of July 1974 which was succeeded by an invasion by the Turkish military five days later. Turkey's relations with Cyprus are being stressed as Erdoğan is asking for the support of nationalists who fiercely oppose the idea of Turkey ceding its control over Northern Cyprus and allowing the island to be reunified without having foreign military troops or foreign guarantors.

The possibility for becoming a part of the EU has been seriously put in question, regardless, with statements by Foreign Minister Sigbar Gabriel. Gabriel said, "Turkey certainly isn't on the verge of joining (the EU), but in no case should we close communication channels, even though things are difficult." In fact, the deterioration of the ties between Europe and Turkey, and especially the EU and Turkey, could be signs of a greater risk internally, where the country, based on reports of someone that would know the country better than others, could be heading into dictatorship. Therefore, the claims about the dictatorial or Nazi actions of Germany, or the Netherlands, could be distraction from the current oppression and shutdown of the media or the press, for example. The Guardian published an article by Can Dündar, who was the editor-in-chief of the oldest newspaper in Turkey called Cumhuriyet.

In it, he puts faith in the voters, in the final say of the vote of the citizens, but is seriously concerned about the real possibility for the country to lean into dictatorial leadership, even an outright dictatorship. "Using the coup attempt to reinforce his power, the president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has since been ruling the country under what is in effect martial law without the army," <u>Dündar said</u>. The number of jailed journalists after the coup shot up by 400% from 30 to 150 - so 120 or 400% more.

The government of Turkey made calls on the <u>European Union</u> and the <u>Council of Europe</u> - an international organization devoted to democracy, human rights, and rule of law in Europe - to 'speak out' against the "breach of fundamental freedoms and European human rights convention" by the Netherlands, which is alleged at this point in time. The accusations went forward. That is, they said that the Dutch government was the cause of the crisis in international law because of its "violence against Turkish demonstrators," according to EU Minister Ömer Çelik. Then there are other recent, relatively small, things such as the ban on the electronics in flights, <u>Eyewitness News reports</u>. The US has done the same jointly with Britain, but the main focus is on Britain here because of its containment in Europe.

There are purported restrictions in the ties with Russia for Turkey, <u>according to Panorama</u>. The deteriorating relationship with the Europe will be used with the ties with Russia, by Turkey. That is, the lesser the relationship with the European Union, or Europe in general, the greater the relationship potential with Russia for Turkey. The director of the Oriental Studies Institute of the National Academy of Sciences, Ruben Safrastyan, <u>said</u>, "Europe continues the process of 'shaping' Turkey...especially during the ruling of Erdoğan, makes such steps and

announcements that are not accepted in the European diplomatic practice...When observing the integration processes, we see...the European society dislikes many things and they speak them out."

According to the <u>Huriyet Daily News</u> contributor Serkan Demirtaş, it is extraordinarily important to note that a country does not get to arbitrarily set the standards for becoming a part of the EU, to accessioning to the EU. Both sides, apparently, want to avoid the potential for conflict, but things are, as noted, heated. Demirtas posed the question of whether or not Turkey wants to be a third-world country. Turkish politician and deputy prime minister, Mehmet Şimşek, said that if it feels as if it can function apart from the EU, then Turkey will be seen as a third-world country. "The more Turkey shows progress in terms of European Union membership, the more it will become attractive," Şimşek said.

So where does this leave us? Not necessarily with the last statement with the state of Turkey as a third-world country, but this does leave us with fewer questions and more statements about the tense situation between the EU and Turkey, Europe and Turkey, Germany and Turkey, the Netherlands and Turkey, and Turkey...with Turkey - that is, both externally and internally. So we have some reflections as discussed. Erdogan has been shutting down dissent and imprisoning journalists, and shutting the media in general. So he has been actively suppressing the population's source of investigative truths. From nine months ago to now, there has been terrorism, political unrest, arrests, and shutdown of media in the country. There have been attempts to consolidate even more power for Erdogan as the President. The death penalty will be reinstated. The Dutch blocked Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu from entering Netherlands; Germany prevent the free campaigning of Turkish surrogates. Erdoğan called the Netherlands "the capital fascism"; he also accused Germany of Nazism. Erdoğan considers the violations of human rights within the country as necessary for 'democracy'. Also, the tensions with Greece are up after events with the Turkish soldiers event and the lashing out in a proclamation from Ankara about the failure to fight terrorism by Greece. Even the editor-in-chief of the oldest newspaper in Turkey warned of the possibility for Turkey becoming a dictatorship under Erdogan, the faith that the editor-in-chief of that newspaper, the Cumhuriyet, was the faith in the voters, in the citizenry. This is all in the light of the query as to whether Turkey wants to be seen as a thirdworld country. Does it? It has many risks and the leadership is lashing out at various countries in the EU and Europe in general. Things are tense now, but only the active participation of the citizenry and support from the outside will suss things out - and that will take time, ever so tense time.

# Skepticism, Humanism, Atheism, and Right Wing Upbringing

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Angelos Sofocleous

July 19, 2017

Angelos Sofocleous is a friend and colleague. We write together a decent amount. I asked about an interview for an ebook, where we would discuss his background. I wanted to diversify the content of the e-book, free one, with not only the articles written with friends and colleagues but also interviews with the writers themselves. Here is Angelos.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: To begin, we have been writing partners. In fact, you've been one of my more prolific writing buddies, activist work, for about a year – coming into a year-and-a-half. It is cool because we're on almost opposite sides of the globe, but we work on common initiatives relatively consistently. I wanted to diversify some of the content of this volume with some more diverse interviews with people beginning their active careers. Their lives in other words, so here we are after you agreed to be a willing interviewee (victim). What was early childhood to college life like for you? Was there an activist background? How do you find the developments within the EU throughout your lifetime?

**Angelos Sofocleous:** Thank you for the opportunity, Scott. You are one of the most active, intelligent, and knowledgeable people I know. It is a joy to be able to work with you on a number of projects.

To begin, I have been through many phases of "metamorphoses" from early childhood to college life. I can think of periods in my life with which I have very little in common with the person I am now. From a very young age though, I always remember myself going through the encyclopedias in my grandma's house, trying to figure out what interests me; from biology to politics, from astronomy to philosophy. Soon, I found out that I was interested in one thing: Knowledge.

Luckily, I was a very introverted and shy child. This gave me the opportunity to be able to spend my time wisely on what regards social interactions while I very carefully allocated my (limited) energy on things that could benefit me. Hence, I spent a lot of time with myself. And I felt totally fine with it. I never get why people consider it weird for someone to stay at home on a Saturday night, or go to the movies by themselves, or pick a book and sit on a park's bench. I was thus involved in activities through which I would spend time having discussions with myself, exploring my mind, and writing down my ideas and thoughts.

Writing, o writing. I started my anonymous personal blog when I was 14, in which I still write 9 years later, although the person who started the blog is different from the one who still writes on it. Words in my mind have no voice, no physical expressions; they can only be expressed through writing, and this is what I did for most of my life. Had it not been for writing, my mind would be a chaotic mess of unstructured and unorganized thoughts, probably expressed in nonconventional ways. And I wouldn't like that. Writing, thus, saved my mind from going crazy. A mind that cannot be expressed, either stops thinking or stops expressing itself. Both can lead to insanity.

The year when I started writing signified a turning point in my life. Growing up in a right-wing religious family, the opportunity arose through my teenage years, to revolt against what I had grown up with, and explore new ideas, while questioning my own, deeply held at that time, beliefs. I no more consider 'belief' to provide an appropriate basis on which to base arguments – What is needed is knowledge, and in case of knowledge is not possible (yet), one must suspend belief until there is appropriate and satisfactory evidence for knowledge. This is science.

Apart from some close friends, I was never able to discuss my atheistic and agnostic beliefs, as well as my opposition to religion and my endorsement of science, with my family or even at school. This is how it is growing up on a small island, with less than 1 million population, which claims to have one of the biggest percentages of religious followers in the European Union. My 'teenage revolution', then, was not verbal and not physical, it was mental.

That being said, my 'activist' background was limited to sharing my ideas, trying to encourage people through my writings and influence them, while I was doing the same with other people's writings. No action out in the streets, no discussions outside social media, limited involvement in groups. I would not say, then, that I had any activist background when it comes to my teenage life unless you want to call writing a form of activism.

In any case, I drew myself more and more into skepticism, freethinking, and humanism, and tried to educate myself on these issues, waiting for the time when I would apply this knowledge into the world.

This could not be done after high school though, as I had to spend two years doing mandatory military service. I will not waste much space here to talk about it, as it's not worth it. I am ashamed of my country that treats its 18-year-olds in such a way, still having remnants of 'hegemonic masculinity'. There is great potential for encouraging young people to develop themselves, and military service is definitely not a way to do this, at least in my country.

Things had changed, however, when I entered university. Having spent two years of physical and mental inactivity, I decided that it was time for me to become active. At the moment, I'm the president of two student societies, Durham Humanists, and Cypriot Society of Durham, while I'm a Sub-Editor at my university's newspaper (Palatinate UK), a writer at ConatusNews.com, and a co-editor at Secular Nation magazine.

I have also just published my second poetry collection. I am therefore active in writing again, this time having the opportunity to meet like-minded people and be active in groups, promoting campaigns and influencing students and the general public to a greater extent. I feel that most of the chains that held me back to my teenage years have broken, and I am now able to take action on the issues that concern me.

Now, moving onto your last question regarding the developments within the EU within my lifetime, I witnessed a major shift in Europe, from conservatism to liberalism and progressivism. Mutual respect and recognition of human rights across Europe, of course, need to take place at a personal level, within societies, but also at a national, and even pan-continental level.

This is what I feel the EU has achieved, bringing European countries closer to each other without erasing any aspect of their unique identities but, in contrast, managing to protect, secure, and enrich each nation's identity through mutual recognition and respect for each other nation's identity.

# Angelos Sofocleous on Being President-Elect of Humanist Students

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Angelos Sofocleous

**December 22, 2017** 

Angelos Sofocleous is an agnostic atheist, skeptic, and the president of the University of Durham's Durham Atheist, Secularist and Humanist society. Recently, he was elected as the President-elect for Humanist Students in the United Kingdom. I reached out to congratulate him, and to talk about the recent election. He is also a friend and colleague (Conatus News).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We're colleagues through writing and friends through constant interaction and united in common cause in the youth activist sector. Happily, you were elected the president-elect of Humanist Students, recently. First, I want to say, "Congratulations." Second, I wanted to talk about some targeted objectives and plans for the position. What seem like the bigger areas for advancement of the humanist movement?

**Angelos Sofocleous:** Thank you, Scott! Very glad to be working with you on a variety of causes in so many different projects. As the position I have been elected to is within a students' movement, I would like to focus on aspects relating to students. As Humanist Students, we want to ensure that religious students and religious institutions and union societies are not in a privileged position over non-religious students and societies. It's alarming and sad that this is the case in most universities around the UK. For the sake of having a belief, in this case a religious belief, religious societies, especially societies of the Christian religion, are treated differently from universities and students' unions. It's concerning that a student society is privileged simply because of their belief. Of course, this shows an absurdity. The absurdity is revealed once we think of a world where societies of certain non-religious ideologies (e.g. political) are privileged over societies of other ideologies. Imagine if the Marxist, the neoliberal, or the conservative society at universities enjoyed privileges that other societies did not have. That would cause a lot of uproar. But this is not the case with religious societies; they can be in an advantageous position without the student population reacting. This is our job as Humanist Students: React against this unfair privilege that religious student societies enjoy and ensure that non-religious students are treated as religious students are.

Despite the fact that, according to the latest British Social Attitudes Survey, 71% of young people are non-religious, this figure does not seem to reflect the work that is done by universities to cater for the needs of non-religious students. More specifically, the number of UK universities which offer non-religious pastoral care is limited, and this, again, makes some students privileged simply because they have a religious belief. No effort has taken place to cater for the needs of non-religious students. A number of universities have argued that their pastoral carers are trained to accommodate for the needs of students of all faiths, even non-religious ones. This is simply not true. The beliefs and ideologies of non-religious students are fundamentally different from the basic beliefs of religious students. Most of the world's religions have some common characteristics; that is, they believe to the existence of a supernatural world, hold a belief to a deity, give value to faith, and have a limited respect for science. Therefore, as the primary structure of the majority of religions is similar, one can't argue that help and advice to a non-religious student can be provided with reference to that structure. Help and advice to a non-religious student should be strictly administered on non-religious grounds.

Apart from countering privileges enjoyed by religious societies and providing non-religious pastoral support to students, we need to bring humanism into campuses to provide a platform and a community for non-religious students. As I will explain later, this is not to be done in a form of dogmatic introduction, or by presenting humanism as a new ideology (this will be harming to humanism itself), but by presenting an alternative to religious societies and to religious institutions which, in many universities, manage to dominate and, at times control, university policies and practices. As a matter of fact, it has been the case that members of religious societies, in this case mostly Islamic ones, at least in the UK, have attempted to de-platform and rally against certain speakers, accusing them of 'islamophobia' and 'hate speech'. This is the mindset that needs to be overturned at our universities. We should be very cautious about what is 'hate speech' at our campuses. There are certainly practices that can be labelled of as 'hate speech'; but criticizing any religion or any belief system is certainly not 'hate speech'. Criticizing any ideology is vital for our development as a society and no ideology shall be immune from criticism. If one gets 'offended' because their religion, ideology, or belief system is criticized then that's their problem. However, when speech calls for violent action against a particular group of people then, yes, that is 'hate speech'. It is vital that we distinguish between the two, so that we are able to not mislabel certain events as promoting a 'phobia' against a particular religion or ideology. It is crucial that we keep our universities as places in which thoughts can be exchanged, challenged, and heavily criticized. There is no place for emotions here.

Wishing to give voice to the 73% of young people, many of whom are students, we are structuring Humanist Students in a way in which we'll have stronger presence in university campuses, battling against religious privilege, and for freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, and promoting critical thinking.

Jacobsen: As a student at the University of Durham, you study philosophy and psychology. You have been the president of the Durham Humanist Students Society since May, 2016. You hold numerous board and executive positions in and for the non-religious community. With these backgrounds, how can we leverage these organizations and publications, and so on, to target those bigger areas with coverage, speaking engagements, political endorsements even, and making the humanist position an acceptable mainstream viewpoint?

**Sofocleous:** Firstly, I wish to point out that our aim, as I see it, is not to make the humanist position 'an acceptable mainstream viewpoint'. Let me explain what I mean by that because such a statement can easily be misinterpreted. This is not to say that I don't believe that the world would not be a better place if people embraced humanism or that we should not campaign for the wide variety of values that humanism endorses. The case, rather, is that there are dangers in viewing humanism as a concrete ideology itself, as an ideology which can turn into a dogma, if managed incorrectly.

Our aim is not to preach for humanism, it is not to try to 'convince' people that humanism holds the absolute truth. Doing this, we fall into the trap of the way of thinking that a number of religions, political ideologies, and other belief systems share. We should not view humanism as a set of ideas to which someone can 'convert to' or 'deconvert from'.

We do not want humanism to be treated as 'any other ideology'. This is simply because respect for other human beings, other animals, and nature is not an ideology. Valuing reason, critical

thinking, and logic, over faith, superstition, and belief is not an ideology. Battling religious indoctrination, religious privilege, and Church of England Bishops having a say in politics is not an ideology. Criticizing the atrocities that take place in theocratic nations and campaigning against blasphemy laws and for freedom of speech is not an ideology. We must not, foremost, treat humanism strictly as an ideology.

Someone who has respect for other human beings, values reason over faith, and is against laws which call for the killing of apostates does not just 'hold an ideology'. Rather, they have just adopted the mindset through which societies can develop and prosper, always having respect for other human beings and human rights. It is the neutral position that every human being must follow, for the sake of being human.

I can make my case clearer by bringing in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), something that humanism fully supports and endorses. Do we want to hold that the UDHR is a 'set of beliefs' which is merely suggestive? Is there any sense in saying that a violent dictator 'converts' when they decide to adopt the UDHR? Is 'preaching' the right way to establish the UDHR as the 'mainstream', as you called it, position? I think that the answer is 'no', in all three questions.

We wish to make the humanist position 'an acceptable mainstream viewpoint' – but this is not to be done by any mechanism or method employed by religions or other belief systems which can be characterized as dogmatic. That is, we do not preach for humanism nor we do not 'convert' people. This is not even an option for humanism.

It is vitally important to understand the points I make above. This is directly related to your question as I see, unfortunately, that many humanist, atheist, secularist, and freethinking organizations become dogmatic and establish a concrete ideology to which all of their members must conform to or they become ostracized. If we, as the non-religious community, want to work together to have an impact in the world and fight for the causes that concern us, we should work according to our values and not fall into the trap of exercising the same practices which we criticize. Those are preaching, hate speech, ostracization.

We must work together, but we must also avoid treating humanism as a system whose values do not change and also avoid treating it as 'any other ideology'. It is not 'any other ideology' for the same reason the UDHR is not 'any other set of beliefs'. It is the position that we ought to take as human beings.

Jacobsen: In the UK, there are various privileges for the religious. How can the young student population work to overcome these biases, e.g. Bishops in the House of Lords?

**Sofocleous:** Indeed, there are a lot of privileges that religious institutions enjoy in the UK. In fact, as a non-British, I find it puzzling, and almost paradoxical, that in a country where the population is increasingly non-religious, the Church of England is recognized as the state church in England, operates its own schools, and can affect or decide on government policies, as it holds seats in the House of Lords. The paradox lies in the fact that, while in most countries the religiosity of people correlates with (or is caused by) the involvement of religion in public and state affairs, in the UK the Church of England seems to hold a position in society which does not reflect its actual effect in society.

The young student population can be active in battling religious privilege in many ways. On a personal level, they can be active in social media raising awareness for the existence of religious

privilege, or writing a letter to their local MP presenting their views and exercising criticism if the MP supports religious involvement in politics. What is more, they can write articles through which they support their position and explain why religious privileged needs to be challenged, potentially affecting other people.

On a wider level, they can join nation-wide campaigns organized by organizations such as Humanists UK and National Secular Society who very carefully plan and promote campaigns battling religious privilege. Such organizations are doing great and important work in securing freedom from religion and active participation immensely contributes to their causes.

# Jacobsen: To found a humanist publication would be a step forward for Humanist Students in general, how do you envision this coming to fruition? How can people help out?

**Sofocleous:** A humanist publication will be a big step forward for Humanist Students. One of the main reasons as to why Atheist, Humanist, and Secularist Students (AHS) was rebranded and restructured as Humanist Students was to give a sense of cohesion and unity among AHS (and now Humanist Students) societies. As a cohesive movement, then, Humanist Students needs to give voice to its students and provide a platform for them. The work that each Humanist Students society is doing at a local level is exceptional. However, mostly, these societies support humanism, express their concerns and promote their causes through talks, small-scale campaigns, socials, and fundraising. A humanist publication will give a new dimension to the ways Humanist Students societies express themselves – it will allow them to be direct and clear about the issues that matter to them. Currently, local issues stay local. An issue which a Humanist Students society faces at its university or city does not receive considerable attention by other Humanist Students societies as it's the case that there is no medium through which the news will reach them. A humanist publication, then, will allow Humanist Students societies to communicate with each other about their successes and challenges they face on a local level.

Humanist Students societies members do have ideas and concerns, and do use writing to express themselves. In the absence of a Humanist Students newspaper, though, they look to find other platforms on which to publicize their material. A humanist publication, then, will not only encourage people who do not usually write to express themselves through writing, but will also utilize the vast number of people and societies who wish to present their ideas to the rest of the student population.

It is vitally important for the Humanist Students movement to have a voice; to have a platform on which it can express itself and through which it can criticize religious privilege and indoctrination. It will be a point of reference both for all Humanist Students societies, but also for any one who wants to learn more about humanism.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Angelos, I had a lengthy conversation with Hannah Timson. You are both highly competent. I look forward to your collaborative efforts to make these plans realities.

**Sofocleous:** Many thanks for this interview, Scott. I greatly value all the amazing work you are doing and the platform you give to so many people to speak out and express themselves. I am sure we will have the opportunity to join forces again during my term.

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# Three Administrations of Humanist Student Leaders Dialogue About Humanism: Hari Parekh, Hannah Lucy Timson, and Angelos Sofocleous

#### **Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

July 15, 2018

\*President Emeritus (Hari Parekh); President (Hannah Lucy Timson); President-Elect (Angelos Sofocleous).\*

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let us start with Hari, how did you become involved in Humanist Students, in brief?

**Hari Parekh:** In brief [Laughing], before Humanist Students was an entity, it used to be known as Atheist, Humanist, and Secular Students (AHS). That entity was the student sector for the British Humanist Association (BHA).

I originally started my own Atheist, Humanistic and Secular (AHS) society at the University of Northampton. It became the first society within the student sector to receive an award from its own Students Union for being the best society of the year, and for myself being the best president. During my second year at university, I was the East Midlands Regional Officer for the AHS – in which I supported the development of the society at the University of Leicester. During my final year at university, I was the New Societies Officer where I helped to start fifteen societies across the UK and Republic of Ireland, and the following year I was elected as President of the AHS during my MSc at the University of Nottingham. Thereafter, I was involved in the successful transition (with the support from the members) from the AHS to Humanist Students as it is now known, and am now President Emeritus of Humanist Students.

The AHS was taken under the wing by the BHA to support students at universities. The problem was, the way it was ran; all of it was organized and actualized by students. So, students were the cohort of the president, the treasurer, the secretary, and, as a result, with students being students having to manage an organization at the same time as managing their academic careers and everything else that they have to do, whether jobs or whatever else.

It meant the framework of the AHS at the time ran, ran pretty much on loose ends, when people had time to do it. As a result, it fractured the way students were supported. It fractured the way students were able to get involved with the student organization.

In actuality, it affected the progression. If you were a student at the time, it was less likely that you would be carrying on within the arena of humanism. It was unlikely that you would be in the arena of being an activist or being interested in what was occurring outside of the student sector.

The other thing is, it managed to last 10 years, but for those 10 years it had a steady decline. It is difficult to see those spaces form. It is difficult to see the gaps and see it sliding down. When others and myself, when I was president at the time, it was kind of about that time that the gaps were shown.

We thought that there needed to be a difference in how this was ran. We needed support from the BHA or more support for the administration and everything else. After the AGM last year in March, an independent review needed to see what the issues and qualms were.

In July, we had an AGM. The caucus passed the amendments to the organization. The changes occurred to the organization. It became Humanists Students, and was allowed to be a part of Humanists UK. Humanists UK supported Humanist Students in changing the way it operated.

It allowed for the new world of the student and youth coordinator in the office of Humanists UK to relinquish all of the advocacy that [Laughing] others and myself have to do. It balanced the load that others and I did, and Hannah and others will do in the future!

As a result, we are able to do the roles we were elected to do rather than the roles plus everything else. We had a good opportunity to re-energize the people interested in it. Those people that are not can observe from the sidelines and hopefully become a part of it later.

As president emeritus, to come back to your point, it has been to see it from a distance, to be there to support Hannah when she needed it and to play that role as an advisor.

Hannah Timson: Yes, so, from my perspective, it has been a bit more of a thing about a welcoming community. When I came to university, I didn't really know what I believed. I called myself agnostic for a little while, but then I went with my friend, Sammy who is a physicist, to a meeting, It was an AHS meeting, where I met all of the people that I know now. I realized, "Wow, these people are speaking my language" [Laughing], but also that there was a community network that I may have missed not being part of a church group. A lot of people go to a community church group at university because they are looking for a welcoming community, there is nothing wrong with that. However, the fact that there was an alternative to that, where I could say, "It is okay that I don't believe in this stuff." That was what led me to the AHS. I hadn't been that involved in the National organisation until I decided to last year and stood for president.

I think I stood because I realized the value of a community and political organization such as Humanists UK. By political, I do not mean sitting on one side or the other, but an organisation that actively pushes for changes for, in my opinion, a more liberal and better society. I realized the need for an organization that was accepting of everyone from all walks of life – regardless if they were religious or not, I think that is what led me to stand. I had a chat with Hari. I hadn't met him, actually, at the time. We chatted [Laughing], and I thought he seemed cool and seem to think the same things as I do.

Parekh: Do you remember that chat?

**Timson:** I do, and it worked out! What I realized was with the role, it wasn't about -I hate the term president to be honest, because the term "president" sounds so grand and, actually the job itself is putting yourself at the level of your fellow students and saying, "How can we work together?" - its about facilitating dialogue and bringing people together.

It is about building community with other people who may have similar values to our own, but also with the others who frankly don't, it is highly important that we do that. This was a platform to do that sort of work, not only local but also national level. That is how I ended up where I am.

I am studying Theology and Religion, so this has always been a massive interest to me. Actually, one piece of highly untapped research that I have encountered in Religious Studies is a growing need to understand The non-religious. Even if we act in similar ways to the religious and have similar needs – whatever words you might use to describe those – there is something missing from the academic conversation.

"Who are those people in our society who are now the majority in Britain at least? Who are they? How do they act? How do they interact with other people who are religious?" That has always been a massive interest to me academically.

It has been nice to be involved in an organization that has been working to actively answer that question. Being non-religious doesn't mean we can't have community and can't build important and interesting structures, even though the questions might be fluid. In some ways Humanity needs those structures in order to identify itself, develop and be progressive.

It has been really nice to be a part of an organization like that, its is nice from both the practical and academic sides.

#### Jacobsen: How about yourself Angelos?

Angelos Sofocleous: Firstly, a few things about myself, religious background, and how I got involved in humanism, in general. I grew up in an Orthodox Christian family and society, was a devout Christian myself, and followed religious practices. Apart from that, I also was what would someone describe an ultra right-wing nationalist, I believed in conspiracy theories, and also followed pseudoscience. At the age of 16-17, a few years before I went to university, I started a process of questioning the whole set of my beliefs, a process which lasted 1-2 years. I ended up on the opposite side of the spectrum on each of my beliefs, managing a full 1800 turn. At the age of 21, when I went to university, I defined myself as an agnostic atheist. I was looking for a group to get involved in to meet people with whom we shared a similar worldview, and a place where I could develop and express myself. I found this in the AHS.

Now, on how I got involved with Humanist Students. At Durham University, I joined Durham Atheist, Secularist, and Humanist society (DASH). Mostly, the BHA supported us at the time, which is now Humanists UK. I first became an officer for DASH. The year after, I became president and became even more involved with the AHS and Humanists UK.

Through those organizations, I met many likeminded people, which, at the time, provided me a community feeling but, more importantly functioned as a think tank where ideas were exchanged and shared. I was also very glad to find out that there were other people like me, who started off as religious and then started to question their beliefs and became atheists.

In June 2017, the structure of the AHS changed and became Humanist Students. Later in the year, elections were held and I was elected by Humanist Students members as president-elect. It is not only a leadership role, I would agree with Hannah, but a community director role rather than just being a top figure in the organization.

It is about supporting all those who do not believe or who start to question things as we did at some point in our lives or still do. It is really important for non-religious people, or people who are skeptical about their religion (people who constitute the majority of the student body at UK universities) at all universities to feel that they have a community to which they belong; to feel that they have likeminded people in their universities.

Also, it really is not only about religion. We want people to start to think about freedom of speech in universities, blasphemy laws, and other things which are not directly related to religion. We want to develop a more freethinking mindset.

Jacobsen: If you look at the demographics of universities and university-colleges with the United Kingdom, there about 130 as of August 2017. I want to ask a question first to

Hannah about the ways in which we find best to reach out to universities and the university-colleges in terms of getting the message out about humanism as well as the work that Humanist Students does.

**Timson:** At this stage, having changed the way that we work, we are now in about 119. We have about 800 students signed up to us, which is pretty good having only opened September time.

That is continuing to grow, we beat the target for this year [Laughing]. It is trial and error because we, obviously, do not know everything. Sean, who is the Student and Youth coordinator for Humanist Students, may know more because he knows more about how the Students Unions work.

It will be trial and error: What do people like? What is it people are interested in? How do you identify yourself? What is it that makes you want to be involved? A lot of outreach is via social media, and communication with student unions and saying, "Hey, we exist," [Laughing], "Would you be interested in doing stuff with us? We'll go to university Freshers weeks and run stalls etc., if there isn't a current society and have been attending things like the National Union of Student's Annual Conference and holding Fringe events.

We are not focusing on societies as the main affiliations of students. We are, as we say, placing the onus on the individual. We want them to feel like they are part of a bigger organization, but as individuals their opinion and the way that they want to do humanism and want to achieve and what they want to achieve is an individual process.

We have reached out, "So, we will open to all universities, whether they have a society or not. You can be a member of Humanist Students as well and get free access to Humanist UK material." We are in about 119 universities and we have at least one student who identifies as a Humanist Student on those campuses. The question is now, how active are those students? That's a question we are beginning to be able to understand. Then how we reach out to those members, is really just trial and error. We have our national conference coming in a month's time. I do not know how many people we will get. I do not know if it will be a struggle. We have always struggled to kind of attract people.

This year, the focus is going to be on "Who are we? What do we want to achieve?" Whether we have 20 or more people, we can ask them because those are the people who have purported to support humanism in the UK. If we get 100 people, it means we have more voices and more independent addition to that conversation. However, obviously, the more people are involved and the more democratic you can become, so we are opening forums and looking to have ambassadors where there isn't a society and asking, "There are 4 or 5 of you there. Would you be interested in starting a society?"

If there isn't anybody or only a student, the idea is to say, "Okay well, would you be interested in being a representative when we have our society in Birmingham in being the ambassador for the Birmingham area?" We would give information to them in that area and then give them the contact and get them in contact with local groups and attempt to arrange local events with our help.

It would be to get the word out about humanism. We will have that set up when we have our conference set up in about three weeks' time. It is a difficult one. But there are things that do work. We are setting up the foundation now. We are trying and seeing how far it can go.

We are and will continue to grow, I believe. 70%, based on the Vatican report, of young people in the UK, 116 to 29 years old, are non-religious. That's a huge percentage, not all will be Humanists, but a large percentage will be. It is about reaching out and saying, "Hey, don't be apathetic, let's build community, let's tackle this loneliness issue in young people, let's tackle mental health by building communities that are safe and welcoming and open. Let's look to the future and be positive and optimistic," which is what I think humanism offers.

*It is a starting place, but I think we will get there: trial and error [Laughing].* 

Jacobsen: Also, Angelos, you have a lot of editing and writing experience in the promotion of atheism, humanism, and secularism. How can other humanist university students develop those skills in order to articulate the humanist message on campus?

Angelos: One of the things that I included in my manifesto when I ran as a candidate for the election as the president-elect was to develop a magazine or blog or more generally a platform for humanist students to be able to express themselves.

We have, at the moment, over 700 members all across UK who, however, do not have a voice to express themselves through Humanist Students. We want to give them the opportunity to raise awareness about what is happening at their universities on issues relating to freedom of speech, human rights, treatment of religious societies.

We really want these issues to come out for people to know about them. Of course, in order to do this, it would be a good idea to have workshops at some of the next conferences.

But from there, it seems that students are, of course, able to express themselves. I am looking forward to giving students a platform to show what is going on at their universities.

Jacobsen: Hari, your own research at the graduate level was on the treatment of those who leave religion. In your time as the president-elect and president, and now as president emeritus, did you come across stories of individuals who had become apostates but then were living at home as students and were mistreated while in a religious home even though they themselves have renounced their religion?

**Hari:** I started the society back at the University of Northampton, where there was no society at the time for non-religious people. It was unheard of at the university or in the student population [Laughing].

When you get up and start a non-religious society in the campus, you turn some heads [Laughing]. You have people saying, "What are you doing? You are going against your skin color and who you are!" Etc. I sense from that. The statement is made from within whatever household is whatever way you want to put it.

There is always going to be some sort of back question about what that person is doing and why they are doing it. When I started the society, there was a young lady had just renounced that she is not part of Islam anymore.

She said, "I told my parents at the time. You know what, they literally abandoned me and told me to leave. They told me to get out of the house and do not look back because she was not welcome anymore." As a result of that, it let me know what else is going on and thinking, "Where else is this going?"

That is ridiculous. Evolutionarily, you have children, or as a social psychology argument, it makes no sense for going against them – they're your children. This is where the emotionality of apostasy comes from, because it triggers a nerve with people that listen to the countless stories; working with Aliyah Saleem and Imtiaz Shams in Faith to Faithless for example, of people not being able to simply be open to the thought that their child/children could potentially think differently from yourselves – and as a result, they may not agree with you on things that you deeply care about. That should not stop you as a parent from loving, caring and looking after them. By abandoning or shunning your own child, all you are doing is facilitating the notion that the religious/cultural/traditional niche you identify as remains stringent, cold and isolative to those that think and feel differently.

As a result, the organizations highlight the emotionality and the problems that happen with it. The research shows this as well. It shows that this has not been tapped into much. It is something the academic community still struggles to identify as an issue. The reason for that is because, obviously, getting to people who have left their religious faith, that have been abused within their household, and actually getting to that community remains quite difficult.

It means that they have to be hidden. If it is not hidden, you end up losing everything that you lived for. There was a guy in Aston, in Birmingham, who said a few months ago, "I do not believe in any of the religious faith at the moment. I am a refugee. You know what, what am I left with if I renounce my religion? I am on the street and then homeless – because my family cannot process the idea or very thought of this being true. There is no reason for me to do this. There is no quality of life for me if I leave. What else can I do?"

It is for that reason to do the research, to highlight that population of people. It exists, most definitely.

Jacobsen: So, Angelos, when it comes to some of the movement of humanism, not only in university but outside of it, I ask because the students themselves with 2-4 years depending on the degree program the are a part of will become part of the general public.

So if that is the case, and it is, what are some healthy ways of transitioning that students could bear in mind when they are working not only within an academic environment – which is a closed environment for the most part – and learning about and developing a humanist life for the most part and also when they leave the university living that outside as well as they can?

Sofocleous: To be honest with you, most humanist groups functioning outside of university have this problem. There are not a lot of young people within those organizations. It is people in their 60s and 70s. These people are doing an amazing job, no doubt. They are educated, smart, intelligent, active. But, at the same time, we cannot continue to ignore the problem of sustainability these societies face. Younger generations need to take over.

As Humanist Students, we mostly address issues that affect young people. We realize, however, the problem that exists in the sustainability of humanist societies which function outside universities, and we try to take steps, within the broader framework of Humanists UK, to address this issue. We have, for example, the Young Humanists branch of Humanists UK, which accommodates for people aged 18 to 35. It is vital that we keep people within humanism when they are in that age group as it is during that period that people enter and leave

university, get a job, and start raising a family. Thus, other priorities may act as a barrier, but there is always something that we can do.

It is important for them to receive help from us. Lots of young people are not involved in humanist groups in universities, but there is the potential for those people to get involved in humanism as, as surveys have shown, most are non-religious.

It is important to reach out and have those people who are not religious to know about us. There are people who are humanists for years and do not know about humanism as an ideology or a way of life. So, they do not publicly identify as humanists.

Jacobsen: Hari, you are farther along in your academic a career and academic completions than the three of us.

Parekh: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: When I reflect on some of the academic and professional accomplishments that you have, what are some issues that you might notice for those humanist youth that are further along in their studies or professional career in terms of still remaining active to some of the concerns noted by Angelos?

**Parekh:** [Laughing] It makes me feel a bit old. Longevity remains an issue, whether it is a student group, local group, or national. Longevity ensures that people remain encapsulated to the issues that once touched a nerve. But, as Angelos said previously, local groups have an attendance that are predominantly elderly. As a result, how can this be true with an increasing population of people identifying as non-religious?

I guess it remains important to highlight what Humanism actually is to a wider audience. The moment someone has a conversation about the actuality of humanism, the usual reply is, well that makes sense. As a result, it remains more important to engage in discourse, to make people aware of this ideological stance and to allow people to be able to ask questions without threat.

The other issue that remains is time. Working professionals, or people progressing within their studies are busy! It can be really draining to be at work throughout the day, to come home afterwards. To be fair, the best thing is rubbish television and an early night. So how does one occupy their spare time with activism or humanism when they have other priorities? The good part is that there is a good sense of transition from Humanist Students to Young Humanists for young people wanting to be involved. As a result, social media remains a great function to reach members from far afield.

It can be a long road before someone actually comes to the decision that they could be part of humanism. There remains no reason for the non-religious to attempt at converting people to being non-religious. It would be absurd. As a result, it is a decision that someone comes to on their own trail of thought. We are reliant on an individual's ability to think differently to what they may have been brought up thinking, and this is why longevity is a factor — it is a difficult decision to come to, and as a result, we need to be more prepared to ensure that we can support people when they come to such a junction. We need to work to find ways in which young professionals and young adults can be more involved, where they can find their sense of purpose.

Jacobsen: Hannah, you had a background not only with the Amish, but also with the Evangelical Baptists or Evangelical Baptist communities and then transitioned into the

humanist community. Same with Hari, being an apostate. Same with Angelos being a former Christian.

These are three common experiences. Two from similar faiths. One from another Abrahamic faith. These are narratives of transitioning from a religious faith, out of it, and into not only rejecting the faith in atheism but also affirming a humanist life.

What have been some similar experiences that you have noted from others as well as insight that you can bring to those who have not had religion discussed in the household and who grew up agnostics, atheists, and so on?

**Timson:** That is quite an interesting question. You do come across a lot of people – and this more and more the case – who simply never talked about religion. It has never been on their radar. I do not know. It is very interesting. I tend to find, and this will sound really cruel, that the people who come from religious backgrounds, who have transitioned from being religious to then being a Humanist, tend to have a hell of a lot more – this will sound really mean – empathy with people who are religious.

I think it takes time to get there because, I think, a lot of people when they first leave religion...

Parekh: [Laughing].

**Timson:** ...are kind of mad. They are like, "Man, you have lied to me for all of this time," [Laughing], "Like wow." But then you realize, a lot of people did it out of love because they truly, truly believe in this religious tradition.

You can kind of empathize because you were in that position, because you did believe all of that stuff. A hell of a lot more than people perhaps who never talked about religion. It flummoxes me. I cannot empathize with people who don't ask these questions, to be honest. My house is literally like a theology seminary. It is just non-stop conversation about the meaning of the universe and stuff. I sometimes I wish I could talk abut Jeremy Kyle.

That is the biggest difference that I have noticed. It is that there is a lot less empathy and understanding. But not everybody, obviously, this is a generalization from people who perhaps come from a less religious background. I also think there is an interesting conversation and something I am thinking about while I write my dissertation about non-religious people and how they interact with the religious people.

There seems to be a difference in language. This might have something to do with the empathy thing. Not necessarily the words that we use, but the way that we use them. I haven't read enough studies on this, but it is quite interesting.

I will be on a panel with people who have never been religious, ever, and, obviously myself who was hugely religious – an Evangelical, proselytizing Christian [Laughing] – and I'll be sitting beside people who think, "Wow, what idiots," [Laughing], not everybody, but I tend to find there is more dismissiveness from people who have never been religious.

You are on this panel with somebody else who has never been religious. Perhaps, you are against the Evangelical Christian Union or whatever. There was this one time when, for example, we were discussing relatively interesting but, in my opinion, pointless questions of theological questions with some people from Oxford.

The answers from my friends, who have always been relatively non-religious; as logical and sensible as they were there was a kind of a lack of empathy, we didn't speak the same language. When I spoke, people said, "Wow, you have got a heart. God is working in you."

I was like, "That was not God."

Parekh: [Laughing]...

**Timson:** "I am just a really soppy human being," you know? I use very romantic language and always have. I do not know. This is not a scientific study. I have been to other debates with scientists. You have Christian scientists – not the Christian scientists who go looking for the Ark, but scientists who are Christians – and non-religious scientists.

You do see a marked difference in the way you use language in the conversations that you have. For me, actually, it has been a real – going to use the word – "blessing" [Laughing] or a real benefit to be able to use the language and understand what people say.

You can't always, but generally to understand what people mean when they use certain words or say certain things, "God is in the space. Can you feel the Holy Spirit?" From my experiences, I can empathize, I do not say, as many do, "That is non-sense, what are they talking about?"

I think, "At this moment in time, they are expressing a feeling." That ability to, in some ways, be bilingual is interesting. I was talking to Quakers, who tend to have a lot of non-theist Quakers — so are a mixture atheist and theist Quakers. Some will say, "This religious language is not useful in everyday life. We do not use it in that way. We use it express ourselves, to express something that we can't quite get out in secular terms." That has been an interesting field of study for me because I couldn't quite understand what people weren't quite getting.

It was really frustrating when having conversations with other atheists. Having to say, "don't you understand that these people aren't stupid, that actually they are expressing their emotions and feelings in a way that perhaps people who have never been religious, there's a dimension there that they have never ventured in to?" So therefore, there's a whole realm of language that was never used. Maybe, you do not need to use it. But it is an interesting distinction.

#### Jacobsen: Any concluding statements or feelings? We are out of time.

**Timson:** I just think that it is very, very important to remember that humanism is an alternative. It is a community. It is growing, however, slowly it might feel. Sometimes, things take a little while to catch on, particularly among young people.

Young people are feeling disenfranchised from labels: Church of England, and this and that. People feel, I think, worried about this word "humanist." We have a conversation about whether we call ourselves "Humanist Students" or the "AHS."

Parekh: [Laughing]

**Timson:** The semantics of it all got a bit too much, but I think at the end of the day, we are trying to build a non-religious alternative and say, "You know what? You can think for yourself. You can do things for yourself, but sometimes you need some help."

We are here to provide a community that says, "I will respect your actions. I will respect that things that you do, but I am here to catch you when you fall." I think that is something that religion sometimes does, not always, but they have those structures in place. We need those in some ways. [Laughing] Maybe, people will probably not like to say that we can learn from

religious organizations, but I think sometimes its unnecessary to reinvent the wheel [Laughing]. It is necessary as social creatures to have a support unit to catch you as you fall: no man is an island.

Quite a lot of the time, non-religious people either don't think about it or they do think about it and are so mad about the whole organized religion thing that they reject all forms of structure and community and say, "I am better off on my own, don't touch me."

At the end of the day, you end up with communities that are quite lonely. Humanism is the answer to that. That's my ending statement [Laughing].

**Parekh:** I think young people that are trying to understand religion better, trying to rationalize religion, trying to move away from religion – anyone of these situations is going to be difficult. There is always going to be the feeling of, if I leave my religious faith, what will make me feel secure. Religion has the ability to make people feel soothed and secure, and as a result, leaving their religious faith can be a really difficult decision for them to make.

This is the thing about religion. Religion does not happen in its own entirety. It happens in support of community, tradition, and culture. As a result, when people lose a religious faith or someone decides it is not for me and does not work, they are losing not just their religious faith, but also moving away in the eyes of others, from their culture and tradition and the system they know. By doing so, this creates the opportunity for that person to be shunned and abandoned by the people they love.

When they are at university and are isolated, and are alone, and like, "I am trying to find my feet again," they may feel isolated and lonely. The issue: who is there to catch you before you fall? That is important. Having Humanist Student Societies on campus can help to support that person, to be their community.

This community should not be the isolated either, by supporting such students. It requires chaplaincy services at university, mental health services at university, further work from student unions to understand that there are people going through such niche transitions that need support.

There remains a need and a purpose to help students who are going through a transition of being non-religious whilst at the university. It is not the role of the non-religious society to convert them to a life of non-religion/ humanism, and it is definitely not the role of the chaplaincy service to convert them back to religion. It remains the individual's sole decision, whether they decide to make the decision for themselves of whether they are religious or not. If you are just atheistic, that is fine. But there is a need and a purpose to have mechanisms that can support students in such a way.

Sofocleous: As a final point, I'd like to say that humanists are not obsessed with religion. Humanism is much bigger than that – it is not only for non-religious people. It is also for people who are skeptics and like to question things, question pseudoscience, people who fight for freedom of speech and human rights.

As humanists, we base our approach to issues that concern humanity and human societies on reason and rational thinking, which for most of us is a way away from religion and towards science and rationalistic ways of thinking. That is really a characteristic of humanists.

It is also the case that most of us are ex-religious – I don't know if I would prefer to grow up as an atheist – probably I would. But, as a non-religious person, I can now see the 'positive'

side of me growing up in a religious environment. Like most other humanists I've met, we are able to understand the spread of fear, irrational thinking, and discrimination, among others, that takes place in religious communities. We are able to know how religious people think, and that's because we were, at some point in our lives, one of them.

This is not to say that we should build barriers between religious and non-religious people. Not at all. It really helps to bring both non-religious and religious people together in the way that we can communicate with them because it really is important that we speak the same language when we communicate.

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

# **Angelos Sofocleous: Free Speech, Political Correctness, and Academia**

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
December 5, 2018

Scott Jacobsen speaks to Conatus News editor Angelos Sofocleous about free speech and political correctness in academia and society.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Angelos, you got in trouble, recently. It was over a phrase tweeted from an article, an article included in the controversy as well. You, due to the created circumstances, resigned as the president-elect of Humanist Students and were fired as the assistant editor of Durham University Philosophy Society's journal, *Critique*, and as coeditor-in-chief of *The Bubble*, a university magazine. Let's start: what was the tweeted statement?

Angelos Sofocleous: As part of some gender-critical articles and comments that I had made in the previous months, I retweeted a tweet which read "RT if women don't have penises". The original tweet also had a screenshot from an article by The Spectator titled 'Is it a crime to say 'women don't have penises?' Apparently, as I have experienced, it is a crime. Christopher Ward, who was Chair of LGBT Humanists in the past, tweeted about my retweet, pointing the fact that I, as president-elect of Humanist Students, was tweeting, in his words, 'transphobic shit'. He had also pointed out that he had faced a lot of 'transphobic' behaviour when he was involved in Humanists UK. He did not give any evidence for his claims, nor he engaged into a conversation when I asked him to and failed to provide counter-arguments in the arguments that I had made supporting my position following his tweet. Calling me a 'bigot' and as 'suffering from cognitive dissonance' was certainly not a way to have a fruitful discussion. I had calmly tried to engage him in a conversation by linking him to a recent article that I had written, in which I explain my position on sex, gender, and the transgender movement. He ignored it, basically revealing that his real intentions were to make a fuss about his view of Humanists UK.

Following that, I was blamed, by Humanists UK officials for 'disreputing' the organisation. They didn't hold any discussion about it and did not show any willingness to engage in a civilised debate about the political statements that I had made. Given their insensible reaction and also the fact that they demanded, in the future, that if similar controversies arise, I have to ask what the official stance of Humanists UK is before I voice my opinion, I felt compelled to resign from my position. This was not a point to which I wanted to reach. However, I couldn't cooperate anymore with people who, despite their claims that they belong in an open-minded organisation which is driven by science and rational thinking, their actions have proven that, in certain cases, Humanists UK cannot avoid dogmatism.

That week, I had also been appointed Assistant Editor of Durham University Philosophy Society's journal, *Critique*. A few days after I was appointed, I received an email from Ryan Lo, the President of Durham University Philosophy Society, telling me that I was fired from my position as my comments 'belittled trans experiences'.

A few days later, I got an email from my co-editor-in-chief at *The Bubble*, a student magazine at Durham University, in which I was informed that I was removed from the position of co-editor-in-chief due to the recent controversies.

In October, Durham Students' Union <u>had ruled that my firing from Critique</u> and <u>The Bubble</u> was <u>unfair and undemocratic</u>, as they did not follow the procedures outlined by Durham Students' Union, did not give me an opportunity to explain my views, did not gather a vote of no confidence from their members, and did not give me an opportunity to appeal the decision.

The reactions from the three organisations unveiled a big problem with freedom of speech in academia. As shown in a <u>petition started by Conatus News</u> a few days after my firings, dozens of academics expressed their concerns about where academia is heading; academics who had experienced fierce criticism for their views. Political correctness has, indeed, gone too far in universities, especially when it is combined with identity politics.

## Jacobsen: What was the intended message of the tweet? What was the interpreted message from the tweet?

**Sofocleous:** In that tweet, and in my previous statements and articles, I expressed some concerns for the transgender movement, offering, at the same time, some suggestions for improvement. I agree with one basic principle of the transgender movement: that gender stereotypes need to break. But my critique is on their actions; particularly on the fact that the transgender movement makes gender stereotypes more concrete instead of getting rid of them. And that critique was not well-received, evidently.

Therefore, I made the retweet as part of the critical statements in which I pointed out that we need to distinguish between sex and gender. Based on this distinction, I claimed that one could not claim to be a woman solely based on how they feel, or behave, or act, or dress, or 'identify'.

This is the crucial point in the discussion and in my criticisms. We need to define what it means to identify as a woman or a man. I have not received a satisfactory answer to that question yet. All answers that I receive are either a) Circular, i.e. 'a woman is anyone who sincerely identifies as a woman', or b) Promoting gender stereotypes, i.e. 'A man is whoever performs/feels/behaves like a man'. This is what I wanted to address with the retweet and my gender-critical statements. Remember, we do not speak about individuals who have undergone surgery and claim to have become women and, thereby, female. Some claim to feel like a woman or claim to be a woman because they behave like a woman or have some behavioural aspects that are normally associated with being a woman. Thus, they enforce the stereotypes. Intersex and transsexual individuals, however, are often left out of the discussion.

So, with this retweet, I wanted to challenge the notion of 'feeling like a woman'. There is no such thing as feeling your gender, or sex, or age, or any part of our identity. True, you might actually feel some things which are stereotypically associated with an identity. But, I want to say three things here. One, aren't we supposed to get rid of these stereotypes? If you conform to certain stereotypes, it is damaging if at the same time you claim to belong to the identity group to which those stereotypes apply. Two, in case you claim to not belong to any identity group and be, instead, gender-fluid or non-binary, then you must understand that by leaving your group (man/woman) you actually strengthen the stereotypes that apply to those groups as the only individuals who belong in that group after you left are individuals who satisfy the stereotypes. Three, following from the previous two points, if you are going to challenge stereotypes associated with your identity group, it is incredibly important that you stay in your group while fighting these stereotypes. Women who feel marginalized are not doing any favour to themselves by calling themselves 'womxn'. If you actually believe that you are oppressed by other women, as a woman, then express these challenges from within your group. By alienating yourself from

the group, you only confirm your beliefs about the group itself. But this only takes place because you have decided to alienate yourself from it.

Gender, sex, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, age. We just are those things. There is no separate feeling that is associated with any aspect of one's identity.

People, I believe, should be able to express themselves in any way that they can. There is no reason to have men's clothes or women's clothes, for example. One should be able to wear whatever they want to, without having to worry that they identify as something. Any label you put in your behaviour is restrictive, especially when this label hijacks science.

Jacobsen: Of those individuals who read the tweet and the full article, so far as you can tell, what was the interpreted message by them – those who took the time to understand the arguments and statements within the specific context?

**Sofocleous:** Unfortunately, those who have read the article were much fewer than those who just saw the retweet. But a general criticism I have gotten is concerning individuals who have gender dysphoria and, even though they are males, for example, they feel like they are women. To deny their claim means, for them, denying their existence. However, no one denies anyone's right to exist. Trans individuals are human beings and, as human beings, they deserve to be treated with love, respect, and kindness. Me not agreeing on how you label yourself has nothing to do with your existence.

The comments were not at all on the personal level but purely on the ideological level; they were not based on attacking any particular individual.

I believe that the transgender movement would be much more able to achieve its aims not by creating more genders but by eliminating gender as a concept.

Jacobsen: In one of the first responses, you gave the reasons as to the resignations and firings. Outside of the philosophy journal, the student magazine, and the president-elect position, what were other resignations or firings at this time?

**Sofocleous:** No. But I faced further problems at University. At the beginning of the academic year, I was worried about the reaction of the philosophy department here, and whether the events would impact my studies and academic career, as I know that the department is not particularly friendly to my views.

I met with this lecturer who is an assistant professor. Before the meeting, she had told that she was open to gender-critical views within the department. At the meeting, I realised that that was not the case. She tried to lecture me on what freedom of speech was, and that my retweet did not fall under freedom of speech. This affirmed what I think about some transgender activists. They police some things people think or say.

She had also said, "You had misgendered someone in your Twitter account." It goes beyond the academic and into scolding someone in a personal capacity based on what they said in their Twitter account. The fact that she actually went back into my Twitter feed and found an instance where I had 'misgendered' someone, and told me off about it, is beyond me. Furthermore, when I said that 'we should distinguish between the personal and the ideological' she said that 'it's easy to say this when you're privileged', twice. It's a tactic of anti-gender-critical individuals, to shut down speech because of someone's 'privileged' position. They start the discussion with a

privilege check and they will deny you the right to speak or voice your opinion if they find that you are too privileged.

Of course, she did not care to ask anything about my background, my past, my ideas. It is extremely sad that some people shout 'privilege!' on their sight of a white heterosexual male, and discussion stops there.

We need to have conversations on gender, on race, and other controversial issues without having the debate shut down because some people take it personally. Facts do not care about your feelings.

As a threatening act, she also had the Gender Identity Policy of Durham University in front of me when I entered the office. The Policy reads:

Transphobic abuse, harassment or bullying (refusing to use a correct pronoun, ignoring a person because of their trans status, intrusive questions) will be dealt with under the University's Respect at Work or Respect at Study Policy and may lead to disciplinary action which could include expulsion/dismissal.

It is like going to Saudi Arabia and have them showing you the part in their Criminal Code which says that it is an insult to criticize Islam. It is the same thing. Someone showing you a legal document or a penal code and not getting to the root of the discussion or the debate, of whether it is right to insult the Prophet Muhammad or to have a discussion on gender issues. The radical left's tactics are incredibly similar, if not identical, to religious fundamentalism. In today's political climate, the radical left and the far-right are connected through this wormhole of similarity of tactics.

Further to that, I had expressed the view that when a foreigner, such as myself, comes to the UK to study, s/he is often unaware of the beliefs, customs, and traditions of the UK. Therefore, even if Brits disagree with a foreigner on an issue which they think that they are absolutely right, they should take the time to explain why they are right, and not just force their opinion. Their colonial past certainly does not help – they're used to forcing their traditions and their views. Coming from a country which suffered from British colonialism, and which still suffers from it, it was particularly ignorant of her that she simply dismissed my statement by saying "I know, I'm from Ireland".

Jacobsen: John Stuart Mill in On Liberty, made a point. He made many points. One of the points made was the idea of someone wanting to restrict the right to freedom of expression of another person. The idea being: the person who wants to restrict the person's freedom of expression believes they have some absolute knowledge ahead of time about what is a correct answer on the topic to be discussed.

With the threat of expulsion from a university, especially for someone about to enter graduate school, post-graduate work, can be particularly threatening coming from the department. Also, you made a point about a separation between the personal and the ideological. In a philosophy department, in particular, a person should have the capacity to speak on even sensitive issues at an ideological level through critical thinking and logical analysis rather than this being 'misgendering'.

This is the big separation and the point you're making insofar as I can tell.

**Sofocleous:** Exactly, it's quite worrying and concerning that this took place in the philosophy society and the philosophy department, when the general aim of philosophy is to discover the truth through debate and discussion. I see that their approach was wholly wrong. But, which is the right approach? Let's take a step back. Let's say you have a dangerous view or a view considered dangerous in your community. How do you deal with that view? How do you deal with a threatening or an immoral view?

Let's take someone who is a white supremacist, or someone who argues that women are subordinate to men. Confronting such views is a three-dimensional process. The first is changing the mind of that person and like-minded people. The second is stopping the harmful view from spreading into society. And the third is spreading the right view into society, not through enforcement, but through society itself finding the right approach.

What happens, however, is that white supremacists, for example, are simply punished. Of course, in punishing those individuals we assure that their views are blocked from spreading into society. But, we do not change the mind of those individuals and we do not make sure that the right view spreads in society. Punishing those individuals does not reveal to them what the right position to take is. They are not convinced that their ideas are wrong. In fact, by punishing them, you even make them believe in the ideology more deeply. Getting at the issue in this way, we are not getting to the core of it. Punishing someone does not ensure the idea goes away.

Their punishment, which might just be physical punishment or punishment affecting their mental wellbeing is received in a way in which those who are punished want to fight back.

Dangerous ideas must be taken to be a virus. However, they can't be treated just like a virus, for the following reasons:

One would think that we need to restrict the idea to a certain area in society in a way that it cannot spread through society, as we would do with a virus. The thing with viruses is that they are not able to organise themselves in a way which is similar to how human societies organise. A virus can simply be marginalised to a certain part of the body where it affects healthy cells at a minimum level, and subsequently be exterminated. The viruses themselves are not going to organise and fight back to the healthy part of the body.

But with human individuals, if you restrict or marginalise a group in society, those individuals are still given the opportunity to organise themselves and fight back against the healthy part of society. Of course, our first inclination when we face a dangerous idea is to punish and marginalise it from society. However, simply marginalising a dangerous view does not help. It helps no one; neither the individuals, nor their groups, nor society.

What is the right approach, then? Education. The right approach is educating those individuals and trying to convince them through healthy debate that they are on the wrong side – if they actually are on the wrong side. There is a caveat here, however. If we debate or discuss with those individuals, where do you put the boundary? Do we need to make this a debate between a creationist or an evolutionist, or a human rights activist and a white supremacist? I do not think it goes to that level where you need to put both in a boxing ring let them fight each other through debate and see which side wins. However, even if those ideas are not debated publicly, individuals who hold those views must not simply be punished, but one should approach them conversationally and convince them of the wrongness of their ideas or show where their way of thinking is fallacious.

There should be a debate or a discussion, or understanding, of my ideas. If those individuals believe I am wrong, I am open to them convincing me otherwise. There is a concern when some individuals are not allowed to voice ideas which some deem controversial. Because you do not know what their controversial ideas or opinions are if you do not allow them to voice them.

You can only attack the ideas when you know what the ideas are. It is important. We cannot treat a dangerous view simply as a virus. We should debate those individuals in the public sphere and the private sphere to convince them of our ideas if we are so confident that we are right.

Jacobsen: Looking forward, what is happening with the student union, the publications, and so on? What is happening with this public dialogue at this point around a particular colleague of mine, Angelos Sofocleous?

**Sofocleous:** Durham Students' Union decided to uphold my complaint by concluding that my firings from *Critique* and *The Bubble* were unfair and undemocratic. However, the investigation said that my freedom of speech was not violated, which is not the case. Freedom of speech means you are free from consequences related to your speech. There's no free speech when you face the consequences for what you say.

It is, however, saddening on the personal level as well. I knew the people who were involved in the two publications and considered them good friends of mine. We have a lot of common interests, views, and ideas. This is the first time in my life that I am not on speaking terms with someone. It is simply sad that people reach this level in their relationships simply because they disagree on some issues. I do wish they would be more accepting of people with different views.

As regards other stuff that has been happening, this gave me the opportunity to talk to other organisations or groups about freedom of speech, transgender rights, and where academia is heading. A few weeks ago, I gave a talk in the UK about whether academia has been impacted by political correctness and people who have been policing what has been happening in academia.

People are scared to be hurt, to be offended, to have their ideas criticized and their worldview shaken.

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

**Sofocleous:** I would like to touch on the subject of truth, especially in philosophy. We have reached a point where feelings seem to matter more than facts and conversation on some subject is shut down based on the feelings of some people because the conversation is seen as too controversial.

We should not fear threatening opinions or even dangerous ones, but be ready to oppose them and support our ideas against the ideas of the other. But, sadly, this does not seem to be the case in academia. This environment is creating people who are too fragile. Or, anti-fragile, as Jonathan Haidt puts it as young people today are overprotecting themselves by being scared to be fragile – people are scared to be hurt, to be offended, to have their ideas criticized and their worldview shaken.

They feel that there should be someone who protects them all the time. It is the law or some policy. However, I would say: it is a good thing to be offended. When someone is offended, they know that they have gone outside of their bubble. We will, of course, feel offended outside of our bubble.

It makes you visit other bubbles and try to convince other people of your truth. Even if we can be open, we can be challenged and change our views on some issues. But, of course, this will not happen if we keep residing inside of our bubble. We should be welcoming to other people's views.

We should value the duty of having a conversation with people whom we have opposing views. Because this is not only an opportunity and to listen to the other person's views. But if we care about the truth, then we can convince them of what the truth is.

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

### Religious Education in Greece: Privileges and Recent Controversies

### **Angelos Sofocleous and Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**November 3, 2019** 

Religious Education (RE) classes in Europe can spark controversies in a number of ways. One is the endorsement of a particular religion or life philosophy in the process of teaching the materials to a diverse student body coming from a variety of different faiths and cultures. Another can be the outing of students' individual faith or parents'/household faith of the student in the context of discrimination or prejudice within the larger culture or in the school for children of other faiths.

A further controversy may occur with the standard educational reason for insufficient teaching of the RE curriculum for various reasons, akin to skimming over evolutionary biology because of the legitimate fear of backlash from religious-creationist parents. A more obscure one, but not necessarily uncommon, can happen when the education minister and theologians come into conflict with one another. In Greece, recently, the controversy centred on the need for parents to submit a Solemn Declaration for their children to opt-out of the RE class.

The National Secular Society reported on a recent case in some depth. The NSS stated that five Greek students and parents brought forth a case to challenge the requirement of a solemn declaration for opting out of RE classes. They would be required to stipulate that they – the students – were not Orthodox Christians in the request for opting out of the RE class. This can carry social risks with 81-90% of the population self-identifying as Greek Orthodox Christian.

The students, if required to stipulate their faith tradition differing from the Greek Orthodox Church, may be exposed to intrusion and coercion from the school authorities and their classmates. In addition to this, the exemption viewed individual belief structures as bound to belief groups and, therefore, neglected the rights of individuals in the light of the freedom of religion and freedom of belief. Both amount to sovereign individual rights, not collective rights seen in the assumption of belief groups as homogeneous as if one mind.

More importantly, making it necessary for students to reveal their religious beliefs in order to receive an exemption from Religious Education classes is unconstitutional. In a unanimous ruling, on Thursday the 31st of October, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), Europe's top human rights court, ruled that Greek authorities do not have the right to oblige students to reveal their religious beliefs for any reason. "The authorities did not have the right to intervene in the sphere of individual conscience, to ascertain individuals' religious belief or to oblige them to reveal their beliefs," the ECHR's ruling said.

The Education Minister of Greece, Niki Kerameus, pledged to abide by the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights and alter the ways in which RE classes take place in Greece as well as revise the procedure to ask for an exemption from the course. This ruling essentially puts in practice changes which the former Minister of Education, Nikos Filis, under the left-wing SYRIZA government, sought to make. In particular, Filis attempted to make RE in Greek schools more secular, diverse, and less focused on Christianity.

As it is currently the case, the nature of RE classes is catechistic and indoctrinates students in the Greek Orthodox religion. Because of this, Nikos Filis put forward certain proposals through which he hoped to modernize RE and enable students to learn about religions other than Christianity. However, the proposed changes were deemed unconstitutional by Greece's Council of State on the grounds that the government's plan "distorted the purpose of [religious] teaching, which is, according to the Constitution, to develop pupils' Orthodox Christian conscience". The Council of State's stance and its focus on developing "pupils' Orthodox Christian conscience" is not surprising given the fact that Greece is one of the few countries in Europe which has a state religion.

In fact, religion plays a major role not only in the everyday lives of Greek people and in the political scene but also in the education system. It is common for schools in Greece to have compulsory morning prayer, religious icons in classes, to take trips of religious context, or to host 'blessing rituals' at the start of the academic year. Sometimes, it takes regional human rights cases to bring this to light.

In the end, Article 2 of Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights was ruled as breached in the ECHR court case with Article 2 of Protocol 1 protecting the right to an education. It states:

No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the state shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.

The NSS stated, "The article requires states to 'respect' parents' rights to ensure education and teaching is "in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions... The court ruled that the declaration requirement risked 'placing an undue burden on parents' and exposing 'sensitive aspects of their private life."

The intervention portion from the NSS was drafted by Professor Ronan McCrea of UCL with input from Harry Small and Sadikur Rahman. With the efforts of the students and the parents, and the support of the NSS and its drafters of the NSS intervention, individual religious and belief rights have remained more respected than before.

# **Extended Conversation with Angelos Sofocleous on the Context Now**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen** 

May 9, 2020

Angelos Sofocleous, M.A. is a Philosophy Ph.D. student at University of York who works as an Interviews Editor at The Definite Article, Deputy Science Editor at Nouse Philosophy, and the Editor-in-Chief at Secular Nation Magazine. Here we talk more in-depth about updates since December, 2018 on the fallout of the reactions to a tweet and an article.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We've written a decent amount together. In fact, we have seen a development of secularism in <u>Greece</u> and in its education, and some of the aspects of <u>personal and professional history</u> for you (bumpy). Mario Zucconi quoted you and I in <u>EU Influence Beyond Conditionality: Turkey Plus/Minus the EU. One of the most recent, relevant developments</u> came in the form of firing or considered resignation from several positions as editor or leader followed by some opprobrium in public. You were <u>President-Elect for Humanist Students</u>, which has a <u>triplet setup for incumbent and leaving presidents</u>. Recently, you were a hated person. Some stood by you. Some still hate you. What was the feeling in the interlude since the last interview in 2018?

**Angelos Sofocleous:** Let me first start with a recollection of what had happened, for reminding those who were following the case when it happened, and informing those who will hear about the incidents for the first time.

On August 21st 2018, I retweeted a tweet reading "RT if women don't have penises". The original tweet was accompanied by an article from The Spectator titled "Is it a crime to say 'women don't have penises'?" The retweet was part of other statements and articles that I had written about sex, gender, and the transgender movement which included certain criticisms of the movement as well as suggestions on how it can be improved so that society can achieve overcoming sex and gender stereotypes. Through my statements, I also wished to express and support the view that humans are a dimorphic species; that is, a human being can be a male or female, allowing for certain cases of intersex individuals who, however, seem to be unrepresented, underrepresented or even misrepresented by the transgender movement.

Despite me deleting the retweet a day after, I was forced to resign from the position of President-Elect of Humanists UK, and a few days later I was fired by Ry Lo and Sebastián Sánchez-Schilling from the position of Assistant Editor of *Critique*, Durham University Philosophy Society's journal, and by Anastasia Maseychik from the position of Editor of *The Bubble*, a Durham University magazine. These dismissals were found to be 'unfair and undemocratic' by Durham Students' Union as they did not follow the procedures outlined by Durham Students' Union, did not give me an opportunity to explain my views, did not gather a vote of no confidence from their members, and did not give me an opportunity to appeal the decision. Durham Students' Union called for the journal and the magazine to apologize. The SU too, as did the magazine, but I have not yet received an apology from the journal.

As I noted in my resignation statement from Humanists UK "[my] views were taken to be 'transphobic' by individuals who cannot tolerate any criticism, either of their movement or their ideas, and are unable to engage in a civilized conversation on issues they disagree on. These are

individuals who think they hold the absolute right to determine which ideas can be discussed and what language can be used in a public forum."

"Living in a free society and being present and active in a public forum means that one often witnesses comments that she may judge as offensive, divisive, or derogatory. Living in a democracy means that one will often offend and get offended. That's the price one pays for being a member of a democracy and not existing into her own bubble."

The incident with the Durham University Philosophy Society journal was cited in the Supreme Court of the United States case R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes, INC., V. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Aimee Stephens. The Supreme Court explicitly says:

"In the U.K., Angelos Sofocleous was dismissed from Durham University's philosophy journal Critique because he used his social media account to share another individual's comment noting that "women don't have penises."

[...] As this Court rightly stated in Barnett, "[i]f there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion, or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein." This Court should adhere to that same principle today, and refuse to compel the R.G. and G.R. Harris Funeral Homes, or anyone else, to believe that men can be women."

My deleted retweet was not taken favourably by Durham University's Philosophy Department either. Following the incidents, I was bullied and harassed by Dr Clare Mac Cumhaill, an academic at the Department. Dr Mac Cumhaill had called me in her office and told me I had no freedom of speech for my views, was illegally in possession of my Bachelor's grades which she used to belittle me, threatened me with expulsion from the University, falsely accused me of misgendering someone on Twitter, and other equally appalling and unfounded accusations. Prof Sophie Gibb, then Head of Department, was dismissive of my allegations and did not act according to the rules and regulations, and Prof Stephen Mumford, current Head of Department, recently issued a non-apology saying "I am sorry that you feel we fell short in your case." after a complaint of mine against Dr Mac Cumhaill and the Department was upheld following an investigation by the University's Student Conduct office.

Such an apology is by no means an apology for various reasons:

- a) An apology is not honest or heartfelt if it's communicated via a third party. The mere fact that this was sent to the Student Conduct Office which then sent it to me leaves me doubting whether the Philosophy Department understood what they did wrong and why they needed to apologize. It feels as if Stephen Mumford, the Head of Department (HoD) was forced to issue the apology.
- b) There was no reason for Stephen Mumford to mention that "While your complaint was not upheld", other than out of spite and wanting to stress that the Department did nothing wrong, regardless of the fact that they did not follow procedure and acted against both University and Department rules and regulations, and included a number of lies and inaccuracies in their statement to the complaint and review investigators which I am exposing as I further appeal my case.

This is particularly weird to me as in my culture such a thing would never happen. An apology will never be communicated via a third party but directly to the person to whom

you are apologizing or publicly so that the parties involved have assured each other that the issue is settled and that the apology has been received as intended.

- c) "I am sorry that you feel that we fell short in your case". This is a clear usage of a gaslighting technique and victim blaming. Stephen Mumford shifts the blame from the Department to me, essentially saying that the problem is not that they fell short in my case but my feeling that they fell short in my case. "I am sorry that we fell short in your case" is the appropriate response. To put it bluntly to make this point clear "I am sorry I raped you" and "I am sorry about how you felt after I raped you" communicate two entirely different things, the latter alleviating any blame from the perpetrator.
- d) The letter puts a lot of emphasis on the need of the Department to process things quicker. That was the least of my concerns regarding the harassment and bullying I received and I am surprised the Department is putting so much focus on that. The point of my initial complaint and the review request was about harassment and bullying. Regardless of the fact that this took a lot of time and that the Department allegedly decided to issue an apology to me 12 months ago (which was never communicated and I question whether such a decision was even taken), there are far more important issues with my complaint, some of which are of legal nature.
- e) The complaint was not from, or on behalf of, the academic against whom I initiated the complaint. My complaint was primarily against the academic and only secondarily against the Department.

Due to the inadequacy of Durham University and Durham University Philosophy Department to deal with this case adequately and with respect, as well as the horrible and evil behaviour I experienced from Claire Mac Cumhaill, I am now appealing the outcome of my complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator and also seeking legal advice due to the severity of the harassment incident and what this has caused me.

You said in your question that I was "a hated person". This was indeed true – I faced a lot of hatred on Twitter and other social media, as well as in Durham University. This is also a symptom of depression – feeling that everyone hates you, that everyone wants to hurt you. In my case though it was not just an unjustified feeling of mine, but something true as I was experiencing, on a daily basis, people telling me how much they hated me or expressing hatred in their own vile ways. What for? For a deleted retweet.

There is this quote: 'If you have haters, you must be doing something right'. This is by no means a rule as it can be easily misapplied and we can think of cases where this is not true. However, for a lot of time before the 'women don't have penises' incident, although I was involved in activist circles and was publicly expressing my views on a variety of topics, I did not have any haters, I had never received a death threat, no one was disagreeing with me, and no one was exposing me publicly. Because of this, I felt I was doing something wrong. The fact that these things weren't happening did not show that I was right in what I was saying, rather that I had not done enough to get outside my bubble and my comfort circle. You aren't much of an activist or an opinion writer if you are only active within your own circles — you have to get out.

Once people started hating me, I realized I was doing something right – not that my ideas were right but that I was getting outside my bubble. A good analogy would be that I was previously within fans of my own football team and I felt comfortable and safe being in between them, but

now I had gotten into the playing field, ready to get into an ideological battle with individuals who disagreed with me.

However, we don't necessarily need to think of debate as two sides which are polar opposites of each other. Philosophy is the quest to truth and in a philosophical debate all sides should strive to build onto each other's argument to reach a truth or a consensus.

Being hated is the price one pays for striving to be a public figure or expressing their opinions publicly. If you imagine you are speaking at an audience of a thousand individuals for years on a variety of topics, it is extremely unlikely if not impossible that there will not be something which offends someone or is hurtful to someone. Your job as a public figure is not to make everyone feel comfortable – we are not in kindergarten. Rather, your aim is to spark conversation and debate and give food for thought to individuals as well as the opportunity to challenge you.

Do your own thing. Haters will hate you anyway.

## Jacobsen: Looking back, what were the long-term effects of these to your mental and emotional well-being?

**Sofocleous:** I fell into major depression. The backlash of that single retweet was immense. I would never have thought that I would make national news because I said "women don't have penises". It was so comical but at the same time it was something that had a huge negative effect on me. I felt that my whole life and my future in journalism and academia was collapsing.

What pushed me into depression was certainly the actions of Andrew Copson and Hannah Timson from Humanists UK, Ry Lo and Sebastián Sánchez-Schilling from *Critique*, and Anastasia Maseychik from *The Bubble*. And of course the compliance of Prof Sophie Gibb and Prof Stephen Mumford to me experiencing severe distress, bullying and harassment within their own Department. However, it was Claire Mac Cumhaill's bullying and harassment that pushed me into depression.

No person who has not experienced depression can understand what depression is like. When you experience depression, you feel surrounded by a black fog, losing all connection to yourself, other people, and the world. The world of depression is gray, colourless, with no meaning or hope. You feel immense guilt all the time, as well as that everyone hates you.

Everything takes an incredible amount of effort to be done. Getting out of bed, making a cup of tea, getting in the shower; it's all a struggle. You feel unable to concentrate on or pay attention to anything and focusing on getting things done seems impossible.

The weeks after I was bullied and harassed by Claire Mac Cumhaill in her office, the gas system at my house stopped working. I couldn't even make the effort of informing the landlord or telephoning the gas company. I ended up washing dishes in the shower, which had an electric boiler, and slept feeling the cold of Durham, even though fixing the gas system was just a phone call away. The bathroom light was faulty too and wouldn't turn on. It was a special light, not one which I could find at a supermarket. I showered with my phone light for weeks until I managed to make the effort to inform my landlord that the bathroom light needed to be replaced.

Every time I went out; to the grocery store, to an event, to the library, to a lecture – I felt this fog around me and was unable to pay attention to anyone or anything people were telling me. I felt that people hated me and that everyone knew about the incidents and turned themselves against

me. This is the world of depression, a place which I wouldn't wish my worst enemy to experience.

The incident with Clare Mac Cumhaill took place in October 2018. I only lasted for two more months in Durham and left in early December 2018 due to the fact that I couldn't continue belonging in a Department in which I felt I was hated and marginalized. I continued my studies as normal as I could do work from home. I only returned to Durham in February 2018, to complete a module I had during that term, and in August 2018, to complete my dissertation.

In September 2019 I contacted Clare, expressing to her how horrible I felt after the meeting we had and how her actions have pushed me into depression. Not only she denied any of my allegations, but she did not even have the slightest courage or decency to apologize for what had happened.

Now, this is very strange to me due to the fact that, in my culture, if someone tells you that you have done something that made them feel horribly bad, you apologize even if you don't feel you have done anything wrong. This is the kindness and respect for fellow human beings that I'm talking about. If you tell me that I did something that hurt you, I will apologize, even if I think that I did nothing wrong or acted with good intentions (as Clare claimed). An individual who does not respond to another's bad emotional situation which she caused is nothing else than wicked.

Nevertheless, I also learned a lot of lessons: People can be vile and evil – some people want to see you suffer and get joy from seeing you suffer. Some people like to experience schadenfreude in its most absolute form. There were people that were emailing my University to expel me. How can any human being wish that for another individual? One would have thought that with the development of modern civilization and democracy we would get rid of the animal inside us, but that will never happen.

We will always organize ourselves in tribes and form mobs to attack members of the other tribe. The only thing that has changed is that instead of these happening in the fields with real weapons, it takes place over the Internet with keyboards.

Twitter will be an excellent tool for future historians in understanding the toxicity of human nature.

Also, it was a good coincidence that while I was experiencing depression, I was attending the "Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences" class. Phenomenology is the branch of philosophy that studies subjective experiences of emotions of people. The seminar leader, Dr Benedict Smith, was excellent and the topic particularly interesting and exciting. Some of the classes were about the phenomenology of mental illnesses, one of them on the phenomenology of depression. I researched more and more into the phenomenology of depression as this helped me better understand my condition and also found comfort realizing that other individuals had the potential of understanding what I was feeling. One of the things you will find if you look at narratives of people who have experienced depression is the disappointment and loss of hope due to the feeling that no one is able to understand what depression is like. Indeed, it is not something one can fully describe – that's why we are using these metaphors which are close to what we are feeling (emptiness, black fog, colourless, gray, numb) but can never accurately depict it.

Due to the fact that I became interested in the phenomenology of depression, I chose to complete my dissertation on that particular area and now I'm pursuing a PhD which focuses on the

phenomenology of depression. I would like to take the opportunity to thank those who pushed me into depression because without them I wouldn't be pursuing a PhD in this extremely interesting area of philosophy.

Jacobsen: Some happenings in the interim, too, included the restriction, in some manner, on freedom of expression, as reported by Dan Fisher in "<u>Terror Tactics Triumph, Silence</u> Freedom of Speech at Bristol University." What happened?

**Sofocleous:** Correct. Because of the incidents following my retweet, the Bristol Free Speech Society had invited me to be a speaker at their panel discussion event in February 2019, in which three panelists would discuss freedom of speech, each having a different approach.

While the event was scheduled to take place, less than a week before the event, Bristol Students' Union contacted the Bristol Free Speech Society informing them that I was disinvited as a speaker saying that I was no longer allowed to be present on the panel amidst 'security concerns'. Bristol SU never said what those security concerns were nor how they were justified. My appearance on the panel was announced weeks before the event but no student society, organization, or individual student had protested against my participation or had called for me to be disinvited.

The Bristol SU was merely succumbing to the global paranoia that currently takes place in universities in which people get de-platformed and disinvited from giving speeches or participating in conferences just because they might offend someone.

It is funny to me how the act of speaking or voicing your opinion can be a 'security concern'. The neo-liberal will immediately reply to this: Yes, but what about Hitler? He was voicing hateful, and obviously wrong, opinions.

The neo-liberal is correct. Hitler was, in fact, voicing deeply hateful and divisive opinions which were wrong beyond doubt. However, if we think that we would get rid of Nazism simply by banning the Nazi party or by fining or putting Hitler and his peers in prison for hate speech we would be very wrong.

We would be very wrong because we would ignore the system through which Nazism arose and developed. No hateful idea appears out of nowhere. We should treat a dangerous and hateful idea like a virus. Now, with the emergence of a global pandemic, the virus analogy is as timely as ever

Dangerous ideas are viruses. But they cannot be treated in the same way as we treat biological viruses.

One would think that we need to restrict the idea to a certain area in society in a way that it cannot spread through society, as we would do with a biological virus. The thing with viruses is that they are not able to organise themselves in a way which is similar to how human societies organise. A virus can simply be marginalised to a certain part of the body where it affects healthy cells at a minimum level, and subsequently be exterminated. The viruses themselves are not going to organise and fight back to the healthy part of the body.

Think about how the majority of countries deal with the coronavirus. They impose a lockdown, and citizens in those countries face legal consequences if they do not isolate themselves at home. In order for a biological virus to be fought, people need to be isolated so that the virus does not spread and those who have the virus are strictly isolated so that they do not spread it onto others.

Take the island of Spinalonga in Greece, for example. Spinalonga served as a leper colony. People with leprosy were sent there to be treated and to not infect the healthy population of Greece. The illness is restricted within a geographical area and is controlled.

However, we cannot do the same with a social virus. If you decide to marginalize or isolate individuals who follow a hateful ideology, those individuals still have the opportunity to fight back against ideologically healthy individuals. The fact that YouTube or Facebook bans individuals with unscientific or hateful ideas may restrict their ideas from spreading, but it does nothing to prevent those ideologies from emerging through other parts of society or in real life. White supremacists and fascists will still find ways to organize themselves and infiltrate society.

What is important to note here is that by attempting to punish individuals or making an ideology illegal, we are not reaching the root of the problem. It is as if we discover that a particular disease stems from unhealthy practices (eating certain kinds of animals, in the COVID-19 case) and yet we continue those practices. We need not simply try to eliminate coronavirus cases or find a vaccine, but to examine why and how the virus emerged in the first place, and once we identify the reason(s), we fight so that we create a society which does not have those kinds of threats.

In a similar manner, a hateful and divisive ideology is part of the system in which it exists. It comes from how children are educated, from biased history books, from false family narratives, from the agenda of political parties. If we want to kill a beast we must find it in its lair and not in the wild.

With a social virus, the antibodies can be developed beforehand through education. Education is for social viruses what a vaccine is for biological viruses. If enough individuals are taught logic, rational thinking, how to respect other people, how to argue with others, how to be kind toward each other, how to value human life and show admiration toward anything alive, including nature, then society will develop 'herd immunity' toward any hateful or divisive ideas.

So, with the above thoughts in mind, I decided to attend the scheduled event of Bristol Free Speech Society as an audience member. The event organizers were planning on holding the event without me as a panel member. However, as soon as some members of the audience realized that I was present, they called for me to appear on the panel.

The President of the Bristol Free Speech Society, listening to people's demands, asked whether there is anyone from the audience who objected to me being on the panel.

No even one person from an audience of 200 people had any objection in me being present on the panel. All committee members of the Society favoured me being on the panel, as well as the other panel members. As responsible adults who can take matters into their own hands, people showed their power and decided that there was no risk associated with me being on the panel.

Bristol SU had acted in a patronizing manner, treating its own students like children who have the need to be disciplined and do not know to judge for themselves whether they want to listen to certain views or not.

The event went on as normal and everyone treated each other with respect and kindness, as human beings do when they grow up in a civil environment in which they learn to challenge and not cancel each other's ideas. Universities and Student Unions so often succumb to the tiny minority of students who think they have the right to dictate what is discussed in a public forum and have the privilege to feel offended by little and unimportant things.

Being de-platformed from an event on free speech is the absolute example of the current state of universities in the UK. You can't get more ironic than that.

Jacobsen: Following from the previous question, why were you considered a security risk within the confines of the event? This may relate to legitimate reasons of uncivil, violent protests from the left or the right, or from illegitimate reasons for the perception of words as violence when done in a controlled panel setting in which the topic, the speakers, and the time and place are known well ahead of time, i.e., if you don't like it, then don't go to it.

**Sofocleous:** It is everyone's right to protest against the appearance of any individual who has been invited to speak at any institution, private or public. What individuals cannot do is restrict that individual from speaking or trying to 'de-platform' them.

This is the beauty of being a citizen of a democratic country. You have the right to listen to all kinds of opinions and views, challenge them, ridicule them, follow them, unfollow them, without any one forcing you to believe one thing or another. When a dangerous idea appears, you challenge it and attack it publicly with reason and evidence and attack it to its core.

The fact that people from all over the political spectrum might respond to certain people speaking with violence is a huge problem. We have witnessed people entering lecture rooms or conference venues and disrupting an otherwise peaceful talk. If they disagree with what the speaker is saying, they can sit in a civil manner amongst the audience, take notes, form their questions, and then challenge the speaker during the Q&A and demonstrate in front of everyone why the speaker is so obviously wrong.

We must not succumb to people who use violence as their form of protest in these circumstances. Any historical period in which ideas were silenced or censored is a dark period. We should not let that happen again.

There were no legitimate reasons for uncivil or violent protests to take place due to me participating in the panel.

I am not a criminal, I have done nothing to justify such an abhorrent behaviour by the Bristol SU, and their stance only adds to confirming the already troubled state of free speech in UK universities.

And if there were legitimate reasons for uncivil or violent protests, this is not something that should concern the panel members, but this is the Bristol SU's problem. If someone is offended because I speak my views on freedom of speech, then they might consider isolating themselves at home and not accessing social media because they are the kind of people that will get offended by anything. And not only they will get offended by anything but they will tell you to stop talking because they are offended.

If Bristol SU was worried that there would be protests at the event, then they should have given themselves enough time to assure police presence at the event. They had not cited security concerns until the last minute which puts their motives and aims into question.

There were never any legitimate reasons for there being any protests at the event and Bristol SU's reaction was wholly unjustifiable.

Jacobsen: David Verry in "Banned speaker joins panel to speak at Bristol free speech event" stated, "Sofocleous complaining that the 'authoritarian' SU had 'deplatformed'...SU had asked for a delay." Reading this reportage by Verry, the language of

"delay" seems too downplayed and "authoritarian" seems overplayed. With some time to reflect on the event, what seems like the correct orientation for the interpretation of the events' proceedings?

**Sofocleous:** There was no reason for the SU to ask for the event to be delayed. The fact that they waited until the last minute to ask for the delay shows that they were ill-intentioned and not interested in providing a space in which ideas and views could be presented and challenged, but rather they wanted to present the event as a threat to everyone involved and to the University.

Bristol SU did, in fact, act in an authoritarian and patronizing manner. Students at the University of Bristol, one of the best universities in the country, are bright enough to decide for themselves whether they want to attend an event or not and whether they want to follow an idea they listen to or not.

As I told you earlier, there were no protests at the event, or any disruption caused by any student. This is what happens when responsible, civil, and kind adults decide to discuss an issue. They will respect the other's opinion and will challenge it publicly. They won't be scared of the idea or try to marginalize it. As I supported, marginalizing ideas or isolating individuals who hold them is not conducive to battling those ideas and making them disappear from society.

Let's finally get this straight: You will never get everyone to agree with you. So the best thing you can do is learn to argue and debate. Violence is not the answer.

We talked before about the individuals who will read the tweet – "Women' don't have penises" – while others will skim the article, and fewer will read the entire set of the arguments into the view for you, including on Keingenderism. Lucy Connolly in UNILAD, in an article entitled "Student Who Said 'Women Don't Have Penises' Was Barred From Free Speech Debate," recounted the statement by the Bristol Free Speech Society:

We are saddened to inform you that due to Student Union bureaucracy we have been forced to cancel the invitation we extended to Angelos Sofocleous to be on our panel discussion on free speech. We have given the SU plenty of notice for this event. But they felt it proper to cancel his attendance in the last minute, citing "security concerns". For context, Angelos is a full time student at Durham University who lives amongst students on campus. We leave it to the public to reach their own conclusions with regards to the SU's intentions.

Taking a generous view, what were the positive intentions of the SU and the Bristol Free Speech Society? I state a "generous view" because I would assume individuals within the BFSS or the SU would argue for good intentions or working for the greater good insofar as they deem it, see it.

Sofocleous: The Bristol Free Speech Society, being a student society which is affiliated to the Bristol Students' Union, is bound to follow certain rules and regulations of the SU. Societies in most UK universities must submit a speakers' list to their SU for approval when they are hosting a guest speaker. This is also what the Bristol Free Speech Society had done on this occasion. Because of my retweet, Bristol SU decided that I was a security threat and called for my deplatforming and for the event to be postponed.

Bristol Free Speech Society acted in accordance with the SU's rules and regulations. Me being amongst the audience members was not something that went against the rules and regulations, nor my eventual participation on the panel. SUs cannot decide for their students. If more than

200 students decided that they wanted to see me on the panel, then Bristol SU saying no to that would be nothing else than patronizing and disrespectful to its own students.

Bristol SU wanted to obviously avoid any protests taking place at the event and within its premises. They also wanted to protect their students from supposedly dangerous ideas.

Nevertheless, I fail to see the relation between words and violence. Certainly, people might call for violence with their words, and that's a crime. But, as I said earlier, any comments that are misrepresentative or derogatory toward certain groups cannot be dealt with simply be censoring or de-platforming. When someone utters deeply xenophobic or racist insults this is just the result of an ill political, educational, societal, family system. If we want to change the situation, we need to attack the system, not merely the individual who is a victim of the system.

SUs and Universities should be champions of free speech, not the ones who will suppress it.

Obviously, in their terms, they were acting in good intention and protecting the greater good. However, this behaviour is no different from the behaviour of religious fundamentalists who send death threats to people or authoritarian regimes who get rid of their opponents.

Religious fundamentalists and authoritarian regimes, too, act in good intentions, in their terms, and say that they protect the greater good.

However, I fail to see how any individual or organization which de-platforms or censors anyone can act for the greater good. This is not to say that they are evil – to say that would be a false dichotomy. They are just not acting for the greater good. Period.

Jacobsen: What were the negative consequences of the aforementioned "positive intentions"? I ask because this goes back to the old aphorism on good intentions leading to bad consequences.

**Sofocleous:** As I said, I don't think these individuals or organizations are evil or they want to hurt people with their censorship. But what they are doing goes against any notion of democracy and freedom. It doesn't have to be about intentions – because they have neither good nor bad intentions.

They just want to satisfy the tiny minority of students who might get offended. But, of course, it is impossible to find a topic which won't insult or offend someone. Israel-Palestine, global warming, veganism, colonialism, capitalism, communism, transgender issues, homosexuality – it's impossible to pick a topic in each of these that won't offend someone. Does this mean we have to stop arguing in order to not hurt people's feelings? No.

Dangerous ideas exist in society and we must come to know about them. That's the only way we are going to confront them. Because if these ideas exist and emerge from underground we will not be ready to battle them. Let's face them, challenge them, and eradicate them while there is still time.

The bad consequences of Bristol SU's actions is that they are appeasing a student generation which has learned that it has the right to determine which ideas others can and cannot hear. This generation also thinks that it has the right to never feel uncomfortable or even slightly distressed, or be protected from ideas they do not like. Universities should mirror society – but the way universities are currently managed and operated only present an elite and privileged form of society, which differs substantially from how the real world operates or functions.

Jacobsen: The tweet became the main point of focus for much of the reportage over the last while now, even for stuff on the free speech event, or as if a super-dangerous conspiratorial secret plot to have you – a surreptitious tweeter and panel participant. This is in spite of other interesting writing and news on Mars colonization, clarification in The Spectator on the free speech campus event, or running for Communications Officer in the University of York GSA, etc. You're a busy person with an intellectual life insofar as I knew and know you. In other words, the idea of 'opinions being expressed on Twitter.' Your views tend to come in essays, interviews, and articles, not tweets. The tweet may be offensive to some, but not all. That's the main point. If individuals wanted to review the personal opinions of yours, they can review some of the articles relevant to the subject matter deemed important by them. As far as I can tell, this was not done by either the SU or the BFSS. Any advice of reading your views before concluding on your moral worth based on one sentence from an old tweet?

**Sofocleous:** I said earlier how I thought Twitter will be valuable for future historians. The modern world has become incredibly fast-paced. Speed-read a book. Form your opinion about someone's views in 240 characters or less. Double-speed your podcast. Digest your daily news in 5 minutes. Get notifications about every email, every Facebook notification, every Twitter mention, every Instagram like – it's become incredibly exhausting and we cannot keep up with it.

The world has been divided into good and bad people, everyone you don't agree with is a fascist and everyone calls each other names or derogatory terms all the time. We have become extremely polarised and yet we feel that we need to belong somewhere and adjust to whatever our ideology dictates. We were never as individualistic as we are now, in the history of humankind. Yet, we have lost ourselves. Unfortunately, this comes at a cost of being unable to have a civil discussion with another human being

Let's take the time and get to know others, have a discussion with them about their views, their opinions, their background, their upbringing, their ideas, their dreams about life. We will find that we share more than what divides us.

Let's not conclude one's moral worth in a single tweet – we can do much better than that!

#### Jacobsen: What's next?

**Sofocleous:** That we have to not conclude someone's moral worth from a sentence they uttered does not mean that we should not strive for justice to be served to those who, having evil intentions, wanted to harm us.

For this reason, I am continuing my appeal to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator against the University of Durham and specifically Dr Clare Mac Cumhaill for her harassment and bullying, and Prof Sophie Gibb and Prof Stephen Mumford for being complicit to harassment and bullying and for doing absolutely nothing to correct Clare's behaviour.

I will also be taking legal action.

Other than that, I am continuing my PhD in Philosophy at the University of York, focusing on the phenomenology of depression. Alongside, among other things, I am involved in some publications (*Nouse*, *Secular Nation*, *The Definite Article*), I am active within the Cypriot reconciliation movement, and doing research on a paper and a book review which I'm writing.

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