



# CANADIAN ATHEIST: SET XVI

SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

# In-Sight Publishing

## **Canadian Atheist: Set XVI**

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**Scott**



## **Canadian Atheist**

# Interview with Artist and Musician Nisi Jacobs

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 18, 2019

**Nisi Jacobs is an Artist and Musician, and a Native New Yorker. Here, we talk about her life, work, and views.**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was religion part of early family life?**

**Nisi Jacobs:** No, religion was not part of my family upbringing because my family left it behind. They are both atheists. They raised my brother and I to be atheists. They were fine with me exploring. Eventually, I simply agreed that I am also an atheist.

**Jacobsen: What was educational and professional background? Some of the highlight reels, in terms of university education and the professional life that took up most of the time to this point.**

**Jacobs:** I went to school for painting. I went to Cooper Union for painting. I went to a science and math high school. It was all math and science. Although, it was focused on religion in either of those two institutions. Pretty soon after school, I did not go to graduate school.

I went into computers and became an Apple certified trainer for a bunch of years. Also, I worked briefly for an Apple programmer when he was defining Final Cut Pro while it was in its infancy. From that, I got into video editing.

I have been a 3D video editor for about nearly 2 decades now. So, there is no religious connection there. Most of the work edited is purely about aesthetic experience and not about dogma or institutionalized groups.

I would have a tough time doing anything that was part of organized religion if that makes any sense.

**Jacobsen: Why does religion not appeal to you? What makes this regular secular life in America more appealing to you?**

**Jacobs:** Because I had a huge heavy-handed dose of religion in my first four years. My father was briefly positioned in Upstate New York in an Evangelical-like town called Binghamton.

It is so backward that one of my aunts, when she was out as a Jew at her job, her friends and coworkers asked if they could feel her tail and horns.

I brought there for the first four years. I was not allowed in the kids' homes that I played within the neighbourhood, except for one family that was Italian Catholic.

For the other kids around the neighbourhood that was not Catholic but were Protestant and Evangelical-born-again kids, I would sit outside and wait for them to finish lunch.

I knew something was odd. But I did not analyze it. I was four-years-old. My father was a well-known filmmaker in the avant-garde film world with a film that he put out. It is considered a classic. It is played at Pompidou and many great museums.

It is my mother breastfeeding me. The Church came and protested and ran articles that my father was Jewish pornographer because his wife showed her breast with his child. My best friend's parents became born again, then I was not allowed to do play dates with her.

This informed me very strongly, very early on. These religions meant fear, threat. I knew something was going on. That my parents were not mentioning because they were scared. You pick all that up. We had this brutal experience, early on, with religion.

When we moved to the city, it is like you are in this fabulous soup of every culture, every ethnicity, and every religion. You can safely hideout and be whatever you want to be. You can be an atheist. You can be gay. You can be trans. Most of the time, you feel safe.

**Jacobsen: Why do some Abrahamic religions, in particular – because the examples were Protestant and Catholic, relate to antisemitism in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, at least?**

**Jacobs:** I think that what complicates that is that we all know the scapegoat. But there is a lot of subconscious reasons why the Jew repeatedly in history becomes the focal point when there are economic insecurity and economic and cultural instability.

When one form of civilization is starting to fade and another is about to take its place, that is when a lot of society becomes anxious and insecure. They want to then say, "Us, we are home. Home and nationalism and identity are important."

Anything that is ambiguous and complicated becomes threatening. So, Jews have always lived through this range of being secular, orthodox, fundamentalist, completely integrated into secular society, up and down the ladder.

For whatever reason, during those insecure waves, I do not really know why. But it has been the case that the Jews have been a target to focus one's anxiety on. I think that the way that we get out ahead of this, this time around now, is because of social media; and, we are connected globally now.

It is for the first time when we have this global insecurity, mostly caused by climate change. But nobody is talking about that. We are just ending up with these far-right nationalist leaders taking over country-by-country and then being supported.

Women are becoming much more central. It is very complicated. But Jews have been white when it suits people and not white when it does not suit people. Rich Jews, poor Jews, smart Jews, not so smart Jews, successful, unsuccessful, has a home, doesn't have a home, Israel, whatever, I have hope, bizarrely, that the moment that we are in with social media may help.

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

## Ask Mandisa 25 – Standard Conventions, Standards and Ethics, and Taking a Stand

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 18, 2019

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

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

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

*Here, we talk about conventions, outreach, and social reproval, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** You were tabling at the American Atheists convention. I am not aware. But where was it? How long was the event? What were you tabling?

**Mandisa Thomas:** Yes, I was there for longer than the weekend, as I also serve on the Board of Directors. I arrived Thursday, April 19th and left April 23rd. It was held in Cincinnati Ohio this year.

I also hosted on behalf of Black Nonbelievers. Every year we table, as we sell merchandise to raise funds (in part). We have hoodies, t-shirts, shot glasses, coffee mugs, and so on. A lot of items with our branding on it.

Also, I think we have some pretty cool stuff available for everyone. I also partook in the annual American Atheists board meeting, so I was representing AA and BN at the same time.

**Jacobsen:** What were some highlights? That you heard about in terms of speakers, other tables, and so on.

**Thomas:** I heard that the keynote speaker Jim Obergefell was great. He won a major landmark Supreme Court case regarding LGBT rights. He came out as an atheist at the convention.

Also, I know there were also some issues within the local secular groups. There was an equality rally. But there have two groups in Cincinnati area. One is the Tri-State Freethinkers. The other is the newly formed Community of Reason.

Unfortunately, it involved the departure of one of the leaders who was also representing AA, not in a good way. I will go on the record saying that anyone who treats volunteers, fellow co-workers and colleagues, badly simply for the sake of their ambition should not be in this movement.

**Jacobsen:** How common is mistreatment of those of lesser stature and lesser ambition in the movement?

**Thomas:** It isn't as prevalent as people may think. Much of the issues surrounding people, predominantly white people, who are very intellectual but don't have much common sense.

Therefore, when talking to people from the LGBTQ community or poor people of color, they have good intentions, but their execution is very poor.

There are well-meaning people in the community, but who need to develop better social protocol. This is, unfortunately, too prevalent among the men.

As I've said before, most of the women get stuck doing the grunt work and the men get the credit. This is changing, but it is still prevalent. That is leftover from religion and religious indoctrination, but also a lot of societal indoctrination.

In that, where the male voice tends to be more credited and recognized than the woman, that is what is more prevalent than people who are deliberately trying to bully. That is what is more prevalent than anything else.

**Jacobsen: What might be some preventatives of the community with regards to this poor behaviour? Something like an escalation protocol or social reproval if someone acts poorly.**

**Thomas:** Yes, when there is a problem brought to the attention of an individual or an organization, it is important to investigate quickly. There must also be follow-up with the individual on any updates and results.

It does not mean things will end up in their favor. But if the proper protocol and steps to prevent these actions in the future are taken, then people will be more assured that they will be listened to, especially women as this has been a problem in the past.

Yes, there should be protocol, especially around conventions. I know in 2017; there was one man who reached out to me out of the blue on Meetup and asked if he could share my room.

Because he figured AA comped my room since I was a speaker that year. That was so highly inappropriate. When I alerted then-president David Silverman about it, and asked if this guy had done this to anyone else, they said, "No." They did a profile.

They found other people who had similar problems with this guy and then prevented him from coming to the convention. They did not want him accosting anyone else. Yes, there should be more of these types of actions taking place when these types of things come up.

The more routine they become and the more people understand that there will be consequences to when they act inappropriately; then it will set a good precedent into the future.

Because we do not want anyone coming into the movement thinking that they can do anything that they want to do. This is not [Laughing] how this works!

**Jacobsen: [Laughing].**

**Thomas:** Even in our community, there is responsibility and accountability that we have as human beings, whether we're believers or not.

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

# Interview with Joyce Schorr and Sylvia Ghazarian of WRAPP on Abortion Rights and Reproductive Rights

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 19, 2019

*Joyce Schorr and Sylvia Ghazarian from WRAPP discuss abortion rights and reproductive rights.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's give some sense of where you're coming from, when you're speaking. What is family/personal background, for instance, geography, culture, religion or lack thereof, and so on?

**Joyce Schorr:** I was with a woman who had an illegal abortion firsthand. She was very fortunate as she survived the illegal procedure. Illegal abortions cause harm and death.

**Jacobsen:** What has been the main battleground of reproductive rights for women in The United States in the past 28 years that you have been doing this?

**Schorr:** It is about keeping abortion safe and legal. In addition to safe abortion, autonomy of your own body, making your own decisions about birth control, equal pay, and gender neutrality is part of this fight. You should be able to control how many children you want and when you want to have them.

**Jacobsen:** If we are looking at people entering the political arena or making commentary and activism in the social arena, who are working to progress women's rights in these arenas? Who is working to regress them in general?

**Schorr:** WRRAP and other abortion funds are working tirelessly on this issue. WRRAP helped launch the National Network of Abortion Funds in the early 1990s.

Their goal is reproductive justice for all women regardless of their ability to pay for the procedure. This includes all low-income women whether they are African-American, Latina, Asian, Native American, or LGBTQ.

Poor women of all races, including poor white families, know this is an economic issue. Even protestors, against abortion, come into the clinics when they are faced with a crisis pregnancy.

Across the board agencies such as NARAL, NOW and Planned Parenthood are focusing on this. I am encouraged that the young people are getting more involved as they are the group these laws will affect the most.

**Jacobsen:** What is some specific legislation?

**Schorr:** There is an attempt to pass all sorts of bills regarding reproductive rights. The Each Women Act is being pursued at the federal level to protect women, but there are also other groups that are working on different initiatives and narrative.

**Jacobsen:** Not always but, how is fundamentalist religious faith being used to deny women fundamental rights of autonomy over their body?

**Schorr:** They believe life begins at conception, which is their view. They are willing to deny you that right to abortion once you are pregnant and many of the laws do not include exceptions such as rape, incest, and health of the fetus or the woman.

The big issue is “fetal rights” over that of the woman. The “heartbeat legislation” is popping up all over the nation in the states. Especially those that are hostile to reproductive justice, they are setting up trigger laws with the hope the Supreme Court will use them to overturn *Roe v Wade*.

They have been very successful with this strategy as there are over a dozen trigger laws and they are waiting for the court to decide which, if any, they will fully hear. The court now has a solid 5 votes to overturn *Roe*.

On the state and national level, they are trying to legislate the “Born Alive Bill.” There are already laws, in effect, which protect any infant that is born. Most disturbing are the laws that will prevent a family from aborting a fetus with any fetal abnormalities.

However, once they are in the world, they cut off all care and programs to help these families. It is going to be a political issue for the upcoming 2020 election, a very big issue.

**Jacobsen: If people are looking for the dog whistles in the political arena now, what are they?**

**Schorr:** Again “Fetal rights,” and “Infanticide” is also being used.

**Jacobsen: What organizations are spreading misinformation, disinformation, and lies?**

**Schorr:** I would say all our opponents who claim to be protecting women. Their whole premise of abortion is based on things that are really based on their ideologies or their religion. Abortion is never mentioned in the bible!

Another great concern are the crisis pregnancy centers. They are set up by religious entities to discourage women from having abortions. There are thousands of them and they now receive federal, local and state funding.

These centers pass themselves off as wanting to help women, but do not have any intention of telling women their full range of options.

**Jacobsen: Does this impact the young or the old more? Moreover, is it impacting young people more in the short term but also impacting older people in the long term in terms of seeing the direction of the lives of young people?**

**Many of whom will be their children. It is almost their legacy being impacted through the denial of these bodily autonomy rights. In terms of the attitudinal stances, are younger people more in line with standard human rights frameworks or not?**

**Schorr:** Young people are more in line with this issue. The other side would have you believe it is the “pro-life generation.” We believe we have the momentum on our side.

Young people are fully aware and want their full range of reproductive rights. They need to be able to make that decision on their own. We have a culture, by our opponents, of not being truthful about abortion and contraception.

Young people, especially those who live in very religious homes, are not able to get the education they need and have their heads filled with inaccurate information.

Many of them are thrown out of their homes, once they become pregnant, and many are physically abused due to their situation.

**Jacobsen:** Of course, as you mentioned about economic insecurity as an issue with regards to reproductive rights and health and wellness access, this will impact people of color – e.g., Indigenous people – and women of color more in particular, and rural people, will have lesser access and will be lower SES in the United States, thus making them even more negatively impacted by legislation that would deny fundamental reproductive rights access.

**Schorr:** There are abortion deserts; they don't have family planning clinics. They don't have doctors to access the procedure. These areas of the country are very conservative and they are controlled by anti-choice legislators. It does carry over to all women who live there.

**Jacobsen:** If we're looking at the long-term life impacts, or short-term in fact, whether it is death due to unsafe clandestine abortions given a lack of safe and equitable access or damage internally based on botched abortions that are done in potentially unsanitary and unsafe conditions and assistance, what are the conditions women are facing when they're in those illegal abortion settings?

**Schorr:** Again, they are faced with little hope or help. Women are focusing on DIY abortions by buying substances on line to get it done. Women in rural areas are the ones most likely to be doing this.

Some are buying the abortion pill online, while considered safe there are protocols that need to be followed and having the assistance of a legitimate health clinic is important.

**Jacobsen:** What are some positive developments seen in 2018 and early 2019?

**Schorr:** The awakening of the nation; the groups that were once not quite as vocal are all rising. Ireland and South Korea have made abortion legal. In many other nations, they are women rising up to have safe access.

Unfortunately, as authoritative people come into power, one thing they do is limit reproductive rights. They need growing populations, for tax money and the military. I am seeing people rise. I am loving it.

**Jacobsen:** What would you consider the most concerning or depressing developments?

**Schorr:** I go back to "fetal rights" and what they're doing in the states, how they're trying to limit women in so many areas. To me, it is an assault on women.

**Jacobsen:** If you are looking at the landscape of the people who are out, speaking, active, and writing, who are the people to pay attention to in the current period? Those are who really nailing it, in terms of hitting the right topics, speaking at the right tone, and so on.

**Schorr:** I read *Rewire*. I follow Jodi Lynn Jacobson, Marcy Bloom, Renee Bracy Sherman and many others who are on the front lines of this movement. I love Gloria Steinem. She loves WRRAP.

**Jacobsen:** What are ways in which people can become involved?

**Sylvia Ghazarian:** *We are non-profit. What we do is support women across the United States, so, the best way people can volunteer or become a part of our organization is to fundraise for us. Because we are, basically, using those funds directly to help the clinics that help these patients.*



**Jacobsen:** What states in the United States are having the hardest time in terms of the provision of service?

**Schorr:** [Laughing] The entire South.

**Jacobsen:** [Laughing].

**Schorr:** Mostly the deep South and the far North, as they call it; those states are having a lot of restrictions hurled at the local level. The South is an abortion dead zone for women and is a dangerous place for women. There are also Midwest states that are passing restrictive laws.

**Jacobsen:** Some of the serious statistics, including Human Rights Watch provides some at the international level. How many women in the United States die every year via abortion?

**Schorr:** I don't have that. I don't know anybody keeping track of that.

**Jacobsen:** In terms of qualitative analysis, what is the feedback you're getting in terms of WRAPP's initiative, work, what it stands for, whether it's a famous person or simply an ordinary American citizen?

**Schorr:** We have wonderful feedback from the clinics as one of the best abortion funds. We are the only proclaimed national fund. The other funds are local or will help nationally for certain cases. The clinics are forever grateful that we're there to assist these women.

Once these women get to the clinic, they have to be able to find the additional funds. We are thankful the clinics reach out to us for assistance. WRRAP's goal, above all, is to keep the women safe.

**Jacobsen:** Does part of the problem stem from a lack of proper evidence-based sexual education in many parts of the U.S.?

**Schorr:** Yes, it's a problem. Abstinence does not work. It is a Band-Aid that does not stick. This is especially happening in the same demographics, the deep South and the far North.

**Jacobsen:** What are ways for men to become involved? How have men been poorly involved? How have men been well-involved in terms of positive change?

**Schorr:** I am going to give you the pleasure, Sylvia.

**Ghazarian:** *Okay, I think the big thing is that I look at is not from a gender point of view. I look at it from the point of view as this is a human rights issue. That affects all of us.*

*As a human rights issue, every gender needs to come aboard and make sure this is known as something that affects women in a negative way when they don't have the opportunity or choice to make decisions about their own bodies.*

*The support system needs to be such that we have a following of anybody who believes this philosophy, and who moves forward in that regard.*

**Schorr:** Over 70% of the men are gone from the women that we help. Men are not standing up for this right. They are late to the party. Yet, they benefit from the active right of women to control their bodies. To me, that is a very troubling stat.

**Jacobsen:** If you're looking at other countries around the world, what ones most concern you, in terms of some of the ones before, e.g., reproductive rights access acknowledged and implemented?

**Schorr:** There are many nations where people are demanding safe abortions. Italy, Argentina, and Poland are just a few.

**Jacobsen: Is a blunt or direct way to state the case that it is in men's self-interest?**

**Schorr:** I think it is very much in their interest. Many of them would have many children to support if not for legal abortions. Men face the same issues, economic, fetal problems etc. It is not just women who benefit.

**Jacobsen: What seem like the sources of this regressive masculinity or hypermasculinity reflected in reactionary nationalism or even ultra-nationalism?**

**Schorr:** We see a lot of people in power who are considered strong men. I think that it is appealing, certainly, to some. Women attend college in greater numbers than men. More women are breadwinners. Culturally, things have changed.

I think a lot of men are feeling that they are losing their power. I see white nationalism rising because we're becoming a browner nation. When people feel as if they're losing something, this is what they do.

**Jacobsen: What are their tactics? How can we counter them in advance?**

**Schorr:** You can see them outside of the clinics. Recently, a militia group appeared on the Capitol steps in Atlanta, Georgia, claiming they will "kick some ass" to protect the fetus.

We see, right now, the rise of white nationalists getting involved in the anti-choice movement. This is very frightening. Tempers get flared. Nobody is safe. I think we're facing a lot of situations, where you really must be careful.

**Jacobsen: In the *Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, New York was a holdout. What states appear more as a holdout for full or almost full protection of women's rights in the United States?**

**Schorr:** Washington state, Oregon, California, New York and IL. Those are really the safest. These states are making sure the pre-*Roe* laws are removed from their state's constitution.

New Mexico tried to take pre-*Roe* laws off the books and were not able to do that. If *Roe* falls, these states will be unable to protect and maintain women's abortion rights. We feel WRAPP is more important than ever to be able to assist women when they travel to one of these states.

**Jacobsen: For someone who is working in this for 28 years, and someone who has seen, in terms of the 70% number given before, men not be involved, even when it is in their self-interest, when they don't come, what are the reason that they give in terms of simply not coming those times?**

**Schorr:** I can't answer that. I have my own opinion. But I am surrounded by men in my life who are part of the movement. They do show up. As for the rest, I just think they feel as if it doesn't affect them. It absolutely affects them. Abortion is a human issue.

**Jacobsen: In terms of building that decent society for everyone, in terms of having men and women involved in the human issue rather than the women's rights issue alone, what are some next steps that could be done, not only leading up to the next election but after the next election however it turns out?**

**Schorr:** The first thing that we must do is fight back against the misleading information coming from religious right organizations. We should not allow the church to dictate to us what is moral.

Abortion is a safe medical procedure and it has been legal for a long time. We need to fight back against people who push their religion on others, whether by ideology or preferences.

We also need to provide much-needed sex education early on in the schools. However, that is not going to happen because the same people who are so against abortion are also against any kind of sex education and birth control. They are all interconnected.

This is something that we need to protect; something that we all need to uphold. If it is not talked about in their home, we must rely on available information in the schools. Unfortunately, many states will not allow this, so more unplanned pregnancies and abortions will continue to happen.

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

**Schorr:** Thank you.

**Ghazarian:** *Thank you.*

# Asia Bibi, Husband, and Daughters Safe in Canada

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 19, 2019

According to *Religion News*, the case – known to several readers here – of Asia Bibi hit some of the news once more.

Some secular Canadians took intrigue at this case because of the reason for the charges against Bibi, who, according to those making the charge, had blasphemed or committed the (religious) crime of blasphemy.

Bibi is a Pakistani Christian who piqued the interest of some Canadian citizens, especially, in the current period, as she was *en route* to their (our) country on May 7, 2019.

The daughters of Bibi travelled to Canada in December of 2018, and Bibi and her husband, Ashiq Masih, stayed in Pakistan.

Last year, the blasphemy charges were overturned for Bibi, to the relief of the family and the secular Canadians who took note of the case.

A friend of the family of Bibi, Nadeem Bhatti, stated that the entire ordeal has taken a toll on Bibi.

Bhatti stated, “We had been told three or four times she was going to be leaving, but it never turned out.”

He – Bhatti – had difficulty believing the reportage about Bibi now. According to Bhatti, Bibi missed her daughters a lot and asked about “how they are doing, and feeling bad she wasn’t there to help them.”

The family of Bibi arrived in Canada, remains happy to be away from the concerns raised about wellbeing from the entrapment in Pakistan and the charges of blasphemy. The family’s locale is, at present, kept secret, but is reported to be inside of Canadian borders.

The reason for the secrecy is a modern one with digital media and other forms of advanced communications enabled by the wonders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: death threats.

“This includes a threat from an Islamist extremist in Pakistan who called on Muslims in other countries to kill her when she was allowed to leave that country,” *Religion News* stated, “Bhatti, who has been advocating for Bibi’s release since 2011, expressed his ‘heartfelt thanks to the Canadian government officials who worked to bring her to Canada.’”

From the perspective of some, the arrival to Canada is answering a prayer and may help raise awareness about the issues faced by Christians in Pakistan and other countries.

With the case for Bibi starting in 2009 over a purported insult to “the Prophet Muhammad,” Bibi consistently stated innocence; however, she was sentenced to death way back in 2010 and remained in prison for 8 years until 2018, where “Pakistan’s Supreme Court overturned the conviction.”

With the acquittal to the charge of blasphemy or, more specifically, insulting the central religious figure in Islam, Bibi was free while, at the same time, fundamentalist religious groups and individuals issued death threats for her.

In Canada, Bibi will probably be safer and be able to continue life anew with her daughters and Masih.

## Ask Mandisa 26 – One River: Two Streams Divided

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 19, 2019

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

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

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

*Here, we talk about streams in the secular communities.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** There are two streams of thought in the secular community. One wants to speak their mind, say what they want, often without consequence in a social or professional capacity.

If they are infringed in some way, insofar as they see it, they will claim their free speech or freedom of expression rights are being infringed upon.

Another view is looking at more social justice concerns from a different angle, as in human rights and equality, with respect to more inclusion of women in leadership, more inclusion of people of colour in leadership, and a broader base of human rights in consideration more equally distributed within the secular communities than simply freedom of expression.

There is a tension, I notice, not necessarily in theory, but certainly in some communities in practice. Can we explore some of that today, please?

**Mandisa Thomas:** Yes, we see that the movement, the secular movement or the atheist movement if you will, is shifting as there have been more calls for diversity and inclusion. Now, you see more people of color getting involved, as well as women and young people.

In many instances, it is in leadership roles too. And as this happens, there is a shift in focus as to concerns that affect marginalized communities and rightfully so. As people come out of religion, especially from these communities, there are often other issues that come along with it.

The community should understand what those are and be prepared to help. Yes, there has been some talk about how the movement is being infiltrated by folks who care more than about simply atheism and education on scientific theory.

What they need to understand, some of these theories and methods have been used in not so good ways. So, to paint a broad brush as if nothing ever happened, nothing bad ever happens, is a mistake. We're a movement of human beings, we aren't perfect.

Human beings are capable of some very good and bad things as with what we see with religion. There are many people in this community who encourage people to value and demand evidence regarding religion, but not much else.

Now, there are more women getting involved and assuming leadership roles (myself included). I also tend to highlight more women in the movement now, especially as they are coming out and participating. It is very important.

The representation matter as much as the diversity of the causes and initiatives that matter to us. Even if we do not care about things equally, they should at least be acknowledged.

Because, ultimately, they affect us and the people around us.

**Jacobsen: What have been some notable efforts for more equal representation of people in the movement? I do mean events like Women in Secularism, for instance.**

**Thomas:** Yes, there was the Women in Secularism conference. There have also been others, including the Secular Women Work conference. In addition to plenary talks, there have been workshops, presented by women.

There is also Skepticon, which is predominantly women led. Many of the issues there surround subjects that pertain to marginalized communities.

Of course, BN along with Black Skeptics and the Women's Leadership Project, is putting on the first Women of Color Beyond Belief in October of this year, which will directly highlight and feature all women of color who are activist organizers and leaders in this movement.

What is significant about this, over the years, there have been a number of us who have participated in these conferences, but we're still sporadic and still a very small few; that have been represented on a larger scale.

We know there are more. We decided to bring as many of us as possible into one event to show the work that we're doing. But also, that it is important to be supported as much as the other conferences featuring predominantly white speakers.

There is also a lot of lip service around this. But regarding action, it is still lacking. We are working to include more women and women of color in positions to help influence the organizations and what they can better focus on

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

# Interview with Donna Harris – Former President, Humanists, Atheists, & Agnostics of Manitoba

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 20, 2019

*Donna Harris is the Former President of Humanists, Atheists, & Agnostics of Manitoba. Here we talk about her life, work, and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What was family background, e.g., language, culture, ethnicity, heritage of belief, and so on?

**Donna Harris:** My father was English/Scottish. My mother was a mix of First Nations and Metis, but I'm still not quite sure of the exact mixture! My mom had her First Nations status, but yet at home, her family spoke Michif, a Metis language, not Cree or Saulteux.

But I grew up rather "white bread", lower middle-class in Winnipeg. St. James to be exact. Both my parents always worked, and we had a comfortable house in the suburbs. My mother didn't pass down any First Nations heritage, and my dad didn't really contribute anything significant heritage-wise either.

We were Roman Catholic, but basically in name only. We went to church very rarely; mostly at Easter and Christmas, and only because my grandmother on my mom's side wanted to attend. Once she passed away, our church visits stopped.

What I learned the most from my parents was the importance of honesty, reliability, and the value of hard work.

**Jacobsen:** How did this impact upbringing for you?

**Harris:** While I wish my upbringing was more positive, the result wasn't good. I didn't know it until much later, but my mother had been sent to a residential school. She never talked about her history at all, and back then, I was too dumb to ask.

But these days, we all know what kind of a house of horrors those schools were. I'm sure her experience was no exception.

So, her child rearing lacked kindness, and any kind of confidence-building. No real praise, little encouragement, only criticism when things weren't done to her standards. My father, sadly, wasn't much of a real presence. He was quiet and rather withdrawn, even when I was an adult. We didn't really have much of a relationship, to be honest.

The result was that I grew up with serious self-esteem issues.

It wasn't until I was in my 30's that I found out about the schools. When I started reading and learning about what went on, my mother's behaviors and ?? started to make sense.

**Jacobsen:** Did this alter the ways in which the community and family life played out for you?

**Harris:** Well, I didn't have a real long-term relationship til I was in my 40's. Nuf said.

**Jacobsen:** When did you first begin to take on an explicit worldview of non-belief, of secularism regarding the nature of existence?



**Harris:** I believe my earliest influences were books and TV. When I was 8 or 9, I remember reading Hurlbut's Story Of The Bible at almost the same time as a book on Greek gods and goddesses. To me, they were both collections of fictional stories. I also watched a lot of nature TV. Those were the days of Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom, and those shows helped me view all living things as just a part of an evolved universe.

As an adult looking back, I also realized that I am a "Star Trek" humanist. I watched the original series in re-runs in the 70's, and then The Next Generation, and after that all the other series and movies in turn. Gene Roddenberry's original humanist doctrine shone through the early series. It was a world where races were equal, our tribal prejudices were exposed as ridiculous, gender roles were not rigid, all life forms were accepted and respected, and peaceful methods of problem solving were generally the first option.

**Jacobsen: How did you find the HAAM community?**

**Harris:** Back in 2005, my spouse and I went to The Amazing Meeting 3, held by the James Randi Educational Foundation. TAM, as it was known, was primarily a skeptics conference. The entire conference had a large influence on me. I gave up the remnants of my superstitious beliefs, such as astrology and belief in ghosts.

Prior to TAM, religion or non-belief were not really on my radar. They were basically non-issues. When I got home I looked up information on local atheist groups. What I found was the Humanist Association of Manitoba. I didn't even know what a humanist was. But I read the bullet points about humanist beliefs, and agreed with every one. I found out that I was humanist! We started attending meetings shortly after.

**Jacobsen: What has been the roles there? What were the tasks and responsibilities as the president?**

**Harris:** After about a year or two in the group, I joined the executive team. I was librarian, then newsletter editor, then vice-president, and then president.

As president, I chaired the executive meetings, and, when required, led votes on various issues. Most votes were rather mundane, such as approval to pay expenses submitted by someone in the Executive. I also led the regular meetings. Calling the evening to order, going over some introductory topics such as upcoming events, and then introducing the evening's guest speaker.

Other responsibilities included monitoring our social media, and replying to inquiries when needed, as well as speaking to the news media from time to time.

**Jacobsen: What were some memorable and heartwarming experience while in HAAM leadership?**

**Harris:** Posing for a picture with a few of our past presidents is a favorite memory. We were all at our summer solstice party at the time.

Being interviewed by the tv news media to respond to our now-premier Brian Pallister, who was quoted as wishing happy holidays to all of us "infidel atheists". That was probably the best Christmas gift Mr. Pallister could have given us. (The full quote is: "All you infidel atheists out there, I want to wish you the very best also. I don't know what you celebrate during the holiday season. I myself celebrate the birth of Christ, but it's your choice and I respect your choice. If you wish to celebrate nothing and just get together with friends, that's good too.")

**Jacobsen:** With Metis heritage, how is the representation of the Metis community in the secular community?

**Harris:** As far as I know, very little. I only know that our membership is not very culturally diverse.

**Jacobsen:** Following the previous question, is there a different representation of Metis men to women in the community? As we both know, the secular community has more men than women, at least in public and, especially, in leadership.

**Harris:** I'm not really aware of any.

**Jacobsen:** How can the Canadian secular community become more inclusive of the diverse voices of the Indigenous non-believing population?

**Harris:** As a whole, I think we need to actively seek out Indigenous Canadians and listen to their stories. There are a lot of documentaries, TV shows, books, events, etc., available to learn from. In talking to Indigenous people, most have some sort of negative memories or have experienced trauma in their lives. A greater understanding of our Canadian history will help a great deal in bridging the gap.

**Jacobsen:** Looking ahead, what are your hopes for the secular community in Manitoba?

**Harris:** I'm hopeful that more young people will become active regarding their non-belief. There is less stigma now about being an atheist/humanist, and as our numbers grow, it will be more important to be part of a community with a united voice, so our opinions and beliefs will be heard, and not dismissed.

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

# Canadian and American Jewish Identity

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 20, 2019

*Religion News Service* reported on some surveys in the recent past about demographic and statistical facts about the Canadian Jewish population.

The author of the article joked about “Canadaphilia” or a “longing to be a Canadian... or, to be even more precise, a longing for the way that Canadians practice Judaism.”

This became a pivot point for some commentary on study of Canadian Jewish peoples following a 2013 Pew Research Center study of American Jewish identity. The findings, according to the reporter, were “remarkable.”

The comparisons for the article related to the American Jewish community and the Canadian Jewish community. If we look at, for instance, the rates of intermarriage, 50% of the American Jewish population intermarry.

Whereas, in Canadian society, only 23% of the Jewish community will intermarry. Canadian Jewish peoples will be twice as probably to take part in yeshiva, community day school, overnight summer camp, and a Sunday/Hebrew school.

As reported, “In the United States, participation has dwindled among non-Orthodox American Jews. The same has not been true for Reform and Conservative Jews in Canada. Canadians are significantly more active in their religious communities.”

Canadian Jewish peoples are twice as likely to take part in Synagogue and 80% of Canadian Jewish peoples have donated to a Jewish organization. Indeed, even on the political and sentiment level, Canadian Jewish peoples identify more with Israel than American Jewry.

“Comparatively few American Jews have a preponderance of Jewish friends... In a few years, Canada’s Jewish population may exceed 400,000, making it the largest Jewish community outside of Israel and the United States,” *Religion News Service* stated.

The author of the article, Jeffrey Salkin, mused about not coveting Canadian Jewish identity because of the implications with the Ten Commandments and coveting, but still coveting the identity nonetheless. Salkin spoke at synagogues in Calgary, Toronto, Vancouver, and Winnipeg.

As a qualitative analysis, he observed a vitality of Jewish life and “sense of togetherness” within a common purpose for the communities. He found the young people’s sense of this “refreshing and inspirational.”

Salkin stated, “To be blunt, the rate of assimilation has been slower among Canadian Jews. There has been a greater appreciation for Jewish ethnicity, which perhaps emerges from a greater sense of diversity in Canadian life itself.”

He went to an exhibit in New York, which was a Jewish Museum. It contained a Lenny Cohen exhibit. In it, he saw the life and times of Leonard Cohen. Salkin could not extricate the understanding of Cohen from Jewish facets of Montreal and Jewish aspects of Montreal from Cohen.

“I would need for my Canadian Jewish friends, communal leaders, and sociologists to analyze why there is such a difference between United States Jewry and Canadian Jewry,” Salked opined, “One answer: the different course of United States history, compared to Canadian history. The United States fought a war against British colonialism, which produced strong American patriotism.”

One of the authors, Professor Rhonda Lenton, of the study argued that this produced a stronger national identity amongst Americans than Canadians. The cohesiveness of the Canadian Jewish communities is something that Salkin wishes American Jewish peoples had as much.

He covets it. And the differences show in the data.

# Journalists Suspended Over Holocaust Video on AJ+

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 20, 2019

According to the BBC, *Al Jazeera*, a Qatari-based news organization, suspended two journalists who denied the full reality of the Holocaust and its impacts on Jewish communities.

The two journalists produced a video in which they denied the reality of the Holocaust, which went online at the AJ+ video library in Arabic. As most or all readers here know, 6 million Jewish peoples were murdered by the National Socialists or Nazis during World War II.

The video published by the journalists on AJ+ in Arabic or through the online channels of audiovisual media of *Al Jazeera* stated that the numbers of the murdered were both exaggerated and then “adopted by the Zionist movement,” where the state of Israel became the “biggest winner” from the genocide of the Jewish peoples during WWII.

“Its narrator also asked, ‘why is there a focus only on them?’ – referring to the Jewish victims – before claiming that the community uses ‘financial resources [and] media institutions’ to ‘put a special spotlight’ on Jewish suffering,” the reportage stated.

The caption for the video was the following: “What is the truth of the Holocaust and how did the Zionist movement benefit from it?”

The Middle East Media Research Institute or Memri tweeted an English translation of the Arabic text or the caption of the video. Memri is a non-profit based in the United States.

The *BBC* stated, “Questioning the number of Jewish victims killed, suggesting that Jewish people manipulate the media, and claiming that Jewish people or the State of Israel benefit from the Holocaust have been condemned as forms of anti-Semitism.”

After the tweet in English from Memri following the Arabic tweet from *Al Jazeera*, the content was widely condemned. A spokesperson, Emmanuel Nahshon, for the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the content the worst evil, and pernicious at that.

He sees lies and evil propagated through *Al Jazeera* akin to *Der Stürmer*, according to Nahshon, which was an anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda publication. *Al Jazeera* broadcast journalist, Mehdi Hasan, was happy for the disciplinary action against *Al Jazeera* journalists, as he considered the AJ+ video “ridiculously offensive and dumb.”

In recent statement by *Al Jazeera*, the video was quickly deleted and “violated the editorial standards of the network.” Both journalists were suspended over the production of the video.

The Executive Director of the digital division of *Al Jazeera*, Dr. Yaser Bishr, stated that there was an immediate call for “mandatory bias training and awareness programme” by him, where the AJ+ Managing Director, Dima Khatib, spoke to how the video was “produced without the due oversight” necessary to prevent falsehoods and offensive content produced about historical events.

# Resolution Proposal for National Policy of The UCC

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 20, 2019

In a small community church in The United Church of Canada tradition, according to the *Manitoulin Expositor*, there has been a call for a resolution to make a change in the national policy of The United Church of Canada.

“At the second-ever cluster meeting of United Churches in the Manitoulin, Espanola and North Shore regions, the host Little Current Pastoral Charge (LCPC) presented a resolution regarding the ministerial appointment of an atheistic minister in a Toronto united church,” the report said.

The Chair, Scott Mosher, of the Church Council of LCPC requested the endorsement and general support of the community to move this to the regional council and the national church. He wanted letters, in agreement, from the members of the community.

On the history of the request, as reported, “The group’s action on this front dates back to January, when the church council sent a letter to the United Church of Canada in protest of its decision to allow Rev. Gretta Vosper remain as the minister of West Hill United Church in Toronto, despite her public stance as an atheist.”

With early February, 2019, Rev. Alan W. Hall sent a note to Mr. Mosher. Hall is the Executive Officer of Ministry and Employment and Human Resources in The UCC. Hall stated that the settlement process changed the role within the national level of The UCC.

Hall described how with the change in the process for a settlement, the general council did not have authority for a formal hearing. The LCPC was concerned about precedents being set into the future because of this decision. He – Hall – affirmed that the letter did not involved precedent.

Hall wrote, “Its conclusion in no way changes or influences denominational policy or doctrine. Nor does it establish a precedent that binds any future complaint.”

Any changes to the faith requirements would need several years and a transparent set of decisions with a full majority of affirmations. It would be a hard slog into the future. Hall retained confidence in The UCC into the future in terms of the “integrity of the faith and the doctrine.”

Mosher and others felt as though their concerns did not fully get addressed. The Pastor of LCPC, Paul Allard, stated that settlement left a bit of sourness in the mouth of the individuals involved in the community at LCPC.

The article stated, “Mr. Mosher told the gathered meeting that a September 2016 report into Rev. Vosper’s ministry had deemed her not suitable to continue as an ordained minister. However, a statement released in November 2018 from Toronto Conference stating that the issues had been settled and Rev. Vosper would remain in the ordained ministry at West Hill. He wondered aloud what had changed between the two dates.”

Studies indicate about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the churches in Canada – presumably for The UCC – will close within the next decade.

Allard stated, “We’re not trying to go after anybody, we would just like to see that, going forward, the United Church tighten its procedural matters in these regards a little more closely.”

More [here](#).

# Women of Color Beyond Belief Conference 2019

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 20, 2019

*\*Attendance information at the bottom.\**

The Women of Color Beyond Belief Conference will be taking place from October 4 to 6, 2019, in Chicago at the Marriott Midway Hotel. The conference is presented by Black Nonbelievers, Black Skeptics Group, and the Women's Leadership Project. Its tagline, and represented by central figures per trait in the tagline, is "Envision. Execution. Exuberance."

"Envision" is Sikivu Hutchison. Mandisa Thomas is the "Execution" of it. Bridgett "Bria" Crutchfield is "Exuberance." All three important to the increased recognition and visibility of women of colour within the secular communities among others.

As there has been an increasing platform for women in secular communities and for people of colour too, there has been a concomitant rise in the individuals who represent facets of communities less represented – simply less present to the public – in prior generations.

Also, there has been the furtherance of events and organizations devoted to more representation and more dignity to communities with less prominence than before, i.e., women and people of colour.

There is the Women in Secularism conference (a recurrent conference), Secular Women Work, Secularism is a Women's Issue, Black Nonbelievers, Black Skeptics Group, the Women's Leadership Project, Kansas City Freethinkers of Color, Secular Sistahs, Ebony Exodus Project, Institute of Science and Human Values, BSLA First in the Family Humanist Scholarship Fund, Black Skeptics Los Angeles, and, now, the Women of Color Beyond Belief Conference, and, presumably, others.

In *The Humanist* or the flagship publication of the American Humanist Association, five women of color – Mandisa Thomas, Bria Crutchfield, Liz Ross, Candace Gorham and Sikivu Hutchinson – were featured, which was in the July/August 2018 issue of the publication entitled "Five Fierce Humanists" for a feature story.

Hutchinson describes this as the "first of its kind in the secular world, underscoring the need to create collective spaces for Black secular women's resistance."

Black women simply have not been recognized or represented within the secular communities as much as others. Hence, the salience of a conference with a specific emphasis on it.

The Women of Color Beyond Belief Conference is a place of "secular feminist activism and organizing," according to Hutchinson. In this conference, there is a filling of a need for Black and Latinx women who reject or question the fundamental tenets and tenability of organized religion.

This is echoed by others around the world. Granted, often, the commentary exists only within the context of the more secular countries of the world. For example, even with the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain or the CEMB, we can see the difficulties for women without extensive commentary on women in the less secularized nations.



Sadia Hameed, Spokesperson for the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB), stated, “Having supported both open and closeted apostates at the Council of Ex Muslims of Britain for the last few years, I am acutely aware of the additional restrictions women face when accessing support, let alone when they attempt to speak out. This conference is vital, as it empowers those that are still imprisoned in the closets their families have created for them. For many unable to speak, it will be a ray of hope for them.”

Often, as comes out in the reportage of women within the secular news and opinion pieces, there was a need for a space for secular women of colour from a variety of backgrounds. The questions of inclusion and dignity for those who may not have had as much in the past becomes a critical and, indeed, crucial or indispensable question for the secular women in the non-religious communities around the world.

Liz Ross, a member of Black Skeptics Los Angeles, said, “Where I live in the South, it is still taboo in Black and Latinx/Hispanic spaces to be an ‘out’ secular humanist. It’s also rare to meet secular humanist women of color, even in progressive spaces, and this experience is very alienating. The Women of Color Beyond Belief Conference would provide a much-needed space for us to celebrate, network, and share a common purpose that intersects social justice with secular humanism.”

Mandisa Thomas, i.e., “Execution,” the Founder of Black Nonbelievers, Inc., stated, “This collaboration between us and our organizations is overdue, yet right on time. When Sikivu said that she wanted to put together a conference featuring all women of color, I said ‘Let’s DO IT!’ Over the past seven years, we have developed not only great respect for each other, but also for each other’s work. There are also other women of color in this community who are invaluable, and they need to be more widely heard.”

Crutchfield – or “Exuberance” – found this as an important part of the conversations and dialogues within the secular world. Her main point in commenting on the conference coming in October to create opportunities rather than wait for them to be handed from the external communities. She wants the disregard for secular women of color to come to an end.

Deanna Adams, author of the blog entitled Musings on a Limb, said, “We live in a world where Black women are one of the most fervently religious groups, yet consistently come up short in measures of health, wealth and well-being. It is extremely important to our futures to show solidarity with others who have left religion, as well as an alternative to religious practices for those still questioning.”

Over the weekend of October 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>, there will be several events for the conference including the tour of Black historic sites in the Chicago, a reception and viewing of “White Nights, Black Paradise”, as well as a Red-Carpet Diva’s Ball. Don’t miss it!

Other speakers, not mentioned already, will include Cecilia Pagan, Ingrid Mitchell, Lilandra Ra, Marquita Tucker, Mashariki Lawson-Cook, Rajani Gudlavaletti, and Sonjiah Davis.

Sponsors of the conference include the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the American Humanist Association, Foundation Beyond Belief, Secular Women, Recovering From Religion, and Atheists United.

*\*For those with an interest in attending the conference, please make sure to reserve a room at the Marriott Midway Hotel [here](#). For registration, please see [here](#). If unable to pay everything in the registration at once, please see [here](#). If you have childcare needs, please see [here](#).\**

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Further information:

Black Nonbelievers is a 501c3 nonprofit fellowship headquartered in the Atlanta area that is dedicated to providing an informative, caring, festive and friendly community. The organization connects with other Blacks (and allies) who are living free of religion and might otherwise be shunned by family and friends. Instead of accepting dogma, Black Nonbelievers seeks to determine truth and morality through reason and evidence.

Black Skeptics Group is a 501c3 community-based organization that provides social justice resources, educational initiatives and scholarships for non-believers, humanists and secularists of color.

The Women's Leadership Project is a Black feminist mentoring, civic engagement and advocacy program for girls of color based in South Los Angeles, focusing on sexual harassment and sexual violence prevention education, women of color social history, reproductive justice, LGBTQI youth rights and college readiness.

Contact: Sikivu Hutchinson, shutch2396@aol.com, 213-703-6982

# The (Secular) God of the (Psychedelic) Gaps

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 21, 2019

With the moves to reduce the harms of drugs and mind-altering substances on the general public in several nations around the world, there have been active decriminalization efforts, as in Portugal, or calls for decriminalization by the (late) former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the UN Ban Ki-Moon, and current Secretary-General of the UN Antonio Guterres, even a joint call by the UN and the World Health Organization.

In line with this, Canadian health authorities in several major cities have made similar calls. Some of the downstream effects come to the notions of what some deem god or the experiences labelled encounters with such an entity.

According to *Vice*, some may feel closer to this entity in an existential-phenomenological (maybe, epi-phenomenological) way. There is a move towards more humane drug policies within Canadian society.

With the nudge from Health Canada, several religious groups have been granted permission to import ayahuasca. There, apparently, is a tourist industry devoted to trips to South America to intake ayahuasca and enter into an altered state of consciousness.

However, there is a ban on the hallucinogenic or psychedelic compound in the United States and Canada with only the recent exemptions permitted for (some) religious groups.

Ayahuasca has been banned by Canadian authorities due to the containment of dimethyltryptamine (DMT) and harmaline.

In following the recommendations of the international community (leadership and organizations) and the trend with the decriminalization of cannabis, these exemptions for some religious groups in some of Canada relate to harm reduction methodologies leaning the country further away from punitive approaches seen in the Philippines under the leadership of Duterte and in the United States with the ramp-up since the “War on Drugs.”

Based on some reportage in April of 2018, there were two Montreal religious organizations that were permitted exemptions from the aforementioned illegality stipulations about the two particular active ingredients – DMT and harmaline – in ayahuasca.

This restrictions related to the ban on the importation of psychedelic tea. The vice president of one of the organizations, Céu do Montreal, at the time stated, “Our legal counsel warned us of the unintended negative consequences of participating in interviews that could jeopardize our continued exemption by Health Canada.”

Psychedelics, harm reduction, and the like, continue to remain sensitive areas of the general public and, in particular, the authorities of Canada.

As reported, “Psychedelic drugs’ criminalization in Canada remains an issue that has sparked a movement for more humane drug policies, specifically targeting the legalization of psychedelics—following the legalization of weed this past October. It’s been widely reported that psychedelic drugs can help with mental health issues, like post-traumatic stress disorder and

helping relieve people from the stress of being on the verge of death. It remains difficult to research the drug's benefits while it is still being criminalized.”

According to Céu do Montreal, in the April 2018 reportage, the ability to practice “our religion” became an integral part of the want of an exemption to the blanket ban on the single psychedelic at the time.

For many individuals, it can become a means by which to commune with what they deem the transcendent, where many secular individuals in Canadian society may not have this privilege of a religious exemption while still seeing value in the use of psychedelic substances.

Perhaps, a future right will become a right to the alteration of one’s consciousness as one deems fit with further scientific comprehension of the mechanisms undergirding specific interactions of some substances and the activity of the mind.

The difficulty for all intrigued may remain in the harshness of the restrictions. The trenchant privilege for the religious seen in the exemptions becomes an additional barrier for the secular who sit within some of the interested (non-)religious parties in these endeavours.

“The latest exemptions were granted to religious groups Ceu da Divina Luz do Montreal, the Église Santo Daime Céu do Vale de Vida in Val-David, Que. and the Ceu de Toronto. The exemptions last for two years and are renewable,” *Vice* said, “A Health Canada spokesperson told Global News that the exemptions will provide members of the exempted groups with permission to possess, provide, transport, import, administer and destroy the tea, as long as it is being used within a religious setting.”

Indigenous groups use the substances for spiritual and other purposes within their framework of seeing the substances and the traditions in communities. For those with formal religious status, these Canadian religious peoples worked for 15 years for the exemptions. Thus, the barriers were substantial and there nonetheless, and remain extant for many other religions and, especially, the secular in Canada.

# Updates on Christchurch Shooting

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 21, 2019

There has been an update on the trial of the mosque mass murderer and terrorist, Brenton Tarrant, charged with the murder of 51 people in Christchurch, in New Zealand.

BBC stated that Tarrant was charged in the trial, according to the police, with “engaging in a terrorist act,” and killed a mass of people. Therefore, Tarrant is a mass murderer and a terrorist.

“He is already facing charges of murder and 40 of attempted murder following the attack on two mosques in the South Island city on 15 March. The Australian is next due in court in June,” the short article said, “However, according to the BBC’s Hywel Griffith in Sydney, there is a debate in New Zealand over the merits of treating the case under terrorism laws, as it may draw out the length of any trial, and potentially provide a platform for extremist views to be aired.”

Tarrant, as should be noted, engaged in the largest mass shooting in the history of New Zealand. This mass murder of innocents resulted in “MPs vote within weeks to ban military-style semi-automatic weapons in the country to prevent any such thing happening again.”

50 people, 2 mosques, 1 city, and 1 further death in a hospital later and uncounted numbers of traumatized and families ripped apart, including the effects of militant hatred on relations within and between communities.

Tarrant identified as a white supremacist. He shot children, women, and men at the Al Noor mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre. Tarrant is 28-years-old. During the murders of Muslims in the mosque, he “live-streamed the attack from a head-mounted camera.”

The Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Adern, has been working with both governments and technology companies to work on countering extremism and, thus, terrorism.

## Ask Professor Rosenthal 3 – Woodpeckers, Woodknocking, and Critical-Thinking

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 21, 2019

*Dr. Jeffrey S. Rosenthal is a Professor of Statistics at the University of Toronto. Here we talk about critical thinking and Knock on Wood.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** When an ordinary citizen like myself or someone else comes across a piece of information, what are some important critical questions to ask about it?

**Professor Jeffrey S. Rosenthal:** First of all, what is the source of the information, and is it accurate? But accuracy is only a first step.

Often facts are quoted correctly, but out of context, so that they give misleading impressions. It's always important to think of the bigger picture, and whether the information really means what they claim it means.

**Jacobsen:** What are some tips and tricks of statistical interpretation to keep in mind to avoid being lied to and mislead?

**Rosenthal:** In my book *Knock On Wood*, I talk about various “luck traps”, which lead us to draw false conclusions. Many of them are related to what I call the “out of how many” principle.

Perhaps you hear some striking fact, like two people meeting up in the most unexpected place or having incredible similarities. You should always ask, this one fact occurred out of how many people?

Out of how many pairs of people? Out of how many different places where it could have happened? Out of how many times that it didn't happen? Out of how many other equally surprising things which could have happened but didn't?

Such questions give a broader perspective, and often show that it wasn't so unexpected that the occurrence, or some similar such occurrence, would have occurred at some point to some people in some place at some time.

**Jacobsen:** What are common manipulations built on misrepresenting statistics to us, in politics and in pseudoscience?

**Rosenthal:** Even if no misrepresentation is intended, selectively quoting facts can be quite misleading. But if the intention is to misrepresent, then the problem only gets worse.

Often it takes the form of “cherry picking”, where someone quotes one particular fact while hiding the bigger picture. For example, perhaps a politician points out how one new factory was built, without mentioning several others which closed.

Or an “alternative” medical practitioner describes in detail how one patient was saved by their methods, covering up several other patients who tried their methods but died.

So, in addition to worrying that you're not getting the whole story or that the facts aren't accurate, you should also worry that the person providing the facts might not have truth and balance as their objective and might intentionally mislead you.

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

## Interview with Md. Sazzadul Hoque – Founder, Council of Ex-Muslims of Bangladesh

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 22, 2019

*Md. Sazzadul Hoque is an exiled Bangladeshi secularist blogger, human rights activist, and atheist activist. His writing covers a wide range of issues, including religious superstition, critical thinking, feminism, gender equality, homosexuality, and female empowerment.*

*He's protested against blogger killings and past/present atrocities against Bangladeshi minorities by the dominant Muslim political establishment. He's also written about government-sponsored abductions and the squashing of free speech; the systematic corruption in everyday life of Bangladeshis; and the denial of the pursuit of happiness.*

*In 2017, after receiving numerous threats, he was forced to leave Bangladesh out of safety concerns. Here we talk to about the new Council.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Why found the Council of Ex-Muslims of Bangladesh?**

**Md. Sazzadul Hoque:** Every country needs a regional representation of such group, particularly due to the language barrier, contemporary ideas are written and expressed in a different language, thus requires a platform to share ideas, these platforms are vital for cross-cultural communication.

Where people from Bangladesh can have a platform, from which they can share ideas and contribute their own. From where people from Bangladesh can collectively empathize with the collective conscience of the Ex-Muslim world.

**Jacobsen: Obviously, this is one of the more dangerous areas of the world. What additional risks come with ex-Muslims in Bangladesh compared to other places in the world?**

**Hoque:** Being an Ex-Muslim poses an inherent danger regardless of location, however, Bangladesh being 93%+ Muslim that is nearly 167 million Muslims, particularly uneducated backward Muslims pose a special danger if found out as an apostate. The Bangladesh political system is engrained with Islamic politics.

Although the constitution states, secular, it also states “Bismillahi rahmani rahim” (in the name of Allah we begin); Bangladesh has Pro-Islamic laws that only patronizes the Muslims and selectively suppresses the minorities using such laws including the new minority that includes ex-Muslim, and non-believers from other faiths.

**Jacobsen: What is the mission and mandate of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Bangladesh?**

**Hoque:** Our mission to have a platform where we are able to collectively express our views or feelings, most importantly a place where ex-Muslims can safely empathize with one another.

A place where we are able to tell the world how we are brutalized by this hate mongering repressive regressive faith that subjugates. Our platform is to convey support to those who are in dire need of psychological support and much other support that we may be able to offer as we grow stronger in the future.

**Jacobsen: What are its targeted objectives or goals for the next couple years?**



**Hoque:** Our intent is to create an information hub from where people can get information and contribute and create social awareness. Particularly about feminism, humanism, civil liberty, civil rights, freedom of expression, free will, and how these are violated by this regressive system.

We would like to have a platform from where we can render support to people in need, such as technical support, mental support, and letting them know that they are not the only one. There are others like them and we are here to listen to your story.

**Jacobsen: How can individuals support the Council of Ex-Muslims of Bangladesh?**

**Hoque:** Individuals from Bangladesh and abroad can contribute with their ideas in their own respective language (i.e., Bangla or in English) to elevate people's awareness, new ideas to support council of ex-Muslim of Bangladesh is always welcome.

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

## Ask Mandisa 27 – Social Movements and Secular Community Concerns

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 22, 2019

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

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

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

*Here, we talk about social movements and secular communities.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's take into account of an article published based on #MeToo and other associated movements or actions to deal with sexual misconduct, sexual assault, even rape, in general society. How does this come to home turf? What has been done?

**Mandisa Thomas:** In the past year or two, there have been assault allegations that arose against a few prominent male members of the secular community. One has been suspended from their place of employment and is no longer actively serving on boards or being invited to speak.

Another was terminated from his job due to sexual assault allegations, as well workplace harassment and mismanagement. These are things that have apparently been abuzz in our community for a while.

With initiatives like Me Too and Times Up arising, there have been a number of people who have spoken up about the mistreatment they've received at the hands of certain individuals.

Now, there are organizations taking steps to investigate and remove people who are associated with such allegations. Also, they are adopting new policies when it comes to their events as well as their organizations regarding sexual harassment and assault, etc.

**Jacobsen:** In terms of this simply not being a sub-cultural phenomenon and a general one, in that, it points to a general social pathology.

**How can we partner with the religious community who are open and willing to work with the secular community, by which I mean the non-religious community, to develop and work on some concrete actionables?**

**To deal with this not simply in leadership, but between members of communities, in other words, a way in which to work at as a society, from where we're at, to further equality of treatment in social life.**

**Thomas:** I don't think the religious community should be held to a higher standard, especially based on their track record of covering up abuse and assault in their community.

So, if there are initiatives to work with religious communities, churches, etc. then there should be other organizations that are involved like Planned Parenthood and the National Organization for Women.

These organizations focus on the rights of women and abuse survivors. I think that both the religious community and the specific secular communities could work with them in order to get some training as well as other resources for members and leaders alike to recognize the behavior and try to prevent and resolve it.

**Jacobsen: Do you think this problem was worse in the past or was simply the same in the past into the present and only recently got called out now?**

**Thomas:** I think it was worse in the past. The same things are still happening now, but with a lot of the signaling and communication as well as new information available.

There are now more resources and recourse for victims to come forward and not just tell their stories, but also making sure that the perpetrators are being held accountable, and even punished in some cases.

So before, it was worse because there were few to no options for victims to really come forward. That is changing.

**Jacobsen: Are the means by which those coming forward with claims can forward sufficient or insufficient at this time?**

**Thomas:** I think they are sufficient. There were numerous valid claims against a few of the individuals in question, which tends to be the case. Though we must remember that it should only take one claim for things to be taken seriously, but usually where there's smoke, there's fire.

And now with more people coming and having the ability to come forward, there is much more support for the accusers and the victims.

**Jacobsen: What about treatment? Those who come forward, claims shown to be corroborated, and then they require, in some manner, counselling or psychological assistance. Do you think the provisions are sufficient for them as well?**

**Thomas:** There are a number of organizations that offer counselling for victims. It is absolutely necessary. It is also the victims. The process of healing from these circumstances and conditions can be lengthy depending on the individual. As long as there is long-term support for them, it is possible for them to overcome and heal.

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

## Interview with Dr. Usama Antar – Independent Political Analyst (Gaza Strip, Palestine)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 22, 2019

*Dr. Usama Antar is an Independent Political Analyst living in the Gaza Strip, Palestine. Here we talk about the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Israel, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What is the current sociopolitical situation from the view of Gaza Strip?

**Dr. Usama Antar:** You cannot describe the Gaza Strip in a straightforward way. It is complex. We are talking about a multi-dimensional conflict. There is an internal conflict within the Palestinians themselves, and there is an external conflict with Israel.

Let us consider the last few years, there is a political split between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. As you know, the Gaza Strip is small. It is about 360 square kilometres.

However, in approximately the last century, the Gaza Strip was the main actor in Palestinian politics and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Gaza Strip remains the focal point with the different political personalities, the novel ideologies, the new thoughts, and the changes in the political approaches.

There were real dynamics moving forward. What does this mean? In Gaza, there is the roots of the Fatah movement and the roots of the Hamas movement too.

For example, due to the political split between Gaza and West Bank, President Abbas was unable to enact the Israeli-Palestinian peace process without the approval of the Gaza Strip. The small Gaza prevented in some way the whole peace process.

I don't think that the Gaza Strip will be alone as the Palestinian state in the future. Even if the Palestinians in Gaza will have good life conditions in 10 years to 20 years, they will want not to be separated from the West Bank, and will want to have a Palestinian state with the West Bank.

After a 12-year siege, the situation is tricky with a radicalized mentality of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip; the people became more radical compared to 10 to 20 years ago as well.

**Jacobsen:** In terms of social outlook, economic views, and travel restrictions, what increases Palestinian radicalization?

**Antar:** There are several factors. As noted, one is the siege or the blockade imposed by Israel since 12 years ago, and the collective punishment imposed by the Palestinian Authority since a couple of years ago. Same with the Egyptian side with the closing of the Rafah crossing border. It is less than 1% of the whole society that can travel to the world outside of Palestine.

Most Palestinians live in perpetually harsh conditions. No freedom of movement or free import-export of goods. Few know the real world outside of the Gaza Strip. Anybody after three wars and 12 years of an air, land, and sea blockade will become radicalized. This happened to the Palestinians in Gaza.

The Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are asking for simple demands, namely a real social and economic perspective. What does an economic and social perspective mean here?

It means halting of the high 46% unemployment in the Gaza Strip. This is the highest unemployment in the world. Declining the poverty rate, which reached about 70%.

What does a social perspective mean here? The social perspective means to have the access of movement and to be allowed to travel and relate with the world outside of Palestine.

For example, if I want to travel to Europe, I need about 3 days to travel from the Gaza Strip to Cairo, and I need another 4 to 5 days to return from Cairo to the Gaza Strip.

There are many restrictions and many checkpoints on the Sinai, the way between Gaza and Cairo, and just 200 people can travel daily and cross the borders.

In order to have a real social and economic perspective, the Palestinians are looking for sovereignty and identity as the Palestinian people with an independent Palestinian state.

**Jacobsen: If the blockade was lifted, how would this impact Palestinians?**

**Antar:** If Hamas remains in power, the siege will stay. Even if we have a progressive government in the future, it is uncertain if the Israelis would lift the siege.

The Palestinians in Gaza sent messages through the Great March of Return. They want to live and let others live. The majority of the Palestinians don't want to harm the Israelis. They want to live in peace and prosperity.

During the three wars on Gaza in the last decade, the Israeli military targeted civilians, business owners, farmers. Many companies and factories were destroyed during the wars. The businesspeople are angry due to destroying the factories, and the normal workers are angry, because they lost their jobs.

Man can say, Israel is targeting the whole society with the imposed siege since 13 years, not the Hamas people alone. The goal of the Israeli aggression against the Palestinian society in the Gaza Strip is to maintain the control on it.

**Jacobsen: How does a blockade, a lack of resources, a sense of despair and want of revenge among some of the population, affect people's abilities to form families and people's abilities to raise their children in what their children sense is a safe and nurturing environment?**

**Antar:** [Laughing] it is like a joke. Even the children understand war, we are not safe. No place in the Gaza Strip is safe. In the recent attacks, it was hurtful. Why? We cannot do anything. If we get a rocket targeting our building, we are helpless. We demand to stop all kind of violence from the both sides, the Palestinian side and the Israeli side.

**Jacobsen: What has been the experience in life for you?**

**Antar:** I lived in Europe for about 12 years. I know, what it means a real good life in Europe. With my family, we travelled and enjoyed our life before. My family is now unable to travel abroad since more than 14 years ago. There is huge restriction on access and movement, and the travel way from Gaza to Cairo is horrible.

If you know the normal life, the good life, in Europe, and if you compare with the current life in Gaza Strip, you get crazy. I cannot travel elsewhere. If we have an escalation or a war in the Gaza Strip, the border will close immediately. Even if you have money, you cannot escape. In any case, most Palestinians do not have money.

You are trapped. It is your fate, survive or not. We have this dead feeling. In the war in 2014, for 51 days, we were scared. We tried with our little children to make some jokes, to show TV, and to make some plays.

However, we know the statistics well from the war in 2014. We are talking about 500 women, and more than 200 children, killed because rockets targeted buildings, that contains women, children, or elders.

**Jacobsen: What is the sense of the conflict? What is a fair solution to the conflict?**

**Antar:** The Palestinians in the Gaza Strip want to live a normal life with dignity and respect. They want some money to live with their families. They want normal access of movement.

A fair solution would be according the international resolutions and the two-state solution. How to achieve it? The Palestinian in Gaza and West bank tried the non-violent protests several times.

The Palestinians have to choose between non-violent resistant, negotiations, or a diplomatic approach. Negotiations led after 25 years of Oslo Accord to big Zero.

And the military resistance is idiocy, because the Palestinians have primitive weapons, and they are unable to fight Israel. Israel is strong. Israel can demolish the Gaza Strip within two days. The international community sides since decades with the Israeli side.

**Jacobsen: What are historical reasons for internal political split and in easing of the tensions?**

**Antar:** Hamas governs the Gaza Strip and Fatah governs the West Bank. There is one-party system in the West Bank and one-party system in the Gaza Strip. The one-party system will not change soon, and will be dominant in the next few years. For that reason, there is no democracy or pluralism. Both sides want control of the government.

Both Fatah and Hamas are dominating the polarization in the society; then about 90% of the society identifies them with either Fatah or Hamas. The real problem is the acceptance of the others.

Therefore, there are different political approaches. One is for resistance, and the other one for negotiation. Both approaches failed against Israel. This created the split between Fatah and Hamas. This split eliminated the culture of democracy and pluralism.

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

# Interview with Moses Klein – Spokesperson, Humanist Association of Toronto

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 23, 2019

*Moses Klein is a Spokesperson for the Humanist Association of Toronto Here we talk about the community of humanists in the largest city in Canadian society.*

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

**Moses Klein:** My family are Ashkenazic Jews. I was born in the United States, where my grandparents or great-grandparents had settled in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but we moved to Canada when I was very young, and I grew up in Toronto.

I was raised mildly Jewish, in a liberal branch of Judaism. My mother was the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi, but left Orthodoxy because she couldn't accept the status of women in that sect.

My father is a secular Jew, but agreed when he married my mother to keep the house kosher to her standards. We lit Shabbat candles every week, but only occasionally went to prayer services.

**Jacobsen:** What were some of the pivotal moments or educational lessons in being guided to a more humanistic worldview, where not only having the rejection of traditional belief systems, typically, forced on the young in this country but also a set of affirmations about life, e.g., reason, science, and compassion?

**Klein:** In some sense, I was always a humanist. My parents were both university professors, and many of our family friends were people they knew as colleagues, so the values of academia – a commitment to intellectual inquiry and its potential to help us understand the world – were inculcated in me from the beginning. It was a sort of humanism that was in no way in conflict with ritual practice. Reconstructionist Judaism, the sect in which I grew up, is in many ways quite humanistic. Besides its strong egalitarianism, it regards Jewish beliefs as the product of a living culture rather than divine revelation.

It acknowledges the human origins of religion. When I abandoned the religious practice, it wasn't a change in my underlying beliefs so much as a recognition that the rituals and arbitrary laws had ceased to carry any meaning for me.

The final straw for me was a result of experience while I was at university when I had a summer job soliciting donations for an environmental organization. I was surprised at how many people I met took the view that, if there is pollution, it is God's doing and it is not for us to do anything about it.

It was a conception about the relationship of deity and humanity completely at odds with what I had previously understood religious belief to be about, but I came to recognize it as an approach that was much too pervasive. Since then, I came to see the concept of a god or gods as a crutch that people can use to avoid responsibility for the world we share.

**Jacobsen:** How did you come to find the humanist community? What were some interesting stories within early moments with the community for you?

**Klein:** The first organized humanist community I joined was in university – a friend of mine started a Secular Humanist Discussion Group. It didn't last long as a formal group, but three of us who came together through that group became, and remained, closest friends.

What was interesting, when I think back, was how our friendship was shaped by us coming together around discussing philosophy, even when our interactions were no longer defined in those terms.

Intellectual bonds shaped and strengthened personal bonds. Even when we started to move in different directions – one of them, for example, started exploring Zen Buddhism – I can't think of anyone I've known, over my whole life, from whom I've discovered more authors in whom to get interested in.

Later, when I was moving around a lot, I started looking up humanist organizations in the towns where I had short-time jobs, as a way to find community quickly. (By that time Google was around, so it was easier than it would have been in my university days.)

I see one of the functions of organized religion as providing a community grounding for people with a shared sense of faith or spirituality, and looked to organized humanist or freethought groups to serve the same function for us. When I moved back to Toronto, I found HAT.

**Jacobsen: What makes humanism appealing to you? How are these anecdotally related to experiences with others in the humanist community in Toronto?**

**Klein:** It's significant to me that the organization is not the Atheist Association of Toronto, because we don't come together over a negative – something that is not a part of our worldview. What brings us together is something we all affirm: that humanity is central to our worldview.

It isn't only that human well-being is the benchmark of our ethics, but that human potential is our way to get there. There's something empowering about the focus on our own agency, and something hopeful about a recognition that what we do matters.

**Jacobsen: What can regular attendees of the Humanist Association of Toronto expect in their participation in the community?**

**Klein:** Our most regular event is our weekly Forum, where we have a loosely structured discussion of a topic of the week, based on questions prepared by one of our members.

I like that because it combines intellectual stimulation and social bonding. Our mission statement refers to "growing humanism, a secular, rational and compassionate worldview, through education, connection, and community involvement."

The HAT Forum exemplifies both the education and connection aspects of that. The Forum isn't designed to learn from experts, so every 2-3 months we have a guest speaker, as part of the education component, and 2-3 times a year we have a party, as part of the connections component.

For community involvement, we have had an HAT contingent as part of the Toronto March for Science, for example. We also have people who have remained dues-paying members for years who do not come to activities but like to get our newsletter, or maybe come only for the social events.

**Jacobsen: What are the approximate demographics of the Humanist Association of Toronto?**



**Klein:** We skew toward the older. When I first got involved I was sometimes the only person in the room under 60! That's changed – we've been able to reach out to more younger people, but the majority of regular attendees are still over 50.

On occasion we've gotten inquiries from parents interested in family-oriented activities, but it's been a Catch-22 – it's been hard to keep their interest without first getting more parents of young children. So we have a lot more of the empty-nest age, and an unusually large number of our regulars who have never had children.

Gender balance is about 50-50 (that also wasn't always the case). We mirror the community in regard to immigrants and Canadian-born; probably disproportionately people of European origins, but also quite a few South American and Asian Canadians.

Aboriginal Canadians, and Canadians of African descent, not so much; I'm not sure why. And, since we've been meeting in a community centre with an LGBT constituency, we've been getting more exposure in that community.

**Jacobsen: Who are some allies in the fight for secular spaces in this broadly religious nations, especially in ways religious Canadian citizens may not recognize or acknowledge – often amounting to tacit or explicit privileges for them?**

**Klein:** I tend to see the LGBT community as natural allies, because they struggle against religiously motivated discrimination. Minority religious groups can be allies on some issues, e.g. a campaign for a unified secular school system, because they often have a sense of not being represented in the mainstream culture, in ways that members of the dominant faith don't always recognize.

However, on some other issues members of minority religions may seek acceptance and alliance with conservative Christians. For example, in Ontario updating a sex education curriculum to make it more inclusive, comprehensive and affirming has been controversial in recent years.

The most vocal opponents have been a mix of fundamentalists and other religious conservatives of different faith traditions – fundamentalist Christians and fundamentalist Muslims have no difficulty making common cause to support an education policy that enshrines a heterosexual bias.

On the issues that really matter to me, where I see basic human rights involved, the liberal and progressive strands of all religious traditions are more likely to be allies of ours against the more intolerant versions of their faith.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved in the Humanist Association of Toronto, whether via membership, donations, or volunteering skills for the community?**

**Klein:** Membership information and notices of upcoming events are available on our website at <http://humanisttoronto.ca>. Any secular humanists in the Toronto area who are interested, I encourage to join us for our discussion every week at the Humanist Forum, at 519 Church St. Saturdays at 11:00.

Most of our activities are run on the busker model – we hope that people will decide to support us, but they're free for anyone regardless. So anyone can check us out without commitment.

**Jacobsen: What are some of the more recent updates happening for 2019 for the Humanist Association of Toronto?**

**Klein:** We recently had Jeffrey Rosenthal, a U of T statistician who is an excellent popularizer of his subject as well as a superb mathematician, give a talk about his new book about luck.

We have a talk coming up about protest songs, which promises to be interesting. We've also been doing a wider variety of social events, ranging from a summer garden party to a party with organized entertainment.

**Jacobsen:** How do members of the humanist community in Ontario tend to experience prejudice against them for not believing in the superstitions and mythologies dominant throughout the nation, e.g., Christian mythology and superstitions?

**Klein:** It varies. Not all of us have felt the victims of prejudice. Growing up in downtown Toronto, I never felt my friends from atheist families – or, for that matter, my openly agnostic father — had any sort of stigma.

I was Jewish, some of my friends were Christian, and others were atheist. We were different, but no better or worse. It was only when I was in the United States that I personally had a sense of religious prejudice being mainstream.

However, some of the people drawn to HAT have spoken about finding a space safe from the hostility of religious norms. Some who came from religiously conservative families are in the closet to their own parents. It depends a lot on what subcultures a person comes out of.

The late Robert Buckman wrote a book called *Can We Be Good Without God*. HAT used to give it away to our guest speakers. The fact that such a title has appeal, is evidence that there is still a widespread belief that only religion can ground morality. It may not be as widespread in Canada as it used to be, or as it still is in other countries, but unfortunately it does exist.

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

**Klein:** So many of my answers have stressed the diversity of our movement – diversity of life experiences, diversity of beliefs beyond core humanist tenets, diversity of attitudes. It shows the challenge of being a spokesperson for an organization that has freedom of inquiry as one of its principles. We can rarely speak with united voice, so on most questions I have to convey a whole spectrum of positions.

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

## Ask HRW (Israel and Palestine) 1 – Recent Events

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 23, 2019

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

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** In mid-May, what are some of the updates in some of the issues regarding Israel and Palestine, especially in light of some of the recent firings in the issue between Israel and Palestine?

**Omar Shakir:** Early May, we saw an escalation between Israel and armed Palestinian groups in the Gaza Strip. These resulted in 25 Palestinians being killed in the Gaza Strip and 4 Israelis were killed in Southern Israel.

The Israelis were killed, 3 of whom were killed via rockets fired indiscriminately from the Gaza Strip. Those are war crimes under international law. There was a fourth Israeli targeted by an anti-tank weapon fired apparently from the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinians were killed – 23 out of the 25 – by Israeli air strikes on the Gaza Strip. A number of those were militants belonging to different armed Palestinian groups. Two Palestinians were apparently killed when a militant rocket misfired and hit their home.

**Jacobsen:** For those who may not know the prior conflicts, what tends to be the proportion of those who are military targets, who are killed or injured, or those who are civilians, who are killed or injured, on the Israeli side and the Palestinian side?

**Shakir:** It is hard to generalize. If we look back at the 2014 war, for example, you had a situation in which you had over 2,000 Palestinians killed. You had more 1,400 who were civilians. We have seen smaller scale flare-ups, where the number of civilians killed has been far fewer than that.

I think the issue is that when raining fire down on a very densely populated area – 2,000,000 people amid a 25×7 mile territory. It is quite likely that civilian casualties are likely to result.

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

## **Interview with Professor Jesse M. Smith – Assistant Professor, Sociology, Western Michigan University & Co-Editor, Secularism and Nonreligion**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**May 24, 2019**

*Professor Jesse M. Smith is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Western Michigan University, and a Co-Editor of Secularism and Nonreligion. Here we talk about religion, secularism, and academic research.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's start from the top. What is family and personal background?

**Professor Jesse M. Smith:** I grew up in Utah. I grew up in the Mormon community. I grew up in the Mormon church. I did the Mormon mission. I got married in a Mormon temple. All of that, I went off to graduate school and took a different trajectory studying sociology and anthropology. I moved out of Mormonism and religion in general during grad. school.

I got a job here after graduation in Michigan. I am an assistant professor of sociology. I wanted to understand a little bit of my own experience and the experience of others. My research is focused primarily on the secular community. I wrote sociological articles about atheists and agnostics and other secular people.

I am really focused on identity processes and the organizational dynamics of the community. One of the first pieces that I wrote and published looked at an atheist identity and the ways people acquire these identities. It has to do with people moving out of their religion of origin. That directed my own interest and disaffiliation with the Mormon church.

I served my mission in Alaska for two years. I finished graduate school in 2013. I am up for tenure this year. I still am continuing my research in that area and into the foreseeable future on secularism, Mormonism, and those sorts of things.

**Jacobsen:** How does a sociological analysis of Mormonism provide some deeper insights than other fields when asking questions around this particular domain of discourse?

**Smith:** That's a great question. There hadn't been a lot of sociological research on the secular community. There were some initial starts in the 60s and 70s of people interested in apostasy and deconversion. There were some trying to make a durable research agenda.

Then it fell away. I started researching groups in Colorado, then sociological literature began to emerge. Its sociological content has to do with examining the relationship with the internal identities and the ways in which people transition away from religion, or come to adopt or acquire a secular identity.

I view this as or sociologists view this as a sociological process. It is not simply an internal psychological thing happening. It is an active engagement with groups, communities, research, and the internet; all of that. We are looking at the social and cultural dynamics surrounding the individuals' identity trajectories.

Why they find meaning and use in joining secular communities? It is bringing the sociological imagination of the individuals' psychology, group dynamics, history, and all of that kind of thing.

**Jacobsen:** If you were looking at some of the demographics of those who would identify as secular or formally non-religious, any differences between those who grew up in a religion and left it & those who never had one?

**Smith:** It is a good question. Some of the new research examines this. I do not have this [data] on hand. One general finding in the secular community is that they tend to be more highly educated, male, and white. All those basic patterns. But the parsing along the lines on the question of those who left the faith and then became secular and those who simply always was secular. It is not very well understood.

The quantitative researchers could speak to this better. The qualitative work that I do; it tends to be those who come from religious conservative or strict backgrounds. When they join secular communities, they more wholeheartedly accept the secular identity more than those who deconverted or have apostasizing experience.

Based on ethnographies, there is a clear pattern. This makes some intuitive sense. Those that came from a religious background and, in particular, a conservative religious background. They tend to be more motivated in terms of embracing their secular identity and having a pro-secular position.

**Jacobsen:** What is *Secularism and nonreligion*? Why found it?

**Smith:** I am currently a co-editor of the journal along with Chris Cotter. We're the second editors. It was founded by Lois Lee and Ryan Cragun. I think in 2008. They founded the journal precisely because of the emerging or the absence of the literature before that time, and their discovery of the fact that there are scholars in the US, Canada, the UK, and elsewhere, who are really interested in understanding the dynamics of the secular community.

So, they founded the journal, which is connected to – under the auspices of – The Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN). It acts as a storehouse and clearinghouse for all of the literature and empirical work, and polemical work, on all things secular.

It is not strictly a sociology journal or a sociology affiliation/organization; it is just meant to bridge all of the work: historical, psychological, anthropological, political science, and so on. We are an interdisciplinary journal in the light of that. There was a discovery of a need for a space in which scholars can communicate with one another and produce work in this area. There just really wasn't another outlet.

All of the research up until then was really in religion journals. Most of the research into non-religion has been produced as a sub-discipline thing within established religion journals, whether the sociology of religion, the interdisciplinary journals, or journals for the scientific study of religion.

It may have, not required but, worked out that scholars tended to use and embrace the language of, for instance, the sociology of religion when talking about religion. We didn't have our own space to start from square one and to develop new methods and theories on non-religion and secularity in its own right.

We were the first to get there. The founders Lois and Ryan needed to move on after having edited it for the better part of 9 years now, or so. I published in the journal; I worked with both of them a little bit in other capacities.

As I mentioned, Chris Cotter and I took it on, and are trying to carry the torch to see what we can do to drum up interest and to produce meaningful scholarship in the area. There is a need. We were trying to fill that need.

**Jacobsen: What has been the most read or cited article (off the top)?**

**Smith:** That's a good question. There's a couple. One has to do with the New Atheists. It has been one of the most read. One of the most read, and one of the most cited, was on the familial relationship outcomes of coming out as an atheist.

Those have had the most interest and downloads and such. The relationships one has been cited a fair number of times, too. I do not know the citation record for some of the more popular articles. We are still growing and establishing ourselves. We will see where that goes.

**Jacobsen: If we're looking at the next year and a bit, so into 2020, what are the hopes and fears for the journal?**

**Smith:** Let's start with fears.

**Jacobsen: [Laughing].**

**Smith:** There has been a transitional period here in terms of trying to get the submissions that we do have moving through the system and moving through the process. It is difficult to find reviewers at any journal. But we are not indexed yet with any of the main indexing groups at this point. We are hoping to be able to do that.

To some degree, for established or senior scholars, one fear is that they are often in the business of sending their research elsewhere to journals that are established and have high impact factors. I can speak directly to this myself in looking to get tenure.

Most of my work has been submitted to other journals. Even though, it is focused on religion and secularity. The fear is that we just don't have the submissions that we would like in any given quarter. The hope, there is some justification for it, is that we're continuing to grow and garner more and more interest.

So, we have started producing special issues in the journal. As you may know, we publish on a rolling basis. We don't put out a quarterly journal or anything like that. It is just on a rolling basis. We started putting together these special issues.

We had some prominent scholars contribute to those special issues. We had one on secularity and intersectionality. There's Phil Zuckerman. He has contributed. We have established and well-known scholars connecting with the journal getting their work there.

I would say primarily, and this is my hope for the journal, is that young and junior scholars will find this a useful publication outlet. As they get started in their careers, that is what happened with me in publishing a couple of articles there.

Along with it being a journal publishing original research, it is a way to build the community of scholars too. The NSRN is one way. They have this research; they know to connect with, who to

look for professionally, and so on. It has been a networking thing as much as a journal. I had actually written on the website. I have a blurb there.

It is to your question. The hope for the future of the journal. Most of it is what you would expect. We would like to increase the number of submissions, increase the output of the journal on an annual basis, and would like to continually uptick the quality of the review process in getting reviewers interested.

We have a large bank of reviewers. But getting people committed to the process can be a little bit of a challenge, we are going to try to do some outreach over social media, which is Chris's job. It is getting people to submit their work to *Secularism and Nonreligion*, so we have a steady stream of material to work with.

We had, as we took over as editors. We published the most in the journal's history so far. It is still not a ton of work. We are going to try and slowly but surely increase the output of the journal and continue to raise its quality with the hope that at some point; we will become indexed and that scholars will be very familiar with the journal, whether they are specifically in the area or not.

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

**Smith:** Thank you!

# Interview with Nisi Jacobs – Founder & CEO, WoMen Fight AntiSemitism

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 24, 2019

*Nisi Jacobs is the founder and CEO of WoMen Fight AntiSemitism, which describes itself as welcoming “all genders and races into our united front to fight for equality and against Antisemitism.”. WoMen Fight AntiSemitism (WMFA) is pursuing New York State adopting an official definition and framework of Antisemitism, South Carolina adopting an official definition and framework of Antisemitism and raising awareness for the United States to ratify the ERA and CEDAW.*

*Nisi attended Stuyvesant High School in 1987 thanks to Alice De Rivera who successfully sued against the school’s all-boy policy in 1969. At Stuyvesant, Nisi studied with Frank McCourt, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning memoir ‘Angela’s Ashes’ and was awarded the Stuyvesant Award for Creative Writing by McCourt. Nisi is a 3D editor on productions that have screened at the MoMA, Lincoln Center, The Whitney, Tribeca Film Festival, Museum of Moving Image, Pompadou, Berlin Festival, among other venues.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How do you define secular art? How would this then turn out in some of the history of secular art productions?

**Nisi Jacobs:** Secular art would entail the creation and manifestation of a creative vision or idea emanating from an artist that is not restricted or bounded by any type of religious commitments or dogma or indoctrination that dictates where that artist can pursue and feel into the unknown.

**Jacobsen:** What about some of the pragmatics in everyday life for secular art? For example, some of the processes in brainstorming, designing, and implementing a secular piece of art.

**Jacobs:** I think that organizations that are granting, funding, and supporting the kind of art that would be defined as secular would have a humanist or a political underpinning, which is interested in changing societies’ restrictions on certain minorities including sexual, gender, racial, class, etc.

So, otherwise, you have money concentrated in religious and academic institutions. Every funding source will have its self-interest or interest in promoting what it deems valuable. Likely, there is not one generalization, where you can say, “The funding is available to secular artists.”

Secular artists are going to have to look at their art and see what category it best falls under. Are they working with LGBT concerns? Are they working with feminist concerns? Are they working with race concerns?

It is likely, I imagine, that there is a pressure to politicize the work. It is not allowed to be free necessarily because of the way that the funding is categorized.

**Jacobsen:** If we are talking about red lines in terms of funding and the productions themselves, what would be something crossing over into standard religious art? What would be something walking along that red line, along that border?



**Jacobs:** The boundary, you can almost look at what Madonna did at Eurovision. She ran through her performance. There was a contract that she signed which said that the performance would have no political content.

She ran it for the judges. It was checked with no problem. When she performed for the live audience, she revealed political content that she had promised not to include. I think that likely the line that has been pushed over and over and would be something like my father and his friend screening a film deemed illegal because it had homosexuality in it, before homosexuality was legal in New York City.

They pushed the line. They did something illegal. They broke a rule. That will relax the rules. Then there is another opportunity for the line to be pushed again. There is probably, if you look at it, the line pushed repeatedly with the artists daring to pull off the forbidden.

I do not know if it is a set line in other words. It is like a shifting tide, as the pressures change and recede. What was illegal or unacceptable becomes normal and then the cycle continues.

**Jacobsen: What have been some areas in which the line has been the most dynamically changing, altering, and shifting with the pressures for an expansive form of art and a more regressive or restrictive form of art in those domains?**

**Jacobs:** I think of the Bauhaus Movement in relation to the Nazis, as Bauhaus artists were considered were degenerate because they were not conveying nationalist imagery. But in our time, right now, I think that there are always these pressures, diverse cultures that are conflicting, and they are happening at the same time.

I think it is hard to say. Unless, one is researching all these pressures that are occurring – these artistic hubs – then it is hard to say. But from my experience in New York and the art world here, and being aware of gender issues my whole life as a specific gender and in the arts, which has been restricted for females, I think the biggest impact is the explosion of women, of having careers, of having big, bold, and vibrant art careers in the last decade or so.

When I was in school, I went to Cooper Union. I ended in the 90s. I think it was Jenny Holtzer, doing these big digital and technical displays. There were few women who had broken through.

Most of them were from a previous era, like Judy Chicago. To be honest with you, it felt like there was a sense of having to sleep your way anywhere. That is what professors would say, “If you want to meet so-and-so, you will have to go to this party with me. Let us talk, let us get coffee.”

That sort of thing. If you chose not to follow that and did not have a lot of money, I can go into a lot of experiences in art school with male professors. I do not want to do that right now. Anyway, I have admiration for women who have developed careers in the arts.

**Jacobsen: What has been the biggest barrier in your time?**

**Jacobs:** I think the biggest barrier was a sense that my own vision did not count. It was being selfish. Women are judged on how kind, giving, and supportive they are rather than how focused and ambitious they are.

Even the typical conditions in an atheist and progressive climate is still wrought with conditioning undermining the pursuit women are after. You must decide that you are going to be judged negatively if you want to succeed.

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

**Jacobs:** You're so welcome.

## Interview with Stacy Sellsted – Member, Central Ontario Humanists Association

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 25, 2019

*Stacy Sellsted is a Member of the Central Ontario Humanists Association (located in Barrie), formerly known as the Barrie Humanists. Here we talk about Sellsted's background, life, and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What is family and personal background? What are some stories and narratives from life for you? How did this impact views?

**Stacy Sellsted:** For me, personally, I grew up in the United Church. Even then, it was pretty mild in terms of religion. When I got to a certain age, like when I wasn't going to Sunday School anymore, my parents were not going to fight me on not wanting to go to church.

I drifted away. I considered myself Christian for many years. I got in a little bit of trouble in high school, nothing too significant, mostly with alcohol. I went into the military and got into trouble, mostly with alcohol.

I got into 12-step. It was somewhat helpful as I have not had any trouble since. They are spiritual-based in it. They kept me in spirituality. There was a lot of God talk.

It was a left-leaning set of religious ideas. I still considered myself Christian. Over the years, I slowly fizzled out. I wasn't praying as much. I wasn't thinking about God as much.

It went into the background. Also during this time, in the military, I was an aircraft technician. I started to work on social work as a degree. I wanted to get into addictions counselling.

Partly going through university and learning from the anthropology courses, it was over the years. I was RINO or religious in name only.

**Jacobsen:** [Laughing].

**Sellsted:** If you asked me what I was, I would tell you that I was Christian, "Sure, I believe in God and Christ," but if you followed me for a week. You would never see an indication of it.

I never considered myself a bad person. I was good to my fellow man. I donated to charity. If you asked anybody, they would generally have something positive to say about me. I was religious for many years.

I think it was never having a reason to talk about it, challenge it, and so on. It was just sort of there. I got to a point along the way. I started to search a little bit more.

I wanted an ethical philosophy. I talked to someone from the Atheist Experience. She started towards Paganism. She said it was a short time. I don't know if she was kidding. She said, "Like two weeks."

**Jacobsen:** [Laughing].

**Sellsted:** It totally related to that. I looked into a Norse Pagan religion for a little while. Because, again, I wanted an ethical philosophy; I would not have used those words at that time.

Christianity wasn't with me anymore. What finally probably tipped me, I heard about this fringe Christian group who was this fringe group who thought the world was 6,000 years old.

I looked more into it. They were politically powerful. It got me to read the Bible more. It goes to Dan Dennett saying that he told his daughter to read the Bible and decide for herself.

It was a clincher for me. It didn't make sense. When I look at the naturalistic world, I thought, "This makes sense." It is instilled in me now. It is humanism. I was watching foxes jump on a trampoline on the television.

Something about it. When I saw these wild animals having fun and enjoying life, just being silly, to me, there was a connection in my head. When you come from the religious tradition, we have dominion over animals.

They are a lesser creature than humans. I thought, "I can relate to that." I made this connection with the natural world. I felt more connected to the natural world.

The first thing that I noticed more and more. If I went grocery shopping, I did a story on this for the little humanist group here. I see this person. I say, "You're the person I saw at the grocery store. You're the grocery store person."

I see them. I somehow know them. I see them at work. It is nice. I see a person I saw in Winnipeg. I like these connections I have through the humanist group.

I have found a way to connect with other humans and found how we all belong together and how we're all part of the same big structure. Again, I was coming through some of it.

When I looked into humanism more, it seemed like the right philosophy to me. It is partly this interconnectedness. But one of the things that I liked about it is the conversation that we can have.

I know I am broad-brushing Christians here. Take the stereotypical Christian here, "Is stealing wrong?" "Yes." "Why?" "Well, it is in the Bible that it is wrong. It is a sin to steal."

In humanism, we can explore why. We can both agree; both sides. Not simply because it is a decree, but we can see how it harms other people. We can understand some of the degrees.

Even if you're starving, it may be wrong to steal but okay to eat, because it is the only option for you. It is forgivable. It is similar with murder. I am stereotyping Christians. They may say that it is wrong because the Bible says so.

At the end of the day, we come up with it being wrong. But we can actually have the conversation and look into the nuances of it all. That is what I like about it. We can have the discussions.

I don't know if you have any other questions.

**Jacobsen: You just answered all of my questions in one response.**

**Sellsted:** [Laughing] I guess I thought about before.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Stacy, and I hope you have a wonderful evening.**

**Sellsted:** Thank you.

## Ask Rob 5 – Back to Basics: Atheism and Its Primaries

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 26, 2019

*Rob Boston is the Editor of Church & State (Americans United for Separation of Church and State). Here we talk about back to basics and some sectors of some of the secular communities.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** If we look at some discussion in the secular communities, one amounts to a back to basics approach or a call to return to atheism without secondary concerns. There are different emphases of a push for human rights and equality, of social justice, e.g., more equality of women in secular communities, or, additionally, more equal provision of the right to freedom of speech or freedom of expression depending on the country and context. One stream expands into emphasizing “free speech” and its importance to civilizational health, and concerns about the changing demographics in Western societies, e.g., immigration from religious – especially Muslim – majority countries and correlates with extremist ideologies (and of extremist ideologies with terrorism), and so on.

Another emphasizing social and representational concerns raised by more marginal voices in the past right into the present about treatment in communities, about equality, about dignity and human rights, equal access, and so on, including women, people of colour, and so forth. Nothing by necessity contradictory between the streams. Other emphases exist, though. Nonetheless, these two streams (and others, e.g., maintenance of what some deem “Western civilization” and the importance of the preservation & dominance of the “white race,” or change in diet and lifestyle patterns to reduce personal impact on the environment or their “carbon footprint,” and so on), and even vitriolic disagreements, live in the secular communities.

The former, not the latter (of the two provided non-parenthetically), makes the call repeatedly for atheist activists moving back to basics, to atheism-only. Duly noting, of course, both provide non-atheism-only positions. Indeed, activism adds to atheism, and becomes a non-atheism-only position across the board. Thus, any argument for atheism-only nullifies all possible activism. Activism includes what seems like – for placeholder terms – conservative atheist activism, in free speech and immigration concerns, and liberal atheist activism, in the inclusion of more marginal voices and improved civility-dignity standards to a wider sector of the secular communities.

What can bring the different sectors of the atheist community together with activism? What can address the concerns of some for a return to atheism-only activism as well as those wanting more activism on some of the aforementioned points? What have been red lines in secular communities? Who has drawn them? What subject matter remains perennially banal and perpetually inflammatory within the secular communities? How can editors and writers use the written word to address the wide smattering of concerns of the secular communities without self-immolating it?

**Rob Boston:** In the United States, we have several national organizations that promote atheism, humanism and freethought. These groups take different approaches, which means most non-believers who want to join an organization can find a good fit.

This may be controversial to some, but to my mind, atheism means simply denying the existence of god. It does not in and of itself posit a system of ethics or morals. One of the reasons I've always been more drawn to humanism is that I am interested in those ethical issues – in the absence of god, how do we determine our ethics, how do we treat one another, how do we invest our lives with meaning? Humanism addresses these questions, which I see as a necessary step after atheism. Atheism says, "There is no god." Humanism says, "There is no god – and what does that mean for us?"

Another thing to consider is that it is possible to be a racist, a homophobe and a misogynist while being an atheist. Indeed, we have seen the rise of such communities primarily in online forums. Some of the men involved in the so-called "men's rights movement" identify as atheists. But these views (racism, hatred of women, anti-LGBTQ views) are incompatible with the core tenets of humanism, meaning that those who trade in hate, division and fear cannot claim to be humanists because their views are incompatible with that philosophy.

As far as activism goes, I support people finding the level that works for them. Some non-theistic groups in America want to keep the focus on atheism. Others have expanded the circle and are addressing social-justice issues such as racism, LGBTQ rights, women's rights, etc. The group I am most closely aligned with is the American Humanist Association, which has a long track record of standing up for social justice. I want that to be part of my humanism, so I feel that I am in the right place. People who are less interested in social justice issues and who want to work primarily on promoting atheism will have no trouble finding a group that fits them better. Having said that, I think the various non-theistic groups should join forces and work together as much as possible, which is easy to do on issues where there is wide agreement, such as several prominent church-state issues. On other issues, groups may not be able to find agreement and decide to go their own way. That's fine.

One of the reasons the Religious Right is so powerful in America is that the various organizations meet, plot strategy and share information under umbrella coalitions, such as the Council for National Policy. Rather than view one another as rivals, the various non-theistic groups in America need to do the same. The good news is, it is happening. We've seen more cooperation and information-sharing in recent years, led chiefly by the Secular Coalition for America, and I applaud that movement.

Having said that, I want to be clear that I am not interested in working with racist, homophobic or misogynistic atheists, and I believe the major non-theist organizations have rightly spurned such people. The future of America is diversity. This means non-theism needs to not just welcome people of color, LGBTQ folks and young activists, we must listen to their concerns, lift up their voices, make sure they have a place at the table and look to them as leaders.

As for how writers and editors can help, I think the answer there is pretty obvious: by fostering discussion and debate over certain issues and encouraging a robust exchange of ideas. We certainly have plenty of forums for that these days. However, there are limits. I am not interested in falling into what I call the "free speech trap." Yes, we have free speech, but that does not mean all ideas are of equal merit or worthy of debate. If someone in a non-belief community wants to "debate" whether LGBTQ people should have rights, whether women should enjoy self-autonomy or whether people with brown skin are inferior, I am not interested. Some subjects, such as whether certain classes of people should enjoy basic human rights, are not open to debate. Racists, bigots and women haters use "debates" as a forum for spewing venom and

fostering extremist ideologies. Such views must be debunked, not treated with the deference that formal debate gives them.

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

# Interview with Sandeep Prasad – Executive Director, Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 27, 2019

*Sandeep Prasad is the Executive Director of Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How did you get interested in sexual and reproductive health and rights?

**Sandeep Prasad:** That is a good question. I grew up in an Indian household. I went to an Anglican school, where the sex-ed that I received was very basic. It was really focused on anatomy and risk. Later in my adolescence, while still in high school, I discovered that I had same-sex attractions.

I came out, myself, as queer. In university, I heavily involved in LGBT organizing on campus during my undergrad. I realized that in that time that I wanted to do professional work related to human rights and sexuality. Of course, law school seemed like a good place to go next after my undergrad. I went to law school in Ottawa. I got involved in this work. The thing is, once you start experiencing and exploring and issue and feel impacted by them, you see the interactions with other issues.

Whether it is same-sex sexuality, abortion rights, and so on, all link to basically the right to bodily autonomy. I was able to work after law school on these issues, luckily. I started my career and have been working globally and domestically, in Canada.

**Jacobsen:** With regards to Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights for sexual and reproductive health rights, I ask this for a framework going forward. What is its mandate?

**Prasad:** Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights's mandate is to uphold sexual and reproductive rights in Canada and globally. We are motivated by creating societies and enabling societies, where everyone can realize their right to bodily autonomy. Where people are empowered to make the decisions related to their body as rights for them, they have the means and support to make sexual reproductive decision-making.

This organization formed out of the merger of three organizations. First, Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights Population and Development, I was the ED before the merger in 2013. That organization primarily did global, sexual reproductive rights policy work.

The other two organizations were Canadians for Choice and the Canada Federation for Sexual Health. Both of whom had worked in Canada. Canadians for Choice was created after and out of the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League.

Because it was thought that Canadian's for Choice could be an organization where decriminalization could happen, and people could be empowered to access abortion services in Canada. The Canadian Federation for Sexual Health builds on the legacy of what used to be called the Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada.



There are some prominent organizations in the history of Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights. It continues to this day in our work.

**Jacobsen: If we are looking at two facets of two pragmatic operations of Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, for short, what is being done domestically, in Canada in other words, in general for initiatives and for programs?**

**Prasad:** Whew, wow, there is a lot that we do. In Canada, there are a couple of things. There are direct supports to individuals in Canada through our access line. Abortion services are and have been hard to access in Canada and hard to locate in Canada. It is a 24/7 line staffed by volunteers but also Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights staff members.

It provides information about sexual and reproductive health, particularly around pregnancy options; it provides referrals to abortions services. That is one. The direct services function is one that Canadian's for Choice was previously stewarding.

The work that we do is also policy related. We do policy relate campaigns in Canada. We have taken the time for drugs being available. Part of that, what has been a barrier to that is the actual price tag, we did a campaign or have been doing a campaign on universal cost coverage of Mifegymiso.

That is one policy campaign. We have gotten the most prominent in the territories to commit and implement universal cost coverage. That is wonderful. They can terminate a pregnancy, whether it is surgical abortion or a medical abortion with Mifegymiso.

We are increasingly doing more work on sexuality education in Canada. We are currently building a national campaign on that issue. That is another aspect of our work. The direct support gets supplemented with direct policy change.

**Jacobsen: With respect to education and in terms of better knowledge of the public reducing discrimination, for instance, if someone is coming out as queer, as gay, as bi, as trans, and so on, how effective is evidence-based modernized education helpful in this sense, in a domestic scene?**

**Prasad:** I think it is beyond helpful. I think it is essential. Part of the problem, certainly, with the sexuality education I received, it did not affirm sexual and gender diversity. It did not actually address anything that I was experiencing.

It did not really help me come to terms with my sexuality and begin to think about my sexuality in more positive and affirmative ways. That is problematic. Also, we have had, for several years now, a very clear attention to the issues of school bullying.

That has been great; that the focus has been there. But education done comprehensively and progressively, and done in a way that is universally implemented, across the country is key to making sure classrooms are more welcoming, young people are learning about human rights, and how they tie to sexuality and gender.

We are fostering cultures where individuals are more respectful of the sexual decision-making of others. I think that is really a key point to make. Sexuality education for us remains a key intervention to ensuring that people in all their diversity can live empowered and respectful sexual lives.

**Jacobsen:** If we are looking at two general categories, we have conservative oriented viewpoints. We have progressive-oriented viewpoints. These conservative and progressive viewpoints look at sexual and reproductive health rights in different ways.

**I want to ask a question about both at the same time. What do progressives get wrong and right about sexual and health rights? What do conservatives in general get wrong and right about sexual and health rights in Canada?**

**Prasad:** [Laughing] interesting question. I can speak to those working on different aspects of sexual and reproductive health rights. I think what we have often gotten wrong is we tend to silo-ize these issues. We tend to invisibilize certain issues as well. I think that is problematic.

I think, first, what we are getting wrong is the silo-ization of these issues. I really do not see, in terms of my personal perspective, differences in issues of sexuality, sexual diversity, sexual orientation, and issues of sexual and reproductive health around abortion and contraception.

I find these often unhelpfully separated. We do need to bring these together in a comprehensive framework centered around bodily autonomy. That is, it centered around this right that people can make decisions around their own bodies and sexual reproductive lives in a way that is supported with information, education, and so on.

It is supported in an enabling environment, where we proactively address attitudes and stigmas. I feel like that silo-ization happens on different issues within sexuality and reproduction. It is not helpful. In terms of what I think we are getting right, slowly, we are advancing sexuality education in schools.

That being something that has really come to the media. Both in BC and Ontario. The actions of forces opposed to issues of sexual reproductive rights. I think that the attention being given to as an issue is the fundamental issue to ensuring that we can create a society, where people are able to realize their sexual and reproductive rights.

Now, onto the second part of the questions, in terms of what people who are opposed to these rights are – framed within the silo-ization point – from groups who are local minorities, those who are opposed to sexual and reproductive rights, whether LGBT rights, abortion rights, and so on.

Absolutely, we can often see these issues better than those who are progressive. Because, often when they are opposing, they are opposing a wide swathe of these issues, including LGBT rights, abortion, contraception, and so on.

They have a very set view of how people should be living their lives, which means sometimes aligning with these traditional Judeo-Christian values. Those that are misogynistic and homophobic. They are seeing connections between issues. I find this interesting.

Of course, I think we do not actually talk about or figure out how to dialogue is points where we can have a discussion between a wider range of actors. So, the issue of sexuality education, for example. The lack thereof issue, people are making decisions that are not right for them.

When they have not had the information, they have not actually been a help to reflecting on what is the most appropriate for them, feels good to them, and so on.

That leads to sexual regrets. I would think that regret is one of these things. Sexual education, like you mentioned, can help end sexual regret. I would think that a wider segment of social can get behind insuring that we are not regretting our sexual lives.

That are given the information to making the decisions right for us. We should use these lenses more than we should in dialogue. I hope I was reasonably coherent [Laughing].

**Jacobsen: [Laughing] no worries at all. Let us go to the international questions as a closing set. What are the main initiatives and programs through Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights abroad?**

**Prasad:** What we fundamentally do in our global work is work as a coalition of national and regional organizations from the global south and the global north coming together to do two things, one is advance global policy on sexual reproductive rights issues; another is support sexual reproductive rights defenders and women's human rights defenders, and LGBT human rights defenders from around the world to use the mechanisms of the international human rights systems to hold their governments accountable.

We work in solidarity with them to help them navigate those systems. A lot happens at the UN. We often think of the UN as this distant place disconnected from the daily realities.

But in fact, so much discussed at the UN is directly relevant on people's lives, very often, we make sure that we are working with national and regional organizations around the world to bring the voices to the UN to make sure the voices are part of the discussions at the UN.

The Sexual Rights Initiative is one way in which we do it. Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights is part of the coalition.

**Jacobsen: Not a laundry list, but, who are the main important actors relevant to Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights?**

**Prasad:** The SRI has 6 members. In addition to Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, there is the Coalition of African Lesbians in Johannesburg. There is CREA based in New Delhi. There's ACAHATA, which is the Latin-American organization working on sexuality and gender. The Federation for Women and Family Planning in Poland, there is also the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. The last one is a human rights organization that works on a wide range of issues including women's rights and sexuality.

Those are our key partnerships within this work: the members of the SRI, the SRI itself collaborating with a plethora of other national and regional organizations around the world.

**Jacobsen: In terms of domestic and international, what are the benefits to the individuals, the citizens, as well as the public? Not only in terms of being more educated but also in health outcomes, by being properly equipped about knowledge of their rights and things that are conducive to better sexual and reproductive health.**

**Prasad:** Part of our goal is to ensure that our national reality in Canada and global mechanisms, international human rights standards, and so on, are aligned together, Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights seeks to hold our government accountable through these international human rights mechanisms.

We want to see these standards better implemented in Canada. To us, that is clear in terms of something that we worked on. For example, we just highlighted a number of these UN

mechanisms about what is happening in Ontario and the rollback of sexual and reproductive education there.

The UN has responded. The mechanisms have responded. There can be mandate to educate the federal government on what it is doing to ensure that this rollback is reversed and sexuality education in Canada is implemented in a way that is consistent with human rights.

That ensures that education around the key issues such as sexual and gender diversity, education for people with disabilities relating to sexuality, and so on, are part of this. The UN is questioning Canada on this now. I think that is where that goes. I think the UN is a good way to question governments, because governments don't like being embarrassed at the international level.

**Jacobsen: For those who want to become involved, whether as members or staff, throughout the donation of time, networks, money, professional skills, how can Canadian do so? Or if they wish to become informed, how can they do that?**

**Prasad:** I would encourage people to check out our website and our Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram feeds. We are quite active on social media. We seek to engage people across the country in our campaigning works, whether around medical cost coverage, whether it is around sexual education in the near future, and so on.

That is a primary place to look. Our website also has a lot of information on it. People can use it to become better informed on some of these realities in Canada, and to be better involved themselves and hold their governments to account and to ask their collective decision-makers what they are doing on these issues.

That is a starting point.

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

**Prasad:** Thank you, Scott, it has been a great conversation. Thank you for the all of those questions.

## Interview with Meghan Doherty – Policy and Advocacy Officer and Sexual Rights Initiative coalition representative of Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 28, 2019

*Meghan Doherty is the Policy and Advocacy Officer for the Sexual Rights Initiative (Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights). Here we talk about her life, work, and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What were background in early life and professional training prior to joining the Sexual Rights Initiative?

**Meghan Doherty:** I am originally from Canada. I grew up in Nova Scotia, in Halifax. In my early life, I did not do much work on sexual and reproductive rights. In 2003, I moved to Ireland to do a Master's in Women's Studies.

It was upon arrival that I realized abortion was criminalized in all circumstances. I was never confronted with that situation before. I was fortunate to relate to local women's organizations, grassroots activists, who were advocating for changes to the law on abortion in Ireland.

I started working at a sexual violence center there. For the next 4 years, I was involved in grassroots advocating. In 2007, I moved to the Irish Family Planning Association, which is a member association of the International Planned Parenthood Federation in Ireland.

I worked on policy reform relating to abortion and women's reproductive rights more broadly and looking at the human rights dimensions there. Following that, I moved back to Canada in 2011. I started working with Action Canada for Population and Development, as it was called at that time.

It was a coordinating partner of the Sexual Rights Initiative. Some context, the SRI does not exist on its own. It is a coalition of 6 national and regional organizations from all parts of the world.

We have Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA), The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), The Federation for Women and Family Planning, Akahatá Equipo de Trabajo en Sexualidades y Generos (Working Team on Sexualities and Genders), and Coalition of African Lesbians.

This was my first introduction to SRI. I began working for it in early 2016. I am the Director of Global Policy and Advocacy. We still hold the coordinating position for SRI. More background on the SRI, we got together in earnest with the Human Rights Council based in Geneva.

It was previously the UN Commission on Human Rights because it was not functioning. I wanted to move away from identity-based advocacy. So, a lot of the organizations within the coalition were working on issues like sexual orientation and gender identity, sexual and reproductive health rights, and so on.

But I wanted to use a broader framework to understand human rights violations in those contexts as well as to make better linkages between issues. So, it is making connections between

restrictions on abortion and restrictions on same-sex relationships, and using the framing of bodily autonomy to articulate these demands.

The SRI came together in 2006. We have been going strong now. We are in our 16th year. We all come together – all the different partners – to Geneva at the HRC for each of the HRC sessions.

So, they happen from March to December every year. Last year, we were fortunate enough to expand our presence in Geneva to have four staff that work out of a Geneva office full time to support the work of the SRI partner, and to engage in the international human rights system.

It means that throughout the year; we were on the political dimensions, which happens at the HRC as they are negotiating resolutions and making public statements to advance the normative framework of sexual rights.

We work through “country review mechanism” including the Universal Periodic Review, where each country is reviewed on its entire human rights record, the treaty monitoring bodies. Also, what is known as a system of special procedures, these are independent human rights experts appointed by the member states of the UN to investigate human rights concerns.

When working through the country review mechanisms, we work with the national and local organizations to analyze and prepare reports to leverage expertise with their acknowledgement of the context, the laws, the policies, the politics, and so on.

It is to make sure sexual and reproductive rights are represented in all these aspects of the human rights system, but the national and regional, and local, organizations can use these processes to really advance their own agendas at the national level.

It is holding their own governments accountable for their human rights obligations.

**Jacobsen: You answered several questions in the back of my mind. You read my mind.**

**Doherty:** [Laughing].

**Jacobsen: Typically, it can be framed as secular and religious-oriented strongmen arising. Now, it is not saying, “Men equal bad.” What is it saying, “There is a phenomenon of strong men in leadership arising and, typically, coming alongside repeals or attempts to retract either the respect for or the implementation of women’s rights, how ever much they are in that particular country.”**

**How does this impact your work through global policy and advocacy through SRI, and other organizations, too? Given, this appears to be an international phenomenon.**

**Doherty:** Yes, I think the rise of authoritarian regimes and the archetypes of the strongman. We are seeing a resurgence of these kinds of leadership styles if you can call it that.

One thing that we have done through our work is working with alarm bell systems of the UN to make sure that the impact of these authoritarian regimes on women’s rights 1) are getting the attention that they deserve and 2) to also encourage and to investigate ourselves.

What are other root causes that create the environment for these leaders to not only come to power but also to stay in power and maintain popular support? What are they tapping into? What are the conditions under which the different state actors and civil society actors are supporting these ideological and ideology-based leaders and regimes?

So, we do it in a few ways. There are experts doing analysis and documentation of how these groups are using the international human right system to subvert what are normally considered to be universal human rights.

They are using the language of human rights and coming across as ‘very reasonable.’ But we see the real impact is to restrict rights even further and then to use this as justification for further repression in countries.

The most direct impact of this is around national organizations and local organizations trying to do grassroots mobilization. We saw, most recently, in Geneva at the HRC; there was an event on authoritarian regimes with civil society speakers from Brazil, where the Brazilian ambassador has been moderate in the past.

She was in the audience. She stood up. She attacked the speaker saying, ‘You are spreading fake news... the things that you are saying about the repression of LGBT persons and women’s rights is not true. It is not happening in Brazil.’

I know this sounds very tame. But within a UN context, it is very unusual. You have the language of the diplomats within the UN spaces and how this is translated within the national level is cracking down organizing and delegitimizing civil society activities focusing on women’s rights and rights more broadly.

In Egypt, we are seeing activists and advocates being put in jail; the organizations are being deregistered. For example, one of our partners in SRI, Coalition of African Lesbians, is had their observer status revoked. The African Commission on Human Rights said that it was promoting un-African values.

**Jacobsen:** [Laughing].

**Doherty:** The very basics of the organizing and advocacy are under threat from these regimes. It is one thing to have the public debates. It is another to be prevented from participating in the discourse on public values. We are seeing states are abusing these very same rights that we trying to uphold and use to advance people’s rights, as a way of oppressing civil society activists.

We also know women are at the frontline of repression all the time. You would be hard pressed to find any authoritarian regime in which women are not sacrificed in the name of the pursuit of whatever they are trying to pursue.

One of the stories that I feel is not really being told very much. We highlighted this during a statement to the Council in March. The strategies, the persistence of human rights defenders over millennia, really, has worked to counter these authoritarian regimes.

Even those who put forward a friendly face, we see a repression of women’s rights anyway. There is a lot to be learned as states wring their hands and fret about the rise of authoritarianism. We could do well to listen to those who have been fighting these leaders for a long time.

**Jacobsen:** If you are looking at North America, as this is a Canadian publication, what traditional stream people will assume, probably, in the readership here is religion – fundamentalist religion – being a source of oppression of women, you are noting something important. It is the notion of a form of secular fundamentalism through a formalized institution or a body called the state.

**How is this playing out in a context closer to home to some of the readership here, potentially?**

**Doherty:** In North America, we must make some distinctions between the U.S. and Canada. Because I think the political climate in the U.S. is a bit different from where we are in America and the protections that we have in place in Canada. We are different in the United States.

I would first draw the distinction there. I do think that we see, for example, within Canada the anti-abortion movement and the anti-choice folks arguing and using different tactics in the way of trying to repress women's rights and access to abortion throughout Canada, whether this is through intense public pressure on elected officials, through these false helps or crisis pregnancy centres that present themselves as places for helping women with their abortions when they're really trying to deter women from getting abortions, and so on.

One aspect that does share a lot with the U.S. is the spread of misinformation. The ways in which they may not need to convince everybody. But if they can confuse enough people, then they will have done their job. We see this around false information being spread around medical risks to abortion and things around abortion that are patently false.

We see scare tactics around saying that Canada has no abortion laws. The regulations that are in place. These disregard all the information. So, advocates like us, we have to spend a lot of our time – not really engaging with these folks as this is not the avenue that we want to pursue, which is best used with correct and rights-based information is available and is disseminated while working to educate the public and politicians, and looking at best practices and applying the human rights approach to policy recommendations.

We are engaging on all the fronts that create something and create something positive. It is to ensure that there is a counter to the misinformation where the correct, rights-based, medically accurate information is out there. It is making sure that all that information is available.

I think in the U.S.; their relationship is not only with religion but also with secularism and issues of women's rights and sexual and reproductive rights more generally. It is on a different and has always been on a different trajectory. But I think that there are lessons to be learned. In this sense, you have to be constantly safeguarding gates that have been made to be honest and truthful, and are persuasive.

It is showing how it is important that we, collectively, agree on women's sexual and reproductive rights, sexual rights more broadly; that we spend the time and energy working with communities to ensure that everybody is included. That nobody is left out. That we are making the links between, for example, racism and access to sexual and reproductive health services.

Or the criminalization of sex work in Canada, and the violence against women. It is doing the hard, slow, slog of informing people and persuading them really getting people to agree on the collective value of everybody's human rights, which includes sexual and reproductive rights

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

**Doherty:** Bye!



## Ask Professor Rosenthal 4 – Princess Statistics: The Fairest of Them All

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 29, 2019

*Dr. Jeffrey S. Rosenthal is a Professor of Statistics at the University of Toronto. Here we talk about critical thinking and Knock on Wood. Here we talk about statistics and education.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How can we make the case for mandatory statistics education?

**Professor Jeffrey Rosenthal:** Well, I'm a bit cautious about making things "mandatory" since I don't like to tell other people what to do. But I certainly think that the more statistics people learn, the better. Most of us won't become statisticians, but just having a little bit of understanding of how randomness works, which probabilities are small and which are large, what statistical conclusions are valid or not valid, and so on, can go a long way towards better understanding the world, making wiser decisions, and having a deeper appreciation for the randomness all around us.

**Jacobsen:** Have increasing lifespans increased our aversion to risk?

**Rosenthal:** I'm not sure if they have, but statistically speaking it would make sense. Often risk takes the form of achieving some short-term pleasure or satisfaction, in exchange for having a certain probability of death or serious injury or other life-changing tragedy. And the longer your lifespan, the more you stand to lose if something bad happens, so the more seriously you should take those probabilities of very negative outcomes. On the other hand, many risks — like airplane crashes and so on — have such small probabilities that they really should be ignored, no matter how long your lifespan is.

**Jacobsen:** As a statistician, how do you prefer to vote? What is your strategy? What type of voting leads to the fairest outcomes statistically?

**Rosenthal:** Well, every voting system (first past the post, mixed-member proportional representation, preferential ranked lists, single transferable vote, etc.) has advantages and disadvantages. But whatever system you've got, it makes sense to take the system into account when choosing how to vote. So, in our first past the post-national elections, the reality is that just one person will be elected in each riding, and there are no points for second place. So, I often vote "strategically", meaning that I take into account predictions based on polls and past votes to see who the leading candidates are likely to be, and then choose among them, instead of "wasting" a vote on a candidate with no chance of winning. Some people think such voting is a shame, but actually, I think it is just making the most reasonable decision under the circumstances. And it's one reason (of several) that I actually like public opinion polls — despite their many flaws, they give us the best snapshot of people's opinions and intentions, for voting and beyond.

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

## Interview with Shirley Rivera – State Director, American Atheists (Puerto Rico) & Founder- President, Ateístas de Puerto Rico

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 30, 2019

*Shirley Rivera is the State Director for American Atheists (Puerto Rico) & the Founder-President of Ateístas de Puerto Rico. Here we talk about her life, work, and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Starting from some backdrop, what was family background?

**Shirley Rivera:** I was born in Puerto Rico. My family is from Puerto Rico. We grew up Christian, Protestant. That is most of the religion. My family, specifically, is Christian, but they do not practice. They follow it, but do not practice. I grew up in a normal family: mom, dad, sisters.

We grew up on the north of the island. I didn't attend church when I was little. I simply decided for myself. I was attending by myself for 2 years. But nobody forced me or invited me to attend the church. I grew without somebody forcing me to attend the church or practice any religion.

**Jacobsen:** How was early life with respect this not being forced into a religion? For instance, some pivotal moments in education or in personal life as you were growing up. That may or may not have been influential on personal secular views.

**Rivera:** In my early years, to me, they did this baptism, like the Protestant way. I go into it. I think that is the only that my family made me do. I wasn't old enough for some other stuff. Most of the values or ethics comes from Protestantism. In attending church, I never before attended it much.

The type of morality and ethics that they rose me in was Protestant Christianity. I think that have a lot to do with how I was raised and how I grew. At the same time, what helped me becoming secular, it was probably the opportunity to meet people as I was growing from other religions.

I mother was raised for Norwegian people. She had more roots there. My dad's side of the family is pretty liberal people. They also didn't attend church. I think that combination probably make me more open-minded to other types of beliefs, religions, and all that type of stuff.

**Jacobsen:** You have also been featured on television, on YouTube, in articles, based on both activism and atheism. When you're thinking atheism, as there are different flavors of it, what is it to you? In addition, how does this then get translated into some of the activist work?

**Rivera:** So, I guess this impacted me. Not only the religious are practicing the empathy around me, but probably how my parents raised me, I have those senses of what is morality. I do not like to say the word morals, but I like the word ethics as this seems more appropriate to say.

So, I guess, this type of concept of hell for people, and so on. I wanted to teach people the sense of helping each other. It is being strong in your point of view. That is the most important thing, whether religious, secular, humanist, or atheist. Most of us have a strong point of view.

But not everybody push that view above and beyond. I think how they raised me make try to push far on that point of view. It is one of the things for activism. You want people to have the same point of view. So, you become more militant and consistent around the spread of your point of view.

My point of view now is their religions are a social problem. We cannot continue to give privilege to them as they are not contributing anything positive in our society. That's why I consider it important to be militant and to have empathy, and show to the rest that we can be secular and a good person.

We can help the people no matter the religion or non-religion. I guess the empathy and the sense of community in how I was raised is one of the most important things to give me power to empower other people to express themselves, and to push their point of view above and beyond.

**Jacobsen: How did you come to found Ateístas de Puerto Rico as its President? What tasks and responsibilities come with that position?**

**Rivera:** Yes, I was in Puerto Rico. Then I moved to Oklahoma. I remember. Before I got back, I was in touch with a humanist group. I was helping them doing videos, articles. I was working in Oklahoma in the media. I was writing and all that stuff.

I met people during that time from South America who wrote secular articles and made secular videos. I was involved with this humanist group. I worked in Puerto Rico. They were humanists. It was the only secular group there. When I moved to Puerto Rico, I started working in the media doing articles and activities with people to make a group.

They made a group. I started helping them. Later, I saw an atheist community without someone representing. I am an atheist. I am not a humanist. I think humanist is a way to leave. But it's not a point of view. You can be a humanist. But I am an atheist because I do not believe in any God. I do not think that group have any representation on the island.

Other friends and I think that we need a group, an atheist group, where we can represent our interests. After all, we started our atheists groups and pushed other types of activism. At the time, I remember. The Christian people tried to push their gender perspective on the schools.

They were pushing anti-abortion laws. At the time, it was a gay marriage controversy. There were a lot of things going on. Nobody was lobbying. Nobody was protesting. That was when the group and I said, "We have to do something." My friends, other folks, and I made a meeting and decided to do it.

After that, everything else came up. We have an organization, a webpage, and so on. We have become an important organization on the island. The only thing that I have done in Puerto Rico is working with older groups like women's groups and other secular groups.

Those who have had trouble lobbying. Now, we have a legal team. We have someone running for the department of education. We lost a municipality on the island as the mayor was doing praying days with money from the government. We did that one.

We have doing all of that stuff, i.e., separation of church and state, while trying to do media. There were a lot of atheists who know about the group now. It is important to create the group. We have been going since 20013. That was when the group was born. We have been growing.

**Jacobsen: How did you become involved with American Atheists as well as being the state director now?**

**Rivera:** It is pretty funny how I meet American Atheists. We knew about the organization from a long time ago. One day, we got the groups. We started. One day David Silverman showed up in Puerto Rico and said, "I want to meet with you guys." We meet with him (including other secular groups).

He said, "We have to meet you," and so on. He showed up. He didn't know about us. But he heard about us. He was interested about bringing American Atheists to Puerto Rico to make a convention to meet the other atheists in Puerto Rico.

That was the time that I met the other atheists in Puerto Rico. It was the first ever convention in Puerto Rico. A year later, they make a new program for stronger local groups. They have been supporting the local groups. That is when they offered to me if I wanted to be the state director and help with American Atheist community.

The work to push those so they have more support for the groups here. Yes, I have been doing this, already, for three years the AA work as state director. I help the group. They also support us with materials and all the stuff that we need.

I think that it is a good program; that they do to help others. The investment in local groups is the best way in starting to spread and grow the atheist community.

**Jacobsen: Over your three years at AA, and as with your work the president of Ateístas de Puerto Rico, what are some lessons to impart to secular women who want to be leaders or who want to be leaders in their earlier years?**

**Rivera:** I think the atheist movement needs more women. This idea about men handling things is everywhere. I think Madalyn Murray O'Hair founded American Atheists. I think women are speaking out now more than ever with women's rights. All of that stuff and realizing how they have been oppressed during all this time. Even with the work, it is still very different in the genders. In the atheist community, most of the leaders are men.

Most of the time, even in our culture, we say, "No, we are not like that." But we are still promoting it, quietly. I think the last couple of years. Women have been speaking out. They have been more militant. It is in the Women's March. Women are speaking out militantly for women's rights and reproductive rights.

In the atheist community, we need more presence. In my group, we are only two ladies. I say, "Hey, do you want to get involved?" Some of them have kids. Some of them have families. It is something that we still have to work on it, as they can do it.

**Jacobsen: How can the secular communities in general, especially in North America, be responsive to an increasing want of prominence and of a voice for women, whether in representation or in the dynamics of the communities?**

**Rivera:** I think all communities, secular and non-secular, need more women's presence. If we say, we are better than 20 years ago. There is still a lot to do. We need more presence. The leadership are almost all men! You can see that. There is no balance. You do not see that balance.

A woman is still with the quiet oppression. They don't think that they can do anything. They still are thinking that they can't because this, or that, or this. There are excuses. They are scared. You can see it when a man is still talking. The woman is still quiet.

It doesn't matter is atheists, humanists, agnostics, whatever. You can see this in government. When a woman tries to speak out, they do not deal with her arguments. Because they still think the woman is inferior to them. They grow in the same environment. Atheists and Christians, and Muslims, grow in the same environment.

Even if we think that we do not agree with that concept of the role of women, inside of them, they still have oppression. This is why I see the in the scientific community, in the atheist community, in the secular community, how the majority of the leadership is gentlemen. There are no ladies.

**Jacobsen: If we are talking about concrete, practical and timely actionables or action items, things that can be done. What can be done? How can the secular communities – let's say in North American in general or Puerto Rico in particular – include more women in leadership, simply not in a symbolic way?**

**Rivera:** I think this is societal work. With the secular community, we try to push that in our environment. For example, if you turn to an atheist woman, and say, "Hey, run for the leadership of this secular group," she will probably say, "No," because she has kids, "No," because she has husband, "No," because she has work, "No," because, because, because... It is not that the community didn't give her opportunities.

It is because in her environment. In her mind, she has a concept of what role she has. In her mind, she becomes a wife, becomes a mom. It is not a leader. In her mind, she cannot understand that she can do anything and can do everything at the same time.

Even if we offer to do this or that, in the secular environment, it is hard work to empower the woman first. They need to believe that they can do it. The people have to support them when they make this decision. But often, the people without supports to give, want the work from her.

You want the work, but you do not support her decision and what she wants to do. That's what I think with the supports and the environment; it is a big problem.

**Jacobsen: If you were to anticipate some responses from secular men, whether the membership or the leadership, what would be the responses? How would you respond to their responses?**

**Rivera:** When you try to put the picture forward of how the women are oppressed, they don't see it. Because the role is in their mind. Most of the leaders, like I said, are men. But they are thinking that if they do not do it. Things are not running as they are supposed to do it.

In their mind, they think the women are not capable of doing it. That she is not capable of doing it. That she is not capable of taking on the position. That is part of the problem. We have nothing to lose.

**Jacobsen: Any recommended organizations, books, or speaker?**

**Rivera:** In Puerto Rico, we have great secular professors. We have a physics professor at the University of Puerto Rico called Ramon Lopez-Aleman. The intellectual minds are there. He is

one. We have a guy from Panama. He wrote a book called “The Imaginary Friend.” It is a great book. I guess it is the first atheist book written originally in Spanish.

I think what we have right now is most of the best resources like this. It is people who speak Spanish. We have a bunch of books in Spanish. But there are not many writing originally in Spanish. He is originally from Argentina. I think in Latin America; they have a lot of power in their activists.

You can see Colombia. There are so many. They are so excited. They believe in what they are doing. They understand and believe in what they think is important in what is secular in the community. Even if they have their own idea of how they can be secular, there are scholars of this in the society.

We have those great speakers in the island: Ramon Lopez-Aleman, Richard Thoma, and Salvador Lugo, and others.

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

**Rivera:** I would like to ask about being an atheist in a different country, whether a colony or whatever people want to call Puerto Rico. I can see from outside from meeting a lot of people from around the world. I can see how their cultures are still influenced in making laws and divisions between people.

For me, sharing time with all of these Latino community, black community, white community, and so on, I can see those divisions in secularism. We have to try to break those and teach to the rest of the world that we have to be together. We have to stop pre-judgment. We have to stop stereotypes. We are supposed to do more. I expect more from the secular community. Sometimes, it is how we have the same pre-judgment and stereotypes to the people. We are supposed to set an example.

I think atheists have to understand that we are all humans; and we have to teach this to the rest of the world. That no matter where you are born, no matter what language you speak. You have to have empathy with the rest, be kind.

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

**Rivera:** Thank you, thank you for this time, I appreciate the interview.

## Ask Kwabena 3 – Event Planning and Coordination

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

May 31, 2019

*Kwabena “Michael” Osei-Assibey is the President of the Humanist Association of Ghana. We will be conducting this educational series to learn more about humanism and secularism within Ghana. Here we talk about events.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are the upcoming events for the rest of 2019 and into 2020? How do you go about organizing an event? What other organizations have been pivotal in the organization of the larger secular Ghanaian events?**

**Kwabena “Michael” Osei-Assibey:** 2019 is exciting for a couple of reasons. Plans for the first Freethought Festival is currently underway. From ministers of state to professors, artists and activists, it is slated to be very interesting.

A video series on the LGBTQIA community in Ghana is to follow afterwards and that would be the major events for 2019. 2020 will present its own challenges but our need to interact more with policymakers will sure feature in what plans we come up with in 2020 and beyond.

As I have said earlier, the organization is 100% volunteer, so we have to discuss as a collective and ask for volunteers for specific tasks.

In the case of the free-thought festival, we break down aspects of the program into specific work packages and then ask for a volunteer to project manage that particular work package.

Thanks to the diversity in the group, from medical doctors to researchers and artists, we always seem to have someone with the right qualifications, or adjacent, to project manage any aspect of our programs. Personally, my project management skills from my engineering background come to play and pick up any slack.

On occasion, we get outside help from partner organizations which brings me to what other organizations have been of great assistance. I will talk about these organizations and what role they play in moving secular conversations as well as the relationship we have with them. Let's start with the environment.

When it comes to our environmental initiatives, we have always partnered with or followed the lead of Environment 360. Their environment initiatives and advocacy tie directly into what members are comfortable with.

I don't know if I have said this before, but, HAG adopts a similar strategy to what our next partner organization does, zero footprint activism.

The Humanism Services Corps, now run by the Freedom Beyond Belief Foundation, runs volunteer programs targeting organizations already on the forefront of fighting marginalization in society.

The understanding is that these organizations already have the expertise and on the ground knowledge about the various challenges in their area of work.

The corpse's partnership is to offer assistance in whatever way is analyzed to be necessary to increase the efficiency of service delivery. In a similar way, when HAG partners with any

organization, we have to make sure our partnership in no way overshadows the already established trust of our partner organizations but boosts it.

A great partner to have in matters of science is the Ghana Science Association. On several occasions and at several events, they have provided us with experts in various fields to facilitate talks and provide us with a broader understanding of where the science is on various issues.

Currently, the University of Ghana is our home and in that respect we are grateful. Our previous home, The Afia Beach Hotel, run by Helen List, had served the secular community greatly since it was opened for business, providing free hosting for humanist events as well as environmental, science and arts events such as Earth day, Science day, Garden Clubs for kids, Arts exhibitions, etc.

This was a truly progressive and secular space and we are sad to see it go. There are also individuals and smaller groups who in one way or the other help organize events. The few that comes to mind are the Realist Foundation and the Common Sense Foundation.

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



# Interview with Red Dela Dingco Tani – Founder and President, Filipino Freethinkers

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 1, 2019

*Red Dela Dingco Tani is the Founder and President of the Filipino Freethinkers. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did early life impact views on religion?**

**Red Dela Dingco Tani:** I was quite religious when I was young. I prayed regularly, attended mass, did the sacraments, etc. But I did question the bad parts of religion, too. The thing is, authority figures — parents and teachers — would tell you to answer that doubt with more faith. That it was up to you — your moral obligation — to fix the problems you had with religion. To make the questions go away. Back then you didn't have the internet. No access to alternative beliefs from elsewhere, to news about the bad things the Catholic Church was doing around the world, and more crucially, no access to nonbelievers. I never met an atheist growing up. Even in college the most I heard of were legends about philosophy professors making students want to become atheists and commit suicide. Humanism was even a more alien idea. Secularism and freedom of religion were stuff only activists would appreciate (I had a very low opinion of activists back then.) So as far as early life goes, it never really became too hard to make me cling to religion or leave it out of a disappointed faith (Many think hardships is the main reason people become atheists). Early life just never gave me options. Religion was the default. The choice was whether to be a good believer (and squash the doubts) or a bad believer (and keep doubting, hard questions and all).

**Jacobsen: What were some intriguing, in hindsight or in the moment, experiences in early life around religion and interpersonal experience?**

**Tani:** I became a member of Youth for Christ in college. There was an initiation ceremony for new members which involved some very weird stuff. The facilitators of that initiation retreat actually believed that demons were specially interested in disrupting the affair. This made them do all sorts of things. They cast spells to protect the venue from evil spirits, to prevent them from entering our bodies, and so on. At one point they taught us about magical powers the Holy Spirit could give you, such as speaking in tongues, a power the head facilitator enthusiastically demonstrated. But none of it was real. I'm certain of it now, but even back then, when I was more inclined to believe, there was really nothing there. These were just some young adults trying to get younger adults to believe magical stuff they took on faith from older (but not necessarily wiser) adults.

**Jacobsen: Were there any pivotal people in this development towards a secular outlook?**

**Tani:** In my case, it was mostly a solo journey of reading and reflection. But one pivotal person is Dan Barker. I've written about that story here: <https://ffrf.org/about/getting-acquainted/item/13729-red-tani-freethinking-filipino> .

**Jacobsen: In examination of the reasons for a secular worldview, what ones made more sense than traditional answers, relative to the Philippines, socially and philosophically? What about scientifically?**

**Tani:** In my case, it came down to what reflected reality more closely. What was more right and less wrong. At first, when I was still letting go of religion, I went through the now popular “spiritual but not religious” phase. I was truly in to New Age. There were sophisticated outlooks that, although secular, weren’t scientific. And it led me to believe all sorts of nonsense. Eventually (or inevitably) I realized that although the beliefs that resulted were kinder than the traditional religious counterparts, they were ultimately not true. I cared about believing true things. What could be tested and disproved, improved and shared freely with others. New Age stuff tends to be good and useful to the extent that you’re already privileged. Ultimately, I settled on naturalism, requiring proportionate evidence to the things that I believed. I don’t think there’s anything particularly Filipino about my journey. But on hindsight, there are contexts where I wouldn’t have had to make it (secular countries) and contexts where make it would be very hard, if not impossible (theocratic ones). I guess you could say that in terms of having to have a journey from faith to faithlessness, the Philippines is in the Goldilocks zone.

**Jacobsen: Who have been integral members of Filipino/Filipino community devoted to the increased secularism and critical thinking, and human rights awareness, advancement of the young?**

**Tani:** There are too many individuals and groups (for this space) who have done good work for secular ideals, both online and offline. But right now, HAPI and PATAS are the two groups I’m aware of (other than Filipino Freethinker).

**Jacobsen: As the President and Founder of Filipino Freethinkers, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?**

**Tani:** As a volunteer organization, we share most tasks and responsibilities, and I’m thankful to all the volunteers who have come and gone throughout the years. Most of the hard organizational work is done by my wife, Kristine Chan, who you recently interviewed (<https://www.canadianatheist.com/2019/05/chan-jacobsen/>). My main responsibility is leading discussions on the overall goals and style of our approach, and making executive decisions (that we mostly reach through consensus building with the core team). I serve as our spokesperson and representative at most events. I also host the meetups and the podcast (<http://facebook.com/freethinkers/videos>).

**Jacobsen: What have been important developments in the history of Filipino Freethinkers?**

**Tani:** When we started in February 2009, we thought we’d simply be an online and offline discussion group for freethinkers. Only a month after, we added advocacy and activism to our goals, particularly on issues that have to do with reason, science, and secularism. At the time, the reproductive health (RH) bill was the issue that embodied these values (or the lack thereof) so we decided to take it on. Our work on the RH issue allowed us to have a louder voice in both mainstream and new media, bringing the secular perspective to an issue previously dominated by religious ones (conservative or progressive, but ultimately religious). It allowed us to talk about atheism, too. I was interviewed in several TV shows about my nonbelief, most prominently for The Bottomline with Boy Abunda. We also won several awards for our advocacy work, most notably the most prestigious prize at the first Globe Telecom Tatt Awards for social media and the Rappler Rexona Digital Trailblazer Award.

The publicity helped our advocacy for other issues: feminism and gender equality, freedom of speech and digital rights, critical thinking and skepticism, religious freedom and secularism, and so on.

**Jacobsen: What other organizations contribute in a positive and different way to Filipino/Filipina secular and human rights concerns and community building?**

**Tani:** I've already mentioned HAPI and PATAS above, and again, this space is too limited to list down secularism-focused organizations, let alone pro-human rights and community building-focused ones.

**Jacobsen: Who are lesser known and important pioneers in Asian secularism and freethought? Why them? What were their developments?**

**Tani:** As I've said above, each country has many such individuals and organizations. I plan to highlight some of them in the upcoming Hello Humanists! video series we're doing in collaboration with Humanists International.

**Jacobsen: What are the important human rights issues in the Philippines now?**

**Tani:** On top of the continuous oppression of the poor and marginalized sectors, there is the violent campaign purportedly against drugs, which has made the oppression even worse. Climate justice is another, as the Philippines is one place that will disproportionately bear the brunt of global warming (an impact that will be most felt, unfortunately, by the already oppressed sectors).

**Jacobsen: Any recommendations for authors or speakers?**

**Tani:** Too many to mention.

**Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion?**

**Tani:** In these seemingly hopeless times, let's do our best to help each other out.

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

**Tani:** You're welcome, and thanks, too, Scott!

## Ask Mandisa 28 – Rhyme in the History, and Punishment of the Liturgy: Presumed Betrayal of Community

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 1, 2019

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

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

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

*Here, we talk about community and perception of individuals deviating from community.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** You sent me a Twitter thread of a – I’m not sure if it’s a Mrs. or a Miss – Lisa Sharon Harper, who is the founder and president of freedomroad.us.

**She made some comments about colonizing nations, about the Christian faith, about leaving the Christian faith, and white supremacy. Can you provide your perspective on that particular commentary, as well as some of your agreements and disagreements with it?**

**Mandisa Thomas:** Yes. Miss Harper, I learned of her from a Tweet thread that was sent to me. She seems to be not only a strong Christian, but a very pro-black Christian.

The premise of the Tweet was to address white people who leave religion, or who are challenging religion. She’s saying that for those walk away from Jesus, that they are still are operating under white supremacy.

I do agree that Christianity IS white supremacy. It has been for centuries. However, she goes on to say that the origins of Christianity are from the continent of Africa. So therefore people who walk away from that faith or religion, including black folks, are basically down-playing the legacy of so many icons from our community. It is true that there are many historic black figures who were religious. That is certainly quantified by the fact that the black community is still very highly religious. However, according to Ms. Harper’s stance, it is ironic that when blacks walk away from religion, we are accused of being like “those white people”.

All Christianity, especially as blacks adhere to it, is still operating under white supremacy. That’s the point that she misses. I think putting a black image on Christianity and trying to invoke the “first rights” is really, really is missing the point of the subjugation that we still face as a community.

**Jacobsen:** Within the commentary, what do you see as a service to moving the conversation forward? What do you see as a disservice to moving that conversation forward?

**Thomas:** I think the service comes when challenging the image and the perception that this religion was started specifically by white people and that the white collective has the monopoly on building the world and building up civilizations.

As the saying goes, history is written by those who won. Certainly, many European nations have conquered other countries. They have been able to put their spin on how things are viewed.

I think it is important for us to re-examine all of it. Especially Christianity, to see how it is a combination of older, ancient religions.

Some that comes from Africa, but also from Greece, and also other land and cultures. This may have been unintended by Miss Harper.

The disservice comes where somehow you're trying to bring Christianity back to it being this idea that it has black roots and that somehow white people who disregard it are turning their backs on black folks.

That's what I'm reading in her correspondence. That when white folks step up and they reject Christianity, that they're dogging out the black legacy, and the black origins, and the black culture. But Christianity itself has done that on its own.

Ultimately, what Ms. Harper is saying is inaccurate, and in trying to reaffirm her faith by trying to go back to the "origins", she has overlooked the brutality that the black community has faced as a result of having to accept this religion.

## Ask Mandisa 29 – RSVP for the Next Generation

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 2, 2019

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

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

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

*Here, we talk about the RSVP for the next generation.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** There are a number of things that are on your mind today. Some of them are relevant news. Some may be relevant news, but are probably a little bit more perennial. What are the ones, let's say, that are of interest, but are more perennial? Then, we can get to more current affairs.

**Mandisa Thomas:** I just wanted to give some general advice to people who are currently organizers, whether there is a secular movement, or in any other capacity. There will be times when you'll plan an event, or you'll plan a meetup, social gathering, or what have you. People may RSVP, but they may not show up.

You may also have a number of people who may join your groups, whether they're on social media, whether they're on Facebook, whether you have a certain number of Twitter followers, or you also have a number of people in your Meetup groups. There will always be a number of people who will join the online forum, and there will be a disproportionate number of people who actually (won't) show up.

You do the analytics and comparisons across groups. These are just some of the things that happen. There are times where it can be frustrating to see people either say they'll come, but then they don't, or you see a number of people who will join the group but then never show up to anything.

For some people, especially if these are atheist, black, secular groups, it may take some time for the individual to actually show, due to being nervous about meeting people. Also, it's important to remember that others have lives, they have families, jobs, and other commitments.

It isn't in that you, as the organizer, is doing anything wrong, but to remain consistent – even if it's just once a month – is going to be important. Because even if someone doesn't show up the first time, or one time, they may show up the next time, and even times after that. It's important to remain encouraged.

If you're involved with a particular an organization that has particular branding, to please make sure that not only are you asking for advice, and you're asking questions, but that you are also following the guidelines that the organization sets. Because that will be important to growth.

**Jacobsen: What about some of the current affairs around admissions at post-secondary institutions?**

**Thomas:** There is a current news story about a number of people, some involving some actresses, and other prominent people, who were bribing admission officials to either accept, or alter, their kids' grades for college. The majority of people who are involved in this scandal are white people from Maine.

What's interesting about this is that it almost seems like it's an episode of *Law and Order*, where you have rich people buying grades for their kids, or just something to alter the college admission process – or it would have been a grading process.

**Jacobsen: This speaks to the unfair advantage that people with money have had for years. It isn't that their kids are smarter than the others who struggle in school.**

**They have more of an opportunity because their parents have money. It doesn't necessarily guarantee that your child will turn out better at any career, but there's an unfair advantage to having parents who have means and money, and also being from a certain status, i.e. basically, in a lot of these cases, being white.**

**What this does is that this basically shows that this is another form of a system that has worked against people of colour, people who have fewer means, working-class people, people who struggle in college, but yet, they have a harder time because they may not have the money or their parents may not have the money.**

**It's interesting to see how this scandal has played out. I know that there are over fifty people involved. Some have been arrested. I think what's interesting about that now, is that you can't get away with that anymore.**

**Even if there is no jail time involved, this was serious business, now. I think it is very important to show that just because you have money and means, shouldn't mean you can get away with murder.**

**Thomas:** Correct. We always hear this argument that affirmative action, there's no need for it anymore, that people of colour, black kids, have a fair advantage now when it comes to being admitted into schools.

That makes me wonder if some of these parents were scared of some of these affirmative action quotas that we know some colleges and universities have. However, that should not have been an opportunity for them to try and "rig the system" because they feel like now their child has less of an advantage. That is playing into unfounded fear that many of them have.

This is what education should look like, that everyone, regardless of their economic background, should have the opportunity to pursue a better education, and know that especially those who come from a working-class background, and who are economically able to afford the tuition, they should still have that opportunity. It really is just downright unfair, and what they were doing was illegal.

Keep in mind that there were a number of wealthy people who voted for Donald Trump to be president. I think these are the very same people who often times you don't see as a typical supporter. There are many people of wealth and means who have the same fears as some of the working class people who supported him, and these are the people that we should be watching out for.

**Jacobsen:** Also, this leads to another commentary, which I would like your input on this, especially on issues of the way in which the educational system leading into, and in, post-secondary institutions.

For instance, the phenomena of the SAT being taken so seriously, as to dwarf so many other possible qualifications, traits, and strengths of perspective students to post-secondary institutions, in which the teachers, the educators, and elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools in the United States, will then aim for what I have been told has been phrased “teach to the test”.

This seems to have a hugely deleterious effect on the psyches of students, in other words, their mental health, and on the ways in which education is focused more towards the test, rather than education.

**Thomas:** Absolutely. There is the report, for a number of years, that the SAT test is culturally biased, meaning that students of colour are less likely to pass that particular test because it does not prepare students who come from economically disadvantaged schools and areas for this test.

If it is being judged as the primary the standard for whether someone gets into a college or university, then that is indicative of a still very racist and an institutionally unfair education a system that we have here. There’s really a need for teachers, as well as people in general, to start realizing this.

When you teach in a certain standard, and the student doesn’t learn well that way, they may be left behind. There are a disproportionate number of young people who may end up in special education classes, or they get left behind in certain grades. It may not be, necessarily, the fault of the student. This is a systematic failure, here, that needs to be addressed. This is something that has been at the core of the public education school system for a number of years.

Really, the SATs are just one symptom of the problem with the way kids are being taught. The “just teach to the test”, and also numerisation as opposed to memorizing what should be on the test, as opposed to retaining the information, which is why you have so many people who are still very, very ignorant on your basic levels of American government, physics, stuff like that.

I know that one of the talk show hosts, Jimmy Kimmel, I think – he does these street interviews, and he asks your average person, about the federal government, or other American histories, or other basic questions, and many of them don’t know.

What this definitely speaks to – not just an economic disadvantage, but also, like you said, it’s a fast-tracking of getting these – and also trying to adhere and fulfill academic standards that aren’t necessarily — There’s some pressure that we put on teachers, as well. It’s just a systematic failure, all around, that is inappropriate.

**Jacobsen:** How does this impact civil society down the road? By which I mean, the arts, the humanities, and other areas that contribute to the cultural health of a society?

**Thomas:** Unfortunately, there are many arts endowments that are in danger of being cut from the budget because they aren’t seen as important. They often rely on other philanthropic efforts, private donations. There is less of an effort to teach this in public schools, and to get students interested in them.

I graduated from a performing arts high school, a specialized high school. In your standard high school, those music collectives aren’t necessarily considered a primary concern. When this



happens, it really can thwart the education process because the creative process is also very important to a child's learning ability.

Unfortunately, it may be priced out so much that your average working-class family would not be able to afford to develop their child's talent. Therefore, that's also another area that they may be left behind. It really becomes something that is only available to those who can afford it, which is a shame.

**Jacobsen: If these trends continue, as they have for many years, what are your projections as to what kind of society America will be producing?**

**Thomas:** Oh, gosh. It would be similar to what I would see as people just droning if you will. Either you have people who will not be. Or it would almost seem to be a dictatorship, people who will just go along with things, simply because. It also seeks to diminish the artistic qualities of people who would be considered "the others".

I think it would really, really have a negative impact on those who are coming after us, the children that we're trying to develop. I think we'll be headed back towards this – it would be for a while; it will be until things change – we'll be headed toward a dark age that people will just go along with things simply because. There would be no independent thought, which would be very, very bad for those coming after us.

**Jacobsen: If you look at culture, broadly speaking, not simply arts, humanities, and other associated fields of endeavour, but also the sciences, we can see a longer-term trend in the United States, with efforts to really thwart proper science education. It comes out in obvious statistics that we're both aware of, unbelief in evolution, unbelief in climate change, skepticism of climate change, and so on.**

**We can see deleterious effects on one metric of cultural health. Certainly, we could see even further deleterious effects on another metric of cultural health, with the arts, humanities, and other associated fields.**

**What happens, then, for the African-American community, and for, in particular, the African-American nonbelieving and atheist community in these contexts, where you see both of those mentioned trends of negative cultural health indicators, of declines in certain aspects of cultural health?**

**Thomas:** What I'm hoping will happen is that we will continue to resist. The one thing that I've always held to be true is that there is always been resistance to oppression and that when people recognize that something is wrong, that they continue to fight back, and that we're not just going to stand for these things to just happen.

The progress has never come easy. It is important that we remain persistent and diligent in our efforts because we know that there are people who might try, which is why it is important to continue to stay involved, actively, in our school boards, in our children's lives, and stay up -to -date with what is going on in our current legislation.

It will be important for us to speak to our legislators, and continue to remain vocal, and vigilant, and continue to mobilize, as much as possible because it will be much harder for people. There are people who don't realize the rights that they have, and that they can exercise them.

Remaining informed, remaining active and continuing to stand with others who will fight for our rights. That will really, really help in the future.

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

**Thomas:** Thank you.

# Interview with Wendy Thomas Russell – Author and Editor

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 3, 2019

*Wendy Thomas Russell is an award-winning journalist, author, and editor. Here we talk about her story and views, and work.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's provide some minor background on you. What is your story?

**Wendy Thomas Russell:** I was raised in the Midwest — Nebraska and Missouri — and graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with a journalism degree. I've spent more than half my life in Southern California, though. First I worked as a newspaper reporter, where I discovered a passion for investigative journalism and creative nonfiction. Then, in 2008, I branched out into book-writing. Eight years later, I founded my own small press, which specializes in contemporary nonfiction. I live in Long Beach with my husband, Charlie, and 13-year-old daughter, Maxine.

**Jacobsen:** How did you discover talent in writing, editing and publishing?

**Russell:** When I was in fourth grade, my teacher pulled me aside and told me I was a good writer. I was blown away. My parents had always enjoyed my childhood poetry and what-not, but I sort of thought that was their bias talking. Then, when I went to work for my first daily newspaper, I took an editing test as a prerequisite. The editor told me afterward that no one had ever scored as high on the test as I had. As for publishing, I'm still waiting for someone to tell me I've got talent in that department.

**Jacobsen:** When did you come into the secular community or find, at least, a secular community?

**Russell:** My blog — which was initially called Relax, It's Just God but then later morphed into Natural Wonderers on the Patheos network — was my first foray into the secular community. From the get-go, I had a lot of support from Dale McGowan (*Parenting Beyond Belief, Raising Freethinkers*), who provided another natural inroad.

**Jacobsen:** Why did you decide to write the book *Relax It's Just God: How and Why to Talk to Your Kids About Religion When You're Not Religious* (2015)?

**Russell:** When my daughter was five, she informed me that God had made her. It was a factoid she'd managed to pick up at preschool from a Jewish friend, and it took me completely by surprise and, if I'm being honest, scared me quite a lot. Until then, I sort of thought not talking about God or religion was an acceptable child-rearing choice. But I was wrong. It quickly became apparent to me that if I wanted to raise a critical thinker who was open-minded and tolerant and literate enough in religion to not feel like an idiot outcast in school, I needed to start having some conversations. As I started to explore, I started to realize that my perspective and experience could be helpful to others in my situation.

**Jacobsen:** What are the ways in which secularism can be seen as a positive for both religious and secular families in the context of education about religion?

**Russell:** Secularism, like most isms, is only as positive or negative as the people who wield it. People can do shitty things in the name of secularism, and they can do wonderful things, too. In the context of religious literacy, I'm an advocate for teaching children a little bit about all religions in a neutral way.

- “Easter is a holiday that celebrates the day that Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven.”
- “That lady is wearing is a hijab. It shows she is a Muslim.”
- “Your teacher is going to Israel on what’s called a ‘pilgrimage.’ That’s a sacred custom in the Jewish tradition because Israel is the birthplace of Judaism.”

**Jacobsen:** In terms of the main steps of secular parenting about religion, what is a proper way to do it, e.g., no endorsement while no denigration too?

**Russell:** I think it’s helpful to remember that speaking about religion in relatively neutral language won’t entice kids to that religion; but it may very well keep them from saying offensive things to nice people — whether on the playground or at family reunions — or from formulating unfair prejudices. I define indoctrination as *teaching children that your way is the only acceptable way to believe and that people who disagree with those beliefs are less moral, intelligent or worthy of respect*. Religious people can introduce their children to their beliefs and celebrate them without indoctrinating them; secular people can, too. You can tell a child you firmly believe your way is “true” without telling her that other ways are bad or stupid. I think that’s an important distinction.

**Jacobsen:** If you could add anything to the original version of the text, what would it be for you?

**Russell:** An index.

**Jacobsen:** When can secular parents be rude? When can religious parents be rude?

**Russell:** Do you mean when *are* they rude, or when is it *acceptable* to be rude? People *are* rude all the time, for any number of reasons. (Particularly on Twitter!) But that’s rarely our base goal. Rudeness (which, in my mind, connotes a snarky-ness or carelessness of words) generally stems from fear, or is a byproduct of a person’s attempts to get his or her needs met in any particular moment. We can all do better at interacting with people who disagree with us, but it takes deep breaths and conscious effort. A secular parent, like anyone else, can be assertive and honest and straightforward without being mean.

**Jacobsen:** Any other upcoming books? Any recommended authors?

**Russell:** I just co-wrote a second book, called *ParentShift: Ten Universal Truths That Will Change the Way You Raise Your Kids*. The book is entirely evidenced-based and structured around ten principles that apply to all children everywhere — regardless of religion or geography or ethnicity or anything else. They are things like: *All children have emotional needs* (and, incidentally, respond in surprisingly predictable ways when those needs aren’t met!); *All children need age-appropriate limits*; *All children have neurological responses to stress*; *All children need opportunities to solve their own problems*; *All children model their primary caregivers*; *All children go through developmental stages and have unique temperaments*; *All children need caregivers who honor their personal boundaries... etc.*

Unfortunately, a lot of the everyday disciplinary tools we use with our kids — timeouts, threats, raising our voices, revoking privileges, grounding, *1-2-3 Magic*, star charts, bribery, rewards, manipulative praise — undermine one or more of these universal truths and, as a result, sabotage so many of the short- and long-term goals we have for our kids. And, the truth is, we don't need any of that stuff. It's completely unnecessary and just makes our lives harder. *ParentShift* provides dozens of alternative tools, all of which do two incredibly important things: Preserve each child's sense of self-worth, and build an impenetrably close bond between parent and child.

As a side note: Although the book is for all parents everywhere, secular parents who may harbor worries that their kids will fall victim to the indoctrination of others will find the book invaluable. After all, our influence on our kids is only as strong as our relationship with them, and their ability to withstand pressure from the outside world is only as strong as their self-esteem.

**Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion?**

**Russell:** Nope, you've covered it. Thanks for the opportunity!

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

## **Ask Herb 9 – Eternal Spring and Brilliant Clothes: The Queen of the Sciences, the Queen of Mathematics, and Civil Disobedience**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**June 4, 2019**

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

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** With respect to the dead, and to the legacy of apprehension of the natural world, what makes mathematics an important foundation to the intellectual traditions of the modern world? How does the secular community benefit from them? What ways does mathematics, even simple arithmetic, assist in reasoning about the modern world? As discussed in prior sessions, what have been cases of civil disobedience on the part of mathematicians, scientists, and similars with a secular and freethought orientation about the world? How do new mental tools – mathematics and science – give a new intellectual garb, and civil disobedience provide, sometimes, novel moral clothes for working in, thinking clearly about, and acting in the modern world to make secular change?

**Herb Silverman:** The 18<sup>th</sup> century mathematician Gauss said, “Mathematics is the queen of sciences and arithmetic is the queen of mathematics.” Mathematics is considered the queen of sciences because it is essential in the study of all scientific fields. Galileo referred to mathematics as the language in which the natural physical world is written. When scientific statements are translated into mathematical statements, including about the structure of the universe, we apply mathematics to solve scientific problems. Similarly, arithmetic (the branch of mathematics that studies numbers and their operations) is the foundation that leads to the study of other branches of mathematics.

Mathematics has its own intrinsic beauty and aesthetic appeal, but its value is measured mainly by what we learn from it. The achievements and structures of mathematics are among the greatest intellectual attainments and worthy of study in their own right. The reliance of mathematics on logical reasoning has educational merit in a world where rational thought and behavior are highly valued. Furthermore, the potential for sharpening the wit and problem-solving abilities fostered by the study of mathematics also contributes to acquiring wisdom and intellectual capabilities. Descartes said, “Mathematics is a more powerful instrument of knowledge than any other that has been bequeathed to us by human agency.”

Mathematics has played a major role in bringing about innovations. Many mathematical theories and models of real-world problems have helped scientists and engineers grapple with seemingly impossible tasks. In addition to making technology more efficient and effective, mathematical techniques help organizations deal with financial, manufacturing, and even marketing issues. These advances have influenced where and how we live, what we eat, what we do for work or leisure, and how we think about our world and the universe.

Martin Gardner said, “Mathematics is not only real, but it is the only reality.” And Bertrand Russell said, “Mathematics is, I believe, the chief source of the belief in eternal and exact truth, as well as a sensible intelligible world.”

Regarding secular activism, I was not led directly to it through studying mathematics, though perhaps indirectly. Mathematics requires us to think analytically and critically, with heavy reliance on logical reasoning. Such reasoning helped me give up my childhood belief in God. But being an atheist doesn’t necessarily turn you into a secular activist. I was an atheist for over 30 years before I became a secular activist. When I learned that our South Carolina Constitution prohibited atheists from holding public office, I ran for governor as the *candidate without a prayer*, which eventually helped me to successfully overturn this unconstitutional provision through a victory in the South Carolina Supreme Court.

Most mathematicians and scientists are probably atheists, though they don’t lead with that term or even think about it. And they probably became atheists for the same reason I did—the importance of thinking logically. Whether or not they consider themselves secular activists, they unintentionally are activists when they announce scientific findings that conflict with god beliefs found in holy book about the nature and understanding of our universe. A large body of mathematics has been used by science to show that many theological beliefs are false. With every natural scientific discovery, there is less reason to believe in the supernatural. For instance, we can accurately predict future eclipses, events once attributed to God’s wrath. Such findings make obsolete many “God of the Gaps” arguments.

I think most mathematicians and scientists try to ignore religion because it has nothing to do with their area of expertise. Some, like Steven J. Gould, reluctantly felt the need to engage with religion when religionists denigrated a body of scientific research (like evolution).

I understand why most mathematicians and scientists don’t become secular activists. It does not help, and in some cases might hurt, their careers. Nonetheless, I wish more of them would become secular activists, explaining to the public the importance of science and how many scientific findings have disproved religious claims. We need a more educated society, not a more ignorant and religious society.

## Ask Mandisa 30 – The Young are Watching

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 5, 2019

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

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

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

*Here, we talk about the ways in which the young are watching us.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** It has been about a year since leaving the former job to enter into activism. Your daughter asked, “Why?” I think that is an apt question. Not an apt question in and of itself, but, in that, the young are watching what you do. What are your thoughts one year on?

**Mandisa Thomas:** Yes, my daughter Djenne obtained her Bachelor’s Degree in the summer of 2018. Which was after I had already left my job as Event Services Manager at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. So, one day we were talking, and she asked, “Why did you stay for so long?” I’ve often thought about this myself, because I was at that job for just under 10 years. I will put a decade on it. The environment at that place was very stressful at times, and I had considered leaving a few times before. But I had to consider the family, and income. We had bills to pay. This was the first job that I had that was steady, and that worked with my home schedule. They also worked with my burgeoning activism. I appreciate all of the consideration given for those factors.

Also, I am not one for giving up easily. I know how to work through challenging situations, and making them work for me. I actually like testing my ability to navigate through tough situations, and seeing the outcome.

It was the perfect opportunity for me. At that job, I was a department manager. I was hell-bent on them not sending me out the way others had been. I did have something to prove. In doing that, and in being able to work through the difficulties, I accomplished what my predecessors could not, which was establishing longevity.

Djenne was at that time, about 10 or 11, and my oldest son Isaiah was 3. Before I started there, I learned that I was pregnant with her brother Myles. So, I had to consider that too.

Even though my husband has a very good job, I had to consider that we have to make money. That we have to sustain our household. That was the reason why even after founding BN, I couldn’t just leave the job without considering all of those factors. It took time to develop the organization, and that is still the case. But eventually, the time came where I could leave and be comfortable taking the leap.



**Jacobsen:** Was it a better decision or the best decision in terms of jobs [Laughing] in terms of full-time running an organization and activism?

**Thomas:** It was one of the best decisions I ever made, though there were a few times where I did consider giving up activism and staying at that job.

It certainly would have been the most convenient thing to do. Definitely would have been very secure, because working for government entities are. However, I have never resolved myself in comfort, nor staying in a place where I am not growing professionally. I would have been completely miserable if I had stayed on. I do not like to feel stifled, which is what I was feeling. It wasn't necessarily a bad place to work, and once again I appreciate the flexibility that I was given while working there. However, I am already dealing with things in my personal life that are challenging. I couldn't deal with the stress that was mounting at the job.

I am a very liberated person, though I can make smart decisions – I think, lol. I needed to be on my own; to be in a place where I could work more on my professional development, and also help others.

While I am in my 40's now, I am still young, and will not settle, especially when I know there is more work for me to do. It isn't easy, but it can be done. And that is what I hope my daughter took away from our conversation.

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

## Interview with Tee Rogers (Humanist Chaplain) of BE. Orlando Humanist Fellowship

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 6, 2019

*Tee Rogers is a Humanist Chaplain and a Member of the BE. Orlando Humanist Fellowship. Here we talk about BE., secularism and humanism in Orlando, the mission and mandate of the organization, its impacts on the community, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Why was BE. founded?**

**Tee Rogers:** BE. was founded on September 2, 2011. Although founded by Atheists, our original focus was simply community service; however, very soon we realized that addressing prejudice against non-religious people at charitable organizations needed to be part of our mission and goals. Charities are statistically faith-biased organizations, yet the secular demographic is quickly growing. Atheists, Humanists, Freethinkers, and other non-religious or minority religion identities sometimes avoid volunteering, donating, pursuing careers in social service, *or even seeking assistance* when they are in need because of the potential bias against them. If they do engage with charities, it is often “in the closet”, hiding their non-faith to avoid confrontation and discrimination.

Many members and friends shared stories about their experiences at charities:

- Not sure how to find a non-religious charity to support;
- Not wanting to bring children to a charity to volunteer and have them proselytized to;
- Fearing a confrontation or not feeling comfortable speaking up;
- When I see a charity with a big cross out front, I feel like the message is: “NOT YOU”;
- Not wanting to be forced to pray or listen to indoctrinating music;
- Worries that people in charity work see themselves as “saviors” and will try to “save”;
- Some worry that having Atheist sticker on their car might mean damage to their car if they park it at the charity;
- Even if I’m just helping to do something like paint a playground, I feel like I’m part of their efforts to force religion on their clients. I don’t want to be part of that.
- I am religious, but I have friends and family who are not. How can we find a place to volunteer where we are all welcome?
- ...And many more.

People shouldn’t have to hide a core part of their identity in order to make a positive difference – and certainly no one should have to pray to someone else’s G/god(s) in order to feed their hungry children.

Secular people are increasing in number and visibility; charitable organizations and businesses for which faith is part of their mission or services need to understand the impact of their faith bias. It can cause stakeholders – potential employees, donors, volunteers, clients, investors – to

hesitate, or avoid connection altogether. Further, those who have experienced faith-related discrimination or bullying may fear being – or actual be – further victimized by the organization. Any charity, physical or mental health professional, or other human service should be including secular identity in the diversity training they provide to their employees and volunteers.

*And we help with that.*

Through service and education, we foster an inclusive culture in our non-profit sector and beyond so that people of all identities are welcomed and respected. We battle stereotypes while making a difference in our community by serving together visibly as a non-religious, Humanist organization. We also offer consultations and trainings for charities and businesses about inclusion for all religious, secular, and spiritual identities.

**Jacobsen: What is the importance of the secular and humanist worldview in Orlando?**

**Rogers:** Central Florida has an amazing and rich secular community – and just like everywhere else, that community is growing. We have a strong network of organizations here building support, opportunity, and visibility for non-religious people.

The largest is Central Florida Freethought Community. As a chapter of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, they focus on separation of church and state issues, spearhead invocations at government agencies across Central Florida, and provide educational and social opportunities for their members. Florida Atheists, Critical Thinkers, and Skeptics (F.A.C.T.S.) is primarily a member-led social group.

We also have smaller organizations that are focused on specific issues and provide specialized support. For example, there are chapters here of Black Nonbelievers and Hispanic American Freethinkers to serve those who face the intersections of being atheists and from cultures and communities where religious integration is so much a part of the cultural identity that being non-religious can be seen as traitorous to the family, the race, or society as a whole. Black and Hispanic non-believers are much more likely face loss of loved ones and support systems when they come out as non-religious. There are also organizations like the Science League for Kids and secular parent groups. And of course, BE. Orlando – bringing compassionate non-religious people together for volunteering and philanthropy.

This ever-growing network of communities and support systems reflects the importance of secular and Humanist worldviews in the greater Orlando area.

**Jacobsen: What are its mission and mandate?**

**Rogers:** Mission Statement: “BE. brings compassionate atheists, humanists, freethinkers, and other non-religious identities, as well as allies of faith, together to make a difference in the community and overcome stereotypes about non-religious people through service and education.”

You’ll notice that we include “allies of faith” in our mission. We have Christian, Muslim, and other religious or spiritual members who share our vision of a world free from prejudice against the non-religious. Serving together builds bridges across our differences – we have to be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with others and work together to make this world a better place. Although we are a secular organization, we advocate for equitable inclusion for religious, secular, and spiritual identities.

We connect with local charitable agencies to find out how we can help them, and we set up opportunities for our members to volunteer at those organizations. We also work to find opportunities that are inspiring to our scientifically-minded members – for example, over the holidays we spearhead a STEM-themed gift drive; on Pi Day we host a Math, Science, & Pi(e) event for at-risk youth; to combat summer reading loss we host a spring book drive for STEM-themed books and books authored by or highlighting women and minorities in science and other successful roles.

**Jacobsen: What are the important effects for the community of BE.?**

**Rogers:** Increased inclusion, collaboration, and impact.

Diverse identities are all around us – including secular identities in increasing numbers. We must ensure that those individuals are recognized and welcomed as part of the fabric of our communities. This increases the well-being of secular individuals and our community as a whole. As we continue to raise awareness of the negative impacts of faith-biased non- and for-profit business, and to build opportunities for connection and visibility for secular people, our community becomes stronger and better able to serve diverse stakeholders.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the BE. community?**

**Rogers:** Just visit <http://JustGottaBE.org>. You can click on “join” and become a member – it’s free. You can elect to join our private meetup to volunteer with us in Central Florida, or just receive our monthly newsletter. Please consider sharing our site with friends or family who live or vacation in Central Florida! The more compassionate people we have involved, the greater the change we can make in the world around us.

You could share your experiences at local or national charities and businesses. There’s a place on our website to share a review: <https://justgottabe.org/review-a-charity/>

**Jacobsen: How can other states in the United States replicate the positive community benefits of BE.?**

**Rogers:** There is a national organization called the Foundation Beyond Belief that promotes secular volunteerism and philanthropy. They have “teams” – and any secular organization can become a team. When you sign up you become part of the national effort and you can win awards and apply for grants. It is an amazing organization. Learn more about them at <https://foundationbeyondbelief.org/>.

One of the most common biases against non-religious people is the misperception that one cannot be a good human being without God: that without religion, one can’t be kind, civically engaged, or compassionate. Join and support local, regional, and national secular organizations that volunteer. If you’re a member of a secular organization that isn’t volunteering, suggest it as an activity. If you don’t have a local secular organization, start one.

I would encourage everyone to seek out the Atheist, Humanist, or Freethought organizations in your areas. But if you’re not a joiner, you can work to expand your own kindness footprint through your individual volunteerism and philanthropy. And if you feel safe doing so, wear a shirt or pin that identifies you as a non-religious. *BE.* the example: people can be good without God/s.

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

**Rogers:** Just gratitude that there are other people out there who care about these issues. Thank you for sharing this story, and I hope it encourages others to address these issues in their own communities. I'm always grateful to speak with like-minded activists; if I can help in any way just connect with me through our website.

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

**Rogers:** Thank YOU, Scott. We're honoured to share BE. Orlando's story with your Canadian Atheist audience.

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