

SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN



CANADIAN ATHEIST:  
SET XVII

# In-Sight Publishing

## **Canadian Atheist: Set XVII**

# IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

*Publisher since 2014*

Published and distributed by In-Sight Publishing

Fort Langley, British Columbia, Canada

[www.in-sightjournal.com](http://www.in-sightjournal.com)

Copyright © 2020 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In-Sight Publishing established in 2014 as a not-for-profit alternative to the large commercial publishing houses who dominate the publishing industry. In-Sight Publishing operates in independent and public interests rather than in dependent and private ones, and remains committed to publishing innovative projects for free or low-cost while electronic and easily accessible for public domain consumption within communal, cultural, educational, moral, personal, scientific, and social values, sometimes or even often, deemed insufficient drivers based on understandable profit objectives. Thank you for the download of this ebook, your consumption, effort, interest, and time support independent and public publishing purposed for the encouragement and support of academic inquiry, creativity, diverse voices, freedom of expression, independent thought, intellectual freedom, and novel ideas.

© 2014-2020 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen. All rights reserved. Original appearance in Canadian Atheist.

Not a member or members of In-Sight Publishing, 2020

This first edition published in 2020

No parts of this collection may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized, in any form, or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented or created, which includes photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher or the individual co-author(s) or place of publication of individual articles.

## Independent Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

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

Names: Jacobsen, Scott Douglas, author

Title: Canadian Atheist: Set XVII / Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Identifiers: None (epub).

Subjects: | BISAC: PHILOSOPHY / General (PHI000000)

Classification: LCC (None) | DDC (None)

p. cm.

Not printed but available on the internet at [www.in-sightjournal.com](http://www.in-sightjournal.com)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

*Designed and implemented by Scott Douglas Jacobsen*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Canadian Atheist: Set XVII</i> .....	3
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	6
<b>1 Canadian Atheist</b> .....	8
a Interview with Dr. Sophie Shulman, M.D., Ph.D., D.Sci. on Updates with Humanism in Victoria .....	9
b Interview with Ross Paton – Writer .....	11
c Interview with Tad Beaty of the Chatanooga Humanist Assembly.....	14
d Interview with Luke Douglas – Executive Director, Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix .....	16
e Ask Mandisa 31 – Toxic and Healthy .....	19
f British Columbia Humanist Association Updates with Ian Bushfield, M.Sc. ....	23
g Interview with Coreen Plawa of the Santa Fe Atheist Community.....	26
h Ask Mandisa 32 – Tact .....	28
i Interview with Auður Sturludóttir – Vice-Chairperson, Siðmennt – Félag siðrænna húmanista á Íslandi .....	31
j Interview with Scott of Skeptic Meditations on Parents and Cult-Like Organizations .....	34
k Interview with Nicholas Kosovic – Founder, UBC Students for Freedom of Expression .....	37
l Interview with Steve James – Executive Director, Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York .....	42
m Ask SASS 2 (Rick and Wynand) – South African Banners, Flags, and Lions, Oh My! .....	45
n Interview with Dr. Mark McKergow – Chair, Sunday Assembly Edinburgh .....	47
o Interview with Tris Mamone – Freelance Writer .....	52
p Interview with the Eastern Shore Humanists of Salisbury, Maryland.....	55
q Ask SASS 3 (Rick and Wynand) – Online Media for Secular South Africa.....	57
r Interview with Boris Van Der Ham – Board Member, Humanists International .....	59
s Ask Herb 10 – Judgment: To Smith in Silver, Pith in Word.....	61
t Interview with Rev. Helen Tervo – Vicar, St. Andrew’s Anglican Church .....	63
u Ask Rob 6 – Evil in Action and in Inaction, Choose Wisely: Secular History Rediscovered.....	74
v Interview with Gary J. Kirkpatrick – Administrator, “Atheism: The Step That Changes Everything” ..	76
w Ask SASS 4 (Wynand) – From WhatsApp to Telegram and Infinity .....	78
x Interview with Tsung-jen Wu – Asian Working Group (Taiwan), Vice-Chair East Asia, Young Humanists International .....	80
y Ask SASS 5 (Jani and Wynand) – Communication, Accents, Afrikaans, and Ethnic Diversity.....	83
z Interview with Marissa Torres Langseth – Founder & Chairwoman Emeritus, HAPI.....	88
aa Interview with Bridgett “Bree” Crutchfield – Founder, Minority Atheists of Michigan & Founder, the Black Nonbelievers (Detroit Affiliate).....	92
bb Interview with John Rafferty – Former President, Secular Society of New York .....	94
License and Copyright.....	99

## Acknowledgements

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

Lucy, Ruth von Fuchs, Margaret Downey, Deo Ssekitoleko, Matthew Krevat, Merja Soisaari-Turriago, Amanda Poppei, William Flynn, Bryan Oates, Lynn Perrin, Sandra Z. Zellick, Asuncion Alvarez del Río, Bwambale Musubaho Robert, Soma – Administrator, “Secular Indian,” Claudette St. Pierre, Rob Jonquiere, Anne Landman, Lucie Jobin, Amanda Poppei, Payira Bonnie, John Hamill, Brian Stack, Jason Torpy, Christopher Smith, Roy Speckhardt, Zenaido Quintana, Jim Hudlow, Michael Cluff, Rob Boston, René Hartmann, Dave Helgager, Jeanne Arthur, Randy Best, Jos Helmich, and the Administrator of “Bengali Ex Muslims Republic,” Susan Nambejja, Dorothy Hays, August Berkshire, Milad Resaeimanesh, Takudzwa Mazwienduna, Scott Sharrad, Haafizah Bhamjee, Justin Scott, Mubarak Bala, Hope Knutsson, Bill Norsworthy, Mark Brandt, Professor Kenneth Miller, Liz Jacka, John Hont, Alton Narcissity Mungani, Bill Cooke, Peter Harrison, Henry Morgentaler, Humanists of Linn County, Denise Robert Nola, Ngairé McCarthy, Abderrahmane M’hiri, Alex Rosenberg, Nicole Infinity, Richard S. Russell, Harris Sultan, Kwabena “Michael” Osei-Assibey, Miriam de Bontridder, Autumn Reinhardt-Simpson, Kelly – Brights Community Clusters (BCCs) Coordinator, Nik J. Gray, Annie Laurie, Courtney of “The Free Speech Podcast”, John Seager, Administrator of “Gay Ex Muslim”, Geoffrey Rosenthal, Administrator of “Ex-Muslim Memes”, Azis, George Martin, Shannon Hardy, Administrator of “Ex-Muslims of India”, Rob Boston, Emma Duke, Richael, Lois Backus, Doris Lin, Norman Finkelstein, James, Ensaf Haidar, Peggy Loonan, Jenny McQueen, Carl Baker, Dale Hemming, Gideon Levy, a South African Ex-Muslim (anonymous interview), Min-hee Janet Yoo, Kristine “Tin” Chan, Izzy Posen, Omar Shakir, Giovanni Gaetani, Gad Saad, Monika Mould, Robert Peoples, Jack Norris, TJ Dudeman, Jacob Fortin, Nisi Jacobs, Joyce Schorr and Sylvia Ghazarian, Donna Harris, Md. Sazzadul Hoque, Usama Antar, Moses Klein, Jesse M. Smith, Stacy Sellsted, Sandeep Prasad, Meghan Doherty, Shirley Rivera, Red Dela Dingco Tani, Wendy Thomas Russell, Tee Rogers, Sophie Shulman, Ross Paton, Tad Beaty, Luke Douglas, Coreen Plawa, Auður Sturludóttir, Scott of Skeptic Meditations, Nicholas Kosovic, Steve James, Mark McKergow, Tris Mamone, the Eastern Shore Humanists of Salisbury (Maryland), Boris Van Der Ham, Helen Tervo, Gary J. Kirkpatrick, Tsung-jen Wu, Marissa Torres Langseth, Bridgett “Bree” Crutchfield, and John Rafferty. I feel honored to contribute to Canadian Atheist.

**Scott**

## **Canadian Atheist**



# Interview with Dr. Sophie Shulman, M.D., Ph.D., D.Sci. on Updates with Humanism in Victoria

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 7, 2019

*Sophie Shulman, M.D., Ph.D., D.Sci. is the Director of CFI-Victoria. I reached out to Dr. Shulman for another interview. She agreed. By the way, she is retired, and still giving interviews.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are some new humanist community updates?**

**Dr. Sophie Shulman, M.D., Ph.D., D.Sci.:** In our current Canadian secular humanist community, I'd say, three groups are of major progressive activity hence of practical importance and promise:

- a) continuing publication of the Humanist Perspectives, our only but excellent an umbrella-type Canadian humanist periodical; that has become an international voice for secular humanism (they have now subscribers in UK, Germany, Greece, etc);
- b) continuing uniting activity of the CFIC with its branches as outlined in their periodic publications ("Critical Links");
- c) local secular humanist groups' activity.

**Jacobsen: What have been some important political and social developments in your locale?**

**Shulman:** Two years ago (May 2017) the first-ever CFI Victoria branch was created and has been active since; it has by now become 156-member-strong and has had regular meetings, panel discussions, Solstice parties as well as has participated in the fight against the anti-blasphemy law in the petitions-on-line, etc. The CFIV is a big step forward in the B.C secular humanist social movement.

**Jacobsen: If we're looking at becoming part of the national conversation, what are the main impetuses for you?**

**Shulman:** Fighting re-surging populism, nationalism, antisemitism, racism, misogyny, supporting the liberal democratic values.

**Jacobsen: How can individual humanists and atheists, and other freethinkers, in Canada become part of the Humanist Canada Discussion List?**

**Shulman:** One should apply to the HCA board, I suppose, and, technically speaking, click on and follow the instructions the List offers at the end of some of its email.

**Jacobsen: What have been some of the long-term themes for the discussion groups? In other words, what interests humanists?**

**Shulman:** In broad terms, I'd say, preservation and further development of the core ideas of globalization, unification, and of the European Renaissance against attacks from the far-right and from the far-left as well (fanaticism, intolerance, fascism, nationalism, isolationism, misogyny).

**Jacobsen:** Any things to look forward to, for the rest of 2019 and into 2020 for the humanist community and its dialogues?

**Shulman:** Wider reach and embrace of the younger part of the population; our average member-age is currently too high.

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

**Shulman:** Thank you, Scott. Please, keep me updated.

# Interview with Ross Paton – Writer

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 8, 2019

*Ross Paton is a Writer with an interest in International Politics, Religion and Foreign Policy. Here we talk about awards, journalism, the arts, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Awards signal excellence in some performance accepted by a distinguished set of members of a community with a specific domain of said performance. However, this can become a channel for inauthentic self-esteem boosting, i.e., awards without merit. What are some symbols of this in the West, in general, and in the UK, in particular?

**Ross Paton:** Sadly, it is tempting to say that the West is beginning to symbolise this more generally. Far from being a simple acknowledgment of someone's talents, awards are an unconscious recognition that people lack motivation to do the job for its own sake. Getting rid of the Oscars would leave society with the actors who act for the joy of acting, and gently filter out those who want fame. Less journalism awards would help to defog the perception that you should be rewarded for what was once considered a public service. The more depressing thought is how few people might survive these narcissism culls, given our ever-rising cultural emphasis on fame. Awards don't just corrupt the artist too. The artistic process becomes a slave to the opinions of others; both in its catered construction to win them, and in its value if you should fail.

**Jacobsen:** How can award culture and narcissism consume an individual unduly and, in the end, destroy them, even their lives and livelihoods?

**Paton:** This question is ultimately about what it means to be good. That might seem like exactly the kind of abstract start to an answer that repels you from reading on with an immediacy more pronounced than even the word 'poststructuralism' could induce. But doing good things day to day, is concrete. In fact, it doesn't get more real than that.

The why of doing good matters. If from my current view of my window I notice an elderly lady struggling with a bag of shopping, which prompts me to abandon my keyboard to help her; I am undoubtedly doing a good thing. But why I chose to help her, can deeply taint both myself and the otherwise helpful act. If for example, I take a picture with her outside her home, shopping safely delivered, and swiftly take to social media to sanctimoniously crow about it, something quite perverse has gone afoot.

I have revealed that my intention behind helping was not for the sake of helping, but was for being seen to help. That my action to help, comes from a desire to be praised for helping. The redeemable aspect of charity is about doing something for nothing; doing something for something is no longer charity – it is a transaction. This desire to be seen to help, underlines that award culture more generally can twist what should be acts of charity into transactions, long before either have taken place. The old lady through my window becomes an opportunity for social media popularity, rather than someone in need of help.

This is linked to why there is that almost imperceptible discomfort we all have when left alone with someone for the first time. That slight, but definite premonition where your body knows

that this is the moment in the absence of group safety, that the social pretences could drop and the murderer behind it would cease to lurk.

More specifically our body knows that this situation is frightening, because it knows something that we are in serious danger of forgetting. That we are most truly who we are when no one is watching. We should never stray towards forgetting, that when you're locked in a room with someone and no-one else watching, that all bets are off. I don't know who said it, but I've never quite forgotten hearing that morality is what you do when no-one is looking.

Understanding this, makes what social media has done to us yet more terrifying. In an analogous way to social pretences, it has made us forget that we are who we are when no one is watching. In the social media age, being virtuous, decent and good has become inexorably tangled in telling and showing others about how virtuous, decent and good you are. Meaning those of us in the snare of social media, are not building our moral foundations on what is good, but on how our actions are viewed by others.

Take away the people watching and the willingness to be a good person you built on their approval comes crashing down; because most fundamentally, when you're alone in that room, awards culture will leave you bereft of a reason to do good.

I know at least three people who fit this frame; they either do good to be viewed as good, or outright pretend – often with hilarious results. Despite having had a few laughs at their expense, I also really pity them. We live in a cut-throat job market where the allure of pretence is compounded by too few meaningful, or even adequately paid jobs. The hierarchical job ladder which people are frantically trying to climb, manages to reward pretence, while social media provides the perfect tool to fool others into believing it. The systemic nature of this allure should not be dismissed; frankly you'd have to be a fool to not even feel its pull.

But personal responsibility is similarly not to be dismissed. This desire to be liked consumes some individuals to the extent where they even lie about their very identity. This problem is most pronounced in activist circles. Young middle-class men with the shamelessness to lie about being working class, ex-religious converts, homelessness, or even belonging to another nationality should take particular credit here. It is a strange sign of the times when those who (rightly) bemoan identity politics, lie about their own identity, then use the fabrication to build their profile as an 'activist'. As Derren Brown (yes – the mentalist one) identifies, '...a reaction against a movement tends to inherit its structure.' Indeed, in some cases their lying is so hilariously axiomatic, and the absence of push back so correspondingly conspicuous, that you begin to wonder if you are alone in your suspicions of the fraudsters

Fortunately, they are relatively easy to spot. Coats which drop further down the waist than a pair of shorts are a warning sign – as is good, perfectly-groomed hair appearing consistently across social media photos. After all, we all share the same amount of time in a day; the amount of it one spends in front of a mirror should not be allowed to increase without the raising of eyebrows. Consistently well-groomed hair and obnoxiously long coats should remind us of Wilde's line; '[to] treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.' As someone managing a (thankfully decreasing) problem with vanity, I can smell this stuff out like a bloodhound; after all, it's always the bad traits that we are vulnerable to which disgust us the most.

**Jacobsen: What are negative outcomes of excessive award culture, including, but also apart from, narcissism, where everyone becomes a star or a legend in their own minds?**

**Paton:** I've used social media as an example because the sanctimony we see on it is something we're all familiar with by now; but awards culture spreads much wider.

Awards in your workplace for example, detract from the internal drive to work hard; that we should work hard because I want to be the kind of person who doesn't leave work unfinished. On a wider basis, if your job is worth doing, awards detract and confuse from what should be driving you; if it isn't worth doing, awards are the rotten carrot enticing you to stay on the production line.

Careerism too, can be viewed as an extension of how awards culture corrupts. In politics – the most consequential of professions, which motivation builds the better parliamentarian; the blacksmith policy maker, who knows that knowledge and arguments are the hammer and anvil to the robust policy sword he wants to forge, or someone vying for the award of the next step on the workplace ladder? The problem with the latter motivation is that it gives you more room to bullshit. To claim the work of others, or to build a pretence of hard work. You can be wily enough fool a person in an interview room, but you can't pretend that your sword is sharp forever.

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

# Interview with Tad Beaty of the Chatanooga Humanist Assembly

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 9, 2019

*Tad Beaty is a Member of the Chatanooga Humanist Assembly. Here we talk about his relevant background, and his community, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's start with some background, either family or personal, what are some salient details and stories?

**Tad Beaty:** So I grew up in a nominally Christian household and never really believed. I realized from an early age (6 or so) that this wasn't just another game of pretend that the adults were playing. I learned from an early age to hide amongst them and just played along. For the first 40 years of my life I hid so well, almost nobody else knew I was an atheist. Shortly after I turned 40 a friend introduced me to a group called the Chattanooga Freethought Association (CFA) and I ended up going to one of their social gatherings. Of 10 people at the meeting, 5 were people I had known from other parts of my life.

**Jacobsen:** How did you become intrigued and involved in secular issues?

**Beaty:** After the CFA event I started hanging out with them a bit. One of the things I noticed in the CFA was there was a lot of online activity but there wasn't a lot of face to face interaction. One of the things I noticed the churches do well is build that sense of community and that was missing from the atheist groups I was becoming involved in. I thought it would be important to find a way to build that community so that atheists in the South didn't have to feel alone anymore.

**Jacobsen:** How did the Chatanooga Humanist Assembly start? What are the demographics of the community now?

**Beaty:** So, after a couple of years in the CFA, Tom Kunesh posted in Facebook an article about the Sunday Assembly and wanted to know if anyone would be interested in building a group like that in Chattanooga. I immediately responded that I was interested. We scheduled a meeting and 3 other people showed up to help us form the group. We discussed what to do and talked to the local Unitarian church about using their facilities after hours to have our meetings. A couple months after the first meeting we got interviewed in the paper and had our first meeting.

**Jacobsen:** What have been important social and political activities of the Chatanooga Humanist Assembly?

**Beaty:** We have tried to stay politically neutral for the most part. We have had a couple of people running for office come and speak but we've mostly focused on social and humanitarian issues like homelessness and equality issues.

**Jacobsen:** What are some new projects for the Chatanooga Humanist Assembly?

**Beaty:** Last year we started a secular meditation group that meets weekly and one of the projects I'd like to see is a Heathen's Hike once a month where we get people out and just enjoying nature as a group. We just started a highway trash pickup on the first Saturday of the month.

We're hoping to get a stretch of highway dedicated to the CHA. One of our current social challenges is that Tennessee is going to have a law that prevents people from performing weddings if they have an online ordination. Fortunately, our board of directors has already ordained two of our members (I'm one of them) and we can ordain more should the need arise.

**Jacobsen: Who is an important person for secular work in your locale? What are other important organizations in the area?**

**Beaty:** Chattanooga is fortunate to have several groups in the area. Of course we have the CFA also, they're more open and easy to find on Facebook. Our group is also easily found and joined there. Chattanooga Atheists is another group but you have to be vouched for to become a member. We used to have a chapter of Atheist Alliance Helping the Homeless but unfortunately that petered out. I'm hoping we can get another group together to help the homeless situation in the area.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the Chattanooga Humanist Assembly?**

**Beaty:** The main CHA group meets at the Unitarian church in Chattanooga on the second and fourth Sundays of the month at 5pm. The second Sunday has a presentation followed by a potluck dinner and the fourth Sunday is just the potluck and a social gathering. The secular meditation group meets every Sunday at 12:30pm at the Center for Mindful Living and is open to everyone who is interested in meditation, no previous skill needed to join the group. To join the track pickup group, you'll need to get in touch with us so you can get on the email list. We'd love to find someone to come out and help us form a Heathen's Hiking group once a month so we can enjoy the great outdoors as a community.

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

**Beaty:** Thank you so much for taking the time to interview me. We appreciate the work you're doing and look forward to seeing this.

# Interview with Luke Douglas – Executive Director, Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 10, 2019

*Luke Douglas is the Executive Director of the Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix. Here we talk about his relevant background, and his community, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's start with some background, either family or personal, what are some salient details and stories?

**Luke Douglas:** I'm a recovering former fundamentalist with a hard 180 story, so we'll get that out of the way right off the bat.

You can check out my story in more detail, but I was homeschooled in young earth creationism and went into conservative political causes for the first six years of my career. I learned in law school how to argue for both sides of a case, and my desire to be the best Christian apologist I could be drove me to research freethought and atheism. It wasn't an easy transition, personally or professionally, but I've gained so much more than I've lost.

**Jacobsen:** How did you become intrigued and involved in secular issues?

**Douglas:** As I said, it's very personal to me, and there's never been a question for me that whatever I believed, I would be active for it. I volunteered for some secular causes after leaving fundamentalism while I built my career in progressive politics. I knew that it was going to take time to find my dream job as a professional secular organizer, but I've found it here, and I couldn't be more excited for the coming year.

We are one of the first local secular organizations in the United States to have a full time executive director. That places very high stakes on whether we can prove that this idea is viable, much less that it's viable in the more religious American interior rather than just on the coasts.

**Jacobsen:** How did the Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix start? What are the demographics of the community now?

**Douglas:** HSGP's history goes back to the 70's as a chapter of the American Humanist Association. Then in the last several years, HSGP came of age by incorporating as a nonprofit organization in its own right and in acquiring its own building that is now the Humanist Community Center.

The biggest challenge HSGP faces in its demographics is that our members and core of volunteers are fairly old. There's a lot of energy being invested right now into attracting a younger audience through campus outreach and activities that students and young adults will find appealing. And being 26 myself, I'm working hard to help make that happen.

**Jacobsen:** What have been important social and political activities of the Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix?

**Douglas:** That's an interesting question since the nonprofit laws in the United States are a bit complicated in terms of how political we can get. Coming from a background of campaign management, I tend to get as political as I legally can and see that as a way of making a real



difference in society. That is, after all, the point of Humanism, to make the world better for Humanity.

Our role in that process, though, is nonpartisan. We invite public officials from both parties to do townhalls at the Humanist Community Center, answer audience questions, and help our members make informed civic choices based on all sides of the debate, while also exposing political leaders to Humanist concerns.

Another way we seek to represent secular values in politics is by volunteering to do invocations in legislative sessions. Arizona's legislative session just ended, and non-theists gave more than a dozen invocations all told, sometimes with loud opposition from religious legislators. With the state session wrapped, I'm focusing on city and county councils and doing invocations in their sessions.

One recommendation I have, regardless of whether you love Trudeau, Scheer, or neither, is the same thing I recommend people do in the United States. When you hear that a political figure, whether an incumbent politician or a new candidate come out publicly as secular, contact their office and thank them. I take it as a given that religious fundamentalists will deride them, and the fear of backlash is much of what deters secretly secular politicians from speaking openly about their nonbelief. Whenever one goes public, I like to counter that with sincere thanks. Even if you live in a different riding, politicians talk to each other, and there are more nonbelievers in public office than you realize. The more you encourage those who do speak openly, the more will follow.

**Jacobsen: What are some new projects for the Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix?**

**Douglas:** To be honest, I don't know where to start. Having a full time executive director has drastically increased our bandwidth to raise money for projects that focus on growth, which include everything from collaborating on interfaith panels around shared goals to proselytizing militant nonbelief.

One good example is our new project with National Public Radio. I don't know how much you follow American media, but most talk radio is very conservative in its leaning, and it has a strong religious presence. The major exception to this is NPR, which takes a balanced ideological perspective, targets a very educated audience, and is already listened to by many of the Humanists who are active in HSGP. We've raised the money to sponsor our local NPR affiliate and reach a far wider audience of potential members and people with shared ideas than we've been able to previously. This has a lot of potential for growth since we are headquartered just five miles from Arizona State University's campus in the heart of Arizona's intellectual nerve center, and we thought that would be more interesting than investing in something more traditional, like tabling at events and so forth.

**Jacobsen: Who is an important person for secular work in your locale? What are other important organizations in the area?**

**Douglas:** Arizona is unique not just in having a professional Humanist organizer, but also a professional political arm as well. The Secular Coalition for Arizona is an advocacy organization that counts HSGP and similar organizations across the state among its membership. They have a full time lobbyist, who is, to their knowledge, the only such professional in the United States who focuses on secular issues at the state level. We have two openly atheist legislators, one in the State House and one in the State Senate, with whom the Secular Coalition works extensively.

And though they are in opposition, Arizona's political landscape is changing rapidly, and the messaging they raise on separation of church and state will continue echoing in future years.

Along these lines, Arizona recently elected an open nonbeliever to the United States Senate. Whatever you think about her policy positions overall, the fact that she got elected at all is very much part of a larger trend toward normalizing nonbelief in American politics, at least among those who aren't actively pandering to religiously motivated voting blocs already.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix?**

**Douglas:** The best thing for someone outside Arizona to do is subscribe to our YouTube channel for exciting new content. All Patreon support goes to making our Audiovisual live streaming better, so please help out if you can because the work we do impacts the secular movement outside of Phoenix.

I've read some of your past coverage of volunteer versus professional secular organizers, and I would say HSGP is probably the single biggest test of that trend in the US right now.

Humanist and atheist organizations all over America are already watching, and I fully intend not only to make it work for HSGP but go on to help our allies across the US and Canada cover the map with professional, funded, and highly effective advocates for nonbelief at the grassroots level.

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

## Ask Mandisa 31 – Toxic and Healthy

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 11, 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 healthy and toxic patterns.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** We're talking about monogamy, polyamory, and so on. There's been a lot of different terms floating around. In general, there are two different meanings. One is two people together for life, sexually and otherwise.

Another one is multiple people together in varying arrangements. I think this has a lot of relationship to secular communities, especially as the excess focus, say, that is given to monogamous relationships in traditional, Abrahamic religions fades away. Let's talk a little bit about that today, please.

**Mandisa Thomas:** Monogamy doesn't necessarily mean that two people are mated together for life. It just means that during the life of said relationship, marriage etc, that the two partners will be exclusive physically, and are also expected to be emotionally and mentally exclusive towards each other.

Polyamory in contrast, means that there's more than one partner involved, and that there's an ability to love more than one partner simultaneously. Usually, these relationships and the individuals who are described as polyamorous, and much like monogamous relationships, require an extensive amount of communication between all parties.

Interestingly enough, within the Abrahamic religions, the ones who are expected to be monogamous are the women. We are supposed to be exclusive only to the men that we're with. The men are allowed to have more than one partner, and it's supposed to be a community-accepted standard that women are just supposed to deal with. It's definitely not the other way around.

Women, if caught having another partner according to the Bible, could be stoned to death. While that doesn't happen in today's society, if a woman has more than one partner, then she could be deemed "a slut" or not respectable. Of course, that is a double standard that I find it very unfair and that I rally against.

**Jacobsen:** How does this play out for African-American communities or black folk across the spectrum of religious belief you might find in America?

**Thomas:** Like many other communities, many in the black folks preach one thing, but then do something totally different behind closed doors. just like most communities, and especially with

the still very high number of- even though teen pregnancy is down. There are medical statistics that show that our communities still have some of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS cases and also STI's (sexually transmitted infections). People obviously aren't being as monogamous, but there is this a pretense that is hard to deny.

But we must also consider institutional factors like slavery. Black women and girls in particular were coerced, raped, and sexually exploited. Also, the black community tends to turn a blind eye to girls who are being molested, and who are being coerced by older men in the community. This also occurred during the period of slavery in this country.

Unfortunately, we don't talk about sex and sexuality objectively in our community. There's also little to no discussion about the LGBTQ community, nor about what to expect from your partner or partners. That it is okay to date, and moreover, how do we date? How do we develop relationships? How do we communicate in a marriage? How does that expectation translate over time?

Sometimes circumstances may arise where partners may need to consider that perhaps being in a polyamorous relationship would be better. And we must be open to discussions and consideration of these factors.

Overall, I think that this is something that isn't discussed frequently but within the black community, it is discussed even less. There's a lot of ignorance about this topic, and a lot of shaming too.

**Jacobsen: What have been proposed solutions to widen the conversation or put a wedge in that crevasse? How do you make it more acceptable to talk about, even if individuals aren't looking to practice it?**

**Thomas:** Right. That's the thing. There is a misconception that just because you identify as polyamorous or you advocate for it, that you're going to automatically go out and act on it. That you're looking to have sex with anyone and the first people that you see, which for most is completely false.

Or this idea that you can't be even physically attracted to someone else while you're in a relationship. That is an unrealistic expectation. Getting people to understand that these things are okay, that it is a part of human nature, hopefully, is the first step.

Unfortunately, there's still a lot of the Biblical stigma, and we're dealing with a lot of toxic masculinity, which is what this is based around men's egos being so fragile that they can't handle if their partner is attracted to someone else.

There must be discussions about the fact that having physical relations with someone does not necessarily mean that you'll fall in love with them. It also doesn't mean that having sex with someone else other than your partner means that they are capable of building the same type of relationship, that they can provide those other needs.

Getting rid of the expectation that one partner should be able to fulfill every need that the significant other has. It is absolutely impossible, especially when individuals come from traumatic backgrounds. Really, there should be some professional counseling involved. I know we've talked about this with other subjects. Professional counseling, preferably nonreligious and based on evidence, will help tremendously.

Comprehensive sex education is going to be really, really important when it comes to these initiatives. Unfortunately, we still don't have these conversations enough within our schools and within our communities to make it comfortable discussing them.

**Jacobsen: Out of the population, if everyone is given the opportunity for social sanction, how many people do you think are polyamorous and how many people do you think are monogamous?**

**Thomas:** I don't have any statistics to back that up right now, so I couldn't really say for sure but I will say that with the number of people who run around on their partners- I also forget the statistics of the number of marriages that end in divorce. I think part of that is because of the unrealistic expectation that the partner is supposed to fulfill every need. Perhaps if the partners communicated and were able to discuss being polyamorous effectively, then perhaps the rate wouldn't be so high.

I'm thinking that there's probably at least 60% of the population that is polyamorous. Whether they'll admit to it is something totally different. There's a need for people to be honest with themselves about what they want, what they like, and whether they're able to communicate that with their partners.

But there are probably quite a few folks who ARE monogamous. I certainly want to be fair about that. I think that if two people are able to make everything about their relationship work, whether they satisfy each other physically, emotionally, mentally, as well as building a solid foundation for their relationship (meaning that their business affairs are also in order, they're able to sustain each other financially), then that's great.

But usually, that tends not to be the case. I'm not saying that it couldn't be, but if there is the opportunity to explore building better relationships with other partners and make it more communal, then I think people should be open to it.

**Jacobsen: You mentioned toxic masculinity. I know at least three general reactions to that phrase or that term. One is outward rejection, word and meaning, whether it's understood or not.**

**Another one is not liking the new terms for just general critiques of certain aspects of how men behave, think, act, in general. Another one is they accept it wholeheartedly in terms of its concept and in terms of its intended meaning and terminology.**

**For those who may not know, what are you intending when you say "toxic masculinity"?**

**Thomas:** My intentions for the term "toxic masculinity" is referring to the notions as well as the actions of people. It doesn't just include men because unfortunately, women and children and others are affected by toxic masculinity.

They are the actions and the notions that impede an ability to look at things objectively, especially as they pertain to the notions that have been placed on us and this idea that if they're challenged in some way, then people will be adversely affected. They come down on folks. They may make nasty comments or they may take drastic actions, especially against women.

Said toxic masculinity may result from challenging these norms and these ideals that have favored men for so long, and their perspective. Really, it's not just a coined term for me. It really does address problems and how men react to them. That is how I'm intending to use the

word and the terms. Hopefully, people understand how these are ideals that are rooted, and that they really do need to be addressed.

**Jacobsen:** If we're looking at the acts and the norms that harm women, and girls, and men, as well as things that men benefit off of as well, through toxic masculinity, would this imply a similar concept in toxic femininity? If so, what would be its form and some examples?

**Thomas:** I think that if we're talking about toxic femininity, then we may be referring to women who say they hate all men. Also, if they haven't sufficiently received the help or support that they need for the hurt or the trauma that they experienced, and they're taking it out on people who don't deserve it. Or even this idea that if you don't go along with their brand of feminism, then you're flat out wrong.

I have seen some women do this. And I contend that it is a byproduct of toxic masculinity. I can only cite my observations, but I find that this tends to be where the toxic femininity comes in, when you have women who just outright take on those same characteristics. You know how the people who were bullied become the bullies later? I don't agree with that any more than if a man was doing it.

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

**Thomas:** Thank you very much.

# British Columbia Humanist Association Updates with Ian Bushfield, M.Sc.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 12, 2019

*Ian Bushfield, M.Sc., is the Executive Director of the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA). Here we discuss updates since the AGM and during the first half of 2019.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's start today with the note of the AGM. What were the highlights of it?

**Ian Bushfield:** Like almost every charity and non-profit, our annual general meeting is the time when the board reports to the membership on our achievements over the past year and when the members get to elect new board members to continue our work.

This year's AGM was possibly our most well-attended in history, with 58 people in attendance, likely driven by our hotly contested board election where eight candidates were in the running for five vacancies.

Members also voted on a special resolution proposed by a number of members condemning the recent string of white nationalist attacks in Canada and around the world. After some debate, the resolution passed.

**Jacobsen:** Who is on the new board?

**Bushfield:** First, we said goodbye to Donna Barker after one two-year term. She opted to take a break from the board to focus on some of her academic pursuits in the short term. Board members Dan Hanna, Colin Crabbe, and Kiana Dashtbazi entered their second year of their two-year terms, leaving five vacancies.

Nigel Fish was the only incumbent running and he was re-elected. Joining him are Demi Blakemore, a psychology major; Dr Katie Marshall, a professor of zoology at UBC and Gary Ockenden, a non-profit consultant who lives in Nelson.

**Jacobsen:** With 2019, what has happened for the BCHA?

**Bushfield:** We've been spending a lot of time in the first bit of this year getting ready for what's coming up this summer and getting things in place to ensure our long-term success. Internally this has meant some new policies to professionalize our membership process, starting some reviews at the board level and the new board starting to look at where we should go next.

At the same time, it hasn't been all quiet. We've seen a lot of movement in Saanich (a suburb of Victoria), where the council looks set to adopt a public benefits test before religious properties can qualify for tax exemptions. There have also been new polls confirming that British Columbians do not support our province's continued funding of private schools – whether religious or secular.

And of course, we've been watching with horror the deteriorating situation for reproductive rights in a number of states south of the border. We know there are a number of groups agitating to roll back the rights Humanists like Dr. Henry Morgentaler won for all Canadians, and we're

adding our voice to the chorus calling for those protections to be reaffirmed by politicians at all levels.

As you know, we always have a lot of irons in the fire. The one I'm most excited about making a big push on is Humanist Marriage. The minority government here is proving to be more stable than most people initially predicted, and with a number of their major campaign promises out of the way, I'm hopeful we can get an amendment to the Marriage Act on the agenda for this fall's legislative session.

We're also going to continue to push back against the province's endorsement of religious services, whether its through funding independent schools or the opt-outs given to publicly-funded but faith-based healthcare institutions.

**Jacobsen: You have three summer interns incoming. Why? What will they do during the summer?**

**Bushfield:** We're super excited to have received funding from the Government of Canada's Canada Summer Jobs program to hire three people to join our team this summer. As one of the only people in the country paid to advance Humanist values and issues, I'm often swamped with just how much there is to do, so I hope we can really leverage this opportunity to start building a group of trained and professional secular activists.

Our two campaigns assistants are going to help move some of the research forward that will inform our future advocacy. Key among their tasks will be analyzing data our volunteers pulled together on the prayers said by MLAs in the BC legislature. We're also hoping to develop a better catalogue of the property tax exemption policies across the province and to dig more into what independent schools are doing in BC.

Our programs assistant will help us build the community here in Vancouver. We're keen to use this opportunity to develop some new pilot programs that we can hope to replicate in Humanist communities across the province.

**Jacobsen: Any areas of special concern for humanist activities?**

**Bushfield:** I think as we come up on the federal election this October, a lot of Humanists and the broader nonreligious community, are thinking about climate change. The latest IPCC reports have painted a bleak picture that this may be our last chance to act and, particularly for people I've talked to here in BC, there's a feeling that Canada just isn't pulling our weight. Humanists International just passed the Reykjavik Declaration on the Climate Change Crisis and I know several of our new board members are eager to see Humanists here in Canada take a similarly bold stance.

Related to the challenge of climate justice is the challenge presented to us by the findings of the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. This report confirms what was found by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission four years ago. I think how Humanists respond to these findings and Calls to Justice will be the other major test for our movement over the coming years.

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

**Bushfield:** Thanks again for reaching out to me. I think there's a lot of opportunity for Humanist groups in the current era. Every poll confirms that Canadians are getting less religious and maintain those broad Humanist values of tolerance, support for evidence-based policies and



openness to the world. Particularly among younger Canadians, there's no reason we as a movement shouldn't be able to capture the passions that are leading so many young people to speak up about climate change, reproductive freedoms, trans rights or any other issue.

My hope is that our organizations are forward-thinking enough to avoid falling into the pseudo-rational populism that ultimately only serves to confirm our own biases. We need to listen to those voices that challenge us and broader society and continually look at how we can make our movement more welcoming and more diverse.

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

# Interview with Coreen Plawa of the Santa Fe Atheist Community

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 13, 2019

*Coreen Plawa is part of the Santa Fe Atheist Community. Here we discuss her background and some of the community.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How did you become intrigued and involved in secular issues?

**Coreen Plewa:** I read Bertrand Russell as an adolescent and subsequently read a lot of theology, philosophy, anthropology and mythology to try to understand why religion had played such a major part in history but I never found a reason to believe in the sky-god myth.

**Jacobsen:** How did the Santa Fe Atheist Community start?

**Plewa:** I was not part of its origination. My husband and I joined after it had existed for a year or more.

**Jacobsen:** What are the demographics of the community now?

**Plewa:** We have 260 listed members on the meetup website but there are no more than 50 who regularly attend one or more of our activities in a given year. We have never queried the membership on their demographics. From my observation, I can say that we are mostly over 60, many retired, straight and gay, mostly white, economically comfortable and very politically liberal.

**Jacobsen:** What are your tasks and responsibilities in Santa Fe Atheist Community?

**Plewa:** My main assigned task is to ensure that our every other Sunday brunch has a location in a home or at a restaurant. I and several other members also post activities to invite others to participate in such as: restocking food pantries, cooking and serving meals to the homeless, attending a protest march, concert, play, movies, book discussion, art exhibits, road trip, camping and hike. Anyone can ask me to post an activity.

**Jacobsen:** What have been important social and political activities of the Santa Fe Atheist Community?

**Plewa:** Many of our members are very politically active and we are all very politically aware. We live in the State Capital so we join in lobbying efforts when the legislature is in session. We have marched in the Pride Parade. As for social activities, all of our activities are very social with food and drink usually involved.

**Jacobsen:** What are some new projects for the Santa Fe Atheist Community?

**Plewa:** We don't do anything that we label a project.

**Jacobsen:** Who is an important person for secular work in your locale?

**Plewa:** Not sure I understand the question. None of us do sacred work so it is all secular.

**Jacobsen:** What are other important organizations in the area?

**Plewa:** There is Humanist organization that is more discussion topic oriented.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the Santa Fe Atheist Community?**

**Plewa:** People just sign up on the meetup site and then show up at one of our activities.

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

**Plewa:** We attempt to fill the social and community needs that churches often provide. We are making friendships.

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

## Ask Mandisa 32 – Tact

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 14, 2019

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

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

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

*Here, we talk about tact.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's talk about some issues about sensitivity to community members, to sectors or demographics of the community and the ways in which secular communities can be mindful of things when having guests on shows, when writing articles and if one wants to speak about particularly sensitive issues, picking your spots and picking your publications and outlets appropriately.

**Mandisa Thomas:** As we know, the atheist/secular community is still represented predominantly by CIS white folks. That's men and women alike. There are now a number of people of colour, women, young people, and also more transgender folks that are involved in the community. As our numbers grow, the issues that we face will be brought more to the forefront. There is genuine curiosity about our perspectives. As the focus on human rights become more prevalent, then our voices are being heard.

This does come as not just a shock, but there is some resistance by some folks, primarily white men, who think that the issues are over exaggerated. They are very ignorant towards issues pertaining to marginalized groups, without even bothering to do the research.

They think they're speaking on behalf of these communities, and they often speak out of turn and get it wrong. They often speak from a perspective that is very ignorant, and it is very inconsiderate and outright harmful to us. This behaviour needs to be addressed.

**Jacobsen:** When speaking of harm, when speaking of marginalized groups, what does one mean by marginalized groups? What does one mean in terms of the harms from these particular topics and the way in which they're spoken of, or about?

**Thomas:** When we're talking about marginalized groups, we're speaking of communities who have, historically, been discriminated against. It could be institutional and systemic, like with the black community. Also, the LGBTQ community, which has often had violence inflicted upon individuals, and negative stigma placed on the entire community.

There are actually actions that impeded people's right to actually live. This was very prevalent when we have seen, historically, with the civil rights movement, with women, in particular, when we were fighting for our right to vote.

This is what I mean when speaking of “marginalized communities”, those who according to society’s standards are put in a very, very degrading position. The atheist/secular community is a marginalized community as well. People still have to deal with the negative stigma surrounding atheism.

Therefore, it’s important that we recognize those individuals are us who have been further marginalized, and who have been affected by said marginalization. The understanding and the compassion and the support should be there, especially since we already experience it on one end.

**Jacobsen: What does this then say about community tact?**

**Thomas:** Tact is the ability to address an issue and do so in a way where people can walk away with better understanding, even if there isn’t agreement. This usually means that people should address important subjects with objectivity and accuracy to help others understand why their previous positions may be incorrect. This also entails what they should be doing in order to learn, and walk away not necessarily being best friends forever, but working more in partnership with each other and that we are truly really trying to understand and work on the problems that we go through.

Tact doesn’t mean that things will be pretty. There may be some things pointed that are hard to handle. It also doesn’t mean that you’re being apologetic, but it also doesn’t mean you have to be mean either. I often try to do this when I speak, especially if I am front of a predominantly white audience. I can talk about collective issues without personally insulting anyone.

Unfortunately, in our community, we pride ourselves on our intellectual capabilities, yet there’s often a lack of empathy. There’s also a lack of understanding, which is disguised as tact when presenting information. Tact doesn’t mean you should lack empathy. In fact, if you are a tactful person, you apply empathy. You can understand people. Certainly, that is something that we still need to work on, especially in engaging other further marginalized groups.

**Jacobsen: With this information, what can media do now?**

**Thomas:** If there is an organization or other outlet that features a speaker who has a history of perhaps provoking people who are marginalized, the first thing that should be done is take the information seriously, and get to the bottom of it. Verify that the information that they are dispensing is indeed harmful, and then call the individual on it, and/or remove their opportunities from said platforms.

Getting back to tact for a moment. Just because you like someone, it doesn’t mean that they can’t be wrong. It also doesn’t mean that you can’t address the issue at hand. If we’re going to be a community that is improving on our efforts and our actions, then that means addressing and correcting people on their stuff.

It doesn’t mean that there has to be outright separation but if someone has been harmful, it helps to show that those members of marginalized communities are being heard, that you care about what they think and also, you care about their support. Feature folks who live those experiences and who can provide more direct information.

It’s definitely best to keep the “majority boys”, i.e. white men, when it comes to these subject matters, on the back burner. There’s nothing wrong with them taking a back seat to subjects that

do not apply to them. Also, they can't be one-time conversations or one-time efforts. It's important to have us represented frequently.

Hopefully, it can turn into teachable moments. However, if the people in question are obstinate, then you may want to reconsider association with them. Again, this doesn't mean outright dismissal, but if you have someone in your network that is causing tension or can cause potential damage to your organization and to the people who support you, then it's worth considering.

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

**Thomas:** Thank you very much.

## Interview with Auður Sturludóttir – Vice-Chairperson, Siðmennt – Félag siðrænna húmanista á Íslandi

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 15, 2019

*Auður Sturludóttir is the Vice-Chairperson of Siðmennt – Félag siðrænna húmanista á Íslandi. Here we discuss her background and some of the community.*

**Scott Jacobsen:** Let's start with some background, either family or personal, what are some important details and stories?

**Auður Sturludóttir:** I grew up in a small village in the North of Iceland. I was not christened as a baby, as was the tradition with almost everyone, and I was probably the only child in the village who was not. My father was against this because he was not religious. But it was the village priest's job to register my name in the official records. He and my father had an argument about this, because the priest denied registering my name unless he would get to christen me. My father did not give in and after he complained to the authorities, the priest had to fill out the papers without having the pleasure of welcoming me to his congregation. That was my first encounter with the public system which was so traditionally contaminated with Christianity, that you couldn't even have a name without having a religious ceremony, or at least that was the misunderstanding of many. Things have evolved a lot since then, thanks to people like my father.

**Jacobsen:** How did you become intrigued and involved in secular issues?

**Auður:** First I must say that I ended up doing the Christian confirmation because of peer pressure and the Siðmennt alternative was not an option yet. My parents had divorced, I had moved to a different town with my mother and I was too shy to be different. My brother did not do the confirmation and I looked up to him, but I did not dare to go in his footsteps. But my disbelief in God and other myths was still there and as a teenager I was appalled by my schoolmates who were often telling ghost stories and talking about life after death. I never believed in this, because that's the way I was brought up. The other kids were offended when I told them I simply did not believe in those stories about messages from dreams or mediums, signs from the supposed other side of life and other supernatural stuff. In my twenties I read a lot of debunking articles from an association called Vantrú, where religion and other non-scientific affirmations were debunked, and people were encouraged to seek and understand the truth in a scientific manner instead of jumping to the most wishful explanation of the world. It wasn't until later that I joined Siðmennt, which for me was a nice discovery, because atheism is one thing, but Humanism is another thing. Atheism just tells you what I don't believe in, but Humanism tells you what I do believe in.

**Jacobsen:** How did the Siðmennt – Félag siðrænna húmanista á Íslandi start?

**Auður:** I've seen Hope Knútsson explaining it here on this site, it was her and a few other parents who started this around the civil confirmation ceremonies they wanted to offer as an alternative to the Christian confirmation.

**Jacobsen:** What are the demographics of the community now?

**Auður:** I don't know. We don't have access to the list of people who are signed up in Siðmennt through the state. My guess would be that our members are of all ages.

**Jacobsen: What are your tasks and responsibilities in the Siðmennt – Félag siðrænna húmanista á Íslandi?**

**Auður:** I'm the vice-chairperson. I have been on the board in different positions since 2015, first as an alternate member and then as a main member. We have always worked as a team and spread the responsibilities as we don't like hierarchy. To make this voluntary work as efficient and pleasant as possible, we split the tasks evenly between us and we have now set up more organized focus groups, councils or committees with both board members and common members to carry out our plans. The idea now is that I lead the council of internal functioning of the organization, which will find methods to strengthen the work of Siðmennt around the country and map ways of interacting with our members, including them and activating in our work. We want to channel the energy of all the people out there, who are so grateful for our work and want to give back, to some projects that will be fruitful for others. Having the choice between belonging to a Christian society or a secular society is extremely important. More active members can contribute to strengthening the secular society.

**Jacobsen: What have been important social and political activities of the Siðmennt – Félag siðrænna húmanista á Íslandi?**

**Auður:** The important social activities that are constant and do matter a lot in the context of having a secular alternative is the ceremonies. Weddings, funerals, name-giving ceremonies and finally, the confirmation ceremonies. This is probably where we play the biggest role for the society. In Iceland, most 14-year-olds do a confirmation, and at this very sensitive point in their life they must answer whether they want to take part in the Christian tradition or not. I think it gives them freedom to have an alternative like we offer. This is also a time in people's life where they start to be genuinely interested in big ethical questions and can easily be influenced by others. It's not good to be forced to adhere to a life stance at this point, but rather to have more education and then decide your life stance later in life. This is what Siðmennt offers, you don't have to commit yourself to Humanism or any other life stance when going through the philosophical course which ends in a graduation ceremony – which we call the “civil confirmation”.

Our political agenda is constantly the same: we want to see the full separation of church and state. I don't know exactly what the form of it will be or how long it will take, but I can see that the society is evolving this way. We want the tax money to be used wisely and fairly. We demand equal service for people of all life stances at the important moments in their lives. When you are in the hospital and need a mental support, you should be offered a talk with psychologist or a social worker – not a priest as the system is now. When a family member dies, you should not have to see angel statues and crosses displayed around the body in the hospital as I experienced with my father. I know they want to be nice, but this kind of details can be disturbing. The best way is the neutral way. And when you have to organize a funeral for your loved one or a wedding, you shouldn't have to rent an expensive housing for the ceremony when all the churches stand there empty and ready to be used – if it wasn't for the ban to use those tax-paid buildings for everything but Christian ceremonies. This ban was implemented by the church council only a few years ago but it sounds like something from the Middle-Ages. One way to face the evolution in the society, i.e. the decreasing number of members in the National Church,



would be to open the buildings for others to use. I think this would be economical and environmentally friendly. We must share more in today's world. The church's ownership of those buildings is a bit outdated in my opinion. And knowing that a big sum of money is spent on priests' salaries instead of subsidizing professional psychological assistances in our society seems to be a waste of money. But the church is so entangled in our tax system that it will take some courageous but wise politicians to land this separation in an acceptable way.

**Jacobsen: What are some new projects for the Siðmennt – Félag siðrænna húmanista á Íslandi?**

**Auður:** We have to work on our internal matters, build ourselves up and prepare for the continuing growth of our organization. Soon we will be able to expand our office and hire a new person. We will have even more teenagers attending our courses next winter and probably more of the other ceremonies as well, and we have to strengthen our infrastructure. As mentioned before, we will have to harness the power of our members and prepare events, like symposiums, pub talks and other exciting things.

**Jacobsen: Who is an important person for secular work in your locale?**

**Auður:** I do not want to drop names. Everyone is important and I think it's dangerous to pinpoint the ideology to a person. It's the idea of equal human rights that is important. And the people to tackle the challenges of equal rights are the people whom we have assigned the power to, that is our MP's. The lawmakers are the ones who will make the country secular and we have to support them and encourage them to take the right decisions. And children's teachers of course. They are the people who lay the foundations of knowledge in our society and we have to start taking their jobs more seriously and pay them better.

**Jacobsen: What are other important organizations in the area?**

**Auður:** The Icelandic Human rights Centre is a very important organization. They fight for the right of all humans regardless of their background or religion and are doing a very good job, considering that it's not a government foundation and has to ask for grants every year.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the Siðmennt – Félag siðrænna húmanista á Íslandi?**

**Auður:** Easy, look us up on the internet and sign up! We also have a closed Facebook chat for members where all kinds of things are discussed. Then we advertise meetings and events regularly.

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

**Auður:** The world surely is a complicated and a magnificent place. We should all focus on saving it, so consume less, fight less and travel wisely.

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

**Auður:** Likewise, Scott.

# Interview with Scott of Skeptic Meditations on Parents and Cult-Like Organizations

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 16, 2019

*Scott is the Founder of Skeptic Meditations. Here we discuss parents and cult-like organizations.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Have you ever been given any indication as to what parents feel or sense as they begin to lose their children to a cult or cult-like organization?

**Scott of Skeptic Meditations:** From my own experience of leaving home, family, and college in my early twenties to join a cult-like group, the Self-Realization Monastic Order, my parents wondered what was wrong with them, with me, and with the group. Why would I “run away” to live in an ashram? Why was I so fervent about meditating hours each day and about following the path of a deceased Hindu yogi-guru with a strange, exotic name: Paramahansa Yogananda. I hadn’t told my parents I was leaving home. I left a note after I left to join the ashram.

My dad, later after I’d been in the Order for a few years, told me he blamed himself for my leaving home and joining the Order. I told dad, at that time, he was not to blame. He knew I was unhappy at home. I had been attending college while living at home. My parents fought a lot. Marital issues that the four of us: dad, mom, sister, and myself who all lived under one roof that caused us to feel like we were all walking on eggshells while in the house or together as a family.

I had found what I thought was a grand solution, a peace and stability in meditation practice and in frequently visiting the local SRF Temple to meditate more and to listen to the lectures about yoga and “how to live”. It was all, at this vulnerable time in a young person’s life, quite seductive and transforming: the promises, the answers, the certainty offered by the church in the midst of my chaos of home life and of facing an uncertain future of leaving home on my own. Let me be clear, I’m not claiming that my just-so story above applies to other families, parents, or children who “lose” their children to cults. Yet, the metaphor, the underlying psychological situation may illustrate some of the reasons why parents may “lose” their children to cult-like groups.

Young people are especially vulnerable during major life transitions, like leaving home, completing college, starting first career, and may dread facing having to make “a living” in an existentially scary world. But how that existential dread gets handled or channelled depends on many factors. We human animals seek meaning and purpose in a fundamentally meaningless and existentially scary world. Young people are bombarded by an endless stream of religious pabulum and political dogma that claims to have answers but creates more conflicts. Our vacuous consumerist techno-scientistic society promises efficiency and productivity and to outsource the future to robots in the name of profits for the 1%. Democracy is a name only and young people see (or sense) the hypocrisies of our post-modern culture. Is it any wonder that introverted, sensitive, artistic, intellectual young people who seek deeper meaning in life than getting a degree, getting married, having kids, and consuming things are probably the most vulnerable and susceptible to joining abusive relationships, coercive organizations, and authoritarian religions?

**Jacobsen: How can parents and friends build bridges with those who have succumbed to a cult or cult-like organization?**

**Scott of Skeptic Meditations:** Cult is often a pejorative term used for ideas or groups we don't like, that contradict our deeply held beliefs.

My first recommendation would be not to call your child's ideas (or the group's) a cult, or see them as stupid or wrong. But to truly try to understand the group's appeal from the child's or follower's perspective. Educating oneself about the underlying psychology and sociology. The best way to help is to get educated about cult-like behaviors. Not just react to fear or sensational, extreme, or suicidal accounts of cults or leaders, like Jim Jones, Charles Manson, or Marshall Applewhite. But to understand from the follower's perspective, their child's or friends' perspective, why they joined and why they stay inside the cult-like group.

There are many books available on cult psychology. Dr. Yuval Laor's free chapter on parent-child model of love and fervor provides a useful framework for understanding cult-like behaviors, relationships, and organizations. Laor's theory posits that as a society we accept that parents may unconditionally protect their child even if the child was a Hitler or Manson. A parent or child in a state of infatuated fervor often has many blind spots and is willing to overlook grievous flaws of the beloved person or organization. Love and fervor is neutral, not judged. What's interesting to understand are how infatuated love, fervour, and awe are typically feelings and experiences of those in cultic relationships or organizations.

**Jacobsen: Any knowledge as to what is the outcome to the emotional and mental health of parents who have lost children completely to a cult or cult-like organization?**

**Scott of Skeptic Meditations:** As I mentioned earlier, Dr. Laor's theory of love and fervour between human animals, especially parent-child relationships, explains some of the actual or possible outcomes within the parent-child in the context of infatuated love, fervor, or awe. The feelings of love, fervour, or awe can blind us. They also can open us to new experiences and feelings. I don't want to speculate on the wide-variety of outcomes that are possible. Rather than judging, fretting, or trying to dissuade our loved ones from a particular ideology or group, I believe our energies would be better spent learning the dynamics and flaws between human animals: why we have blind spots (sometimes called biases), the many ways fervour and awe get triggered, and how our experiences and relationships can be both healthful and harmful. With cult-like groups we tend to focus on the behaviors that are disagreeable and that we think are harmful.

I recommend learning from experts in the field, mental health professionals in the field, and organizations that provide resources for parents or children in or coming out of abusive relationships or cultic groups or extremist ideologies.

**Jacobsen: Are there hotlines or places to make calls for help, including law enforcement?**

**Scott of Skeptic Meditations:** Unless there's physical abuse or breaking of the law, I'm not aware of what you'd be able to do to get help from law enforcement. However, there's a toll free hotline with Recovering From Religion. The hotline is for people who have questions or problems coming out of religion or religious groups.

The Cult Education Institute has a Directory of Cult Recovery Resources that includes mental health professionals.

The Open Minds Foundation also lists resources for parents and children in abusive or coercive organizations. Yuval Taor, whom I recommended above, is associated with and has pages listed with Open Minds Foundation.

The International Cultic Studies Association website has support groups and resources.

I hope this information helps you or your readers learn more and to look for the resource to help them on the journey.

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

# Interview with Nicholas Kosovic – Founder, UBC Students for Freedom of Expression

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 17, 2019

*Nicholas Kosovic is the Founder of the UBC Students for Freedom of Expression. Here we discuss his work and background, and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's start from a historical perspective. This is the UBC Students for Freedom of Expression. You are the founder and the past president.

**Nicholas Kosovic:** I was the founder. I recently resigned as president. I am in the process of transitioning an entirely different team as most of them are graduating.

**Jacobsen:** What was the niche needing filling in UBC campus life for undergraduates in order to create Students for Freedom of Expression?

**Kosovic:** There's always a consideration. We are the second freedom of expression group on UBC campus. There is the much larger free speech club going around. Personally, from my dealings with them and examining what they were doing, I just wasn't seeing what I wanted to happen, which was campus culture is incredibly polarized.

Most people feel constrained by their ability to interact with ideas. It is very limited. There is a high concentration of what I would call the mainstream campus view on certain issues or the inability to address views outside of that consolidated view circle [Laughing].

I decided. If we are going to do it, we need to do it right. That whatever we do tends not to galvanize anxiety or fear, but, rather, an academic view of most of the controversial ideas floating around today.

**Jacobsen:** Who were some controversial speakers brought to events hosted by Students for Free Expression? What were some controversies?

**Kosovic:** Our first goal for addressing these big topics is focusing first on the topics and then we sought out academics or authors who spoke on these issues; that seemed like they were going to be suppressed, e.g., Armin Navabi discussing issues in Islam and how we're able to talk about Islam in a very serious manner concerning radicalism (and how this is discussion about radical Islam is thrown to the side in the greater context).

He didn't face suppressed speech. Until, he was stopped from speaking at Mount Royal University. We saw the writing on the wall. That he was being disinvited from places. We decided to bring him. He was local.

That was the first event. Our second event, we wanted to talk about a lesser known controversial issue. It is not really in the mainstream in the moment about Canadian history. We wanted to talk about native issues and how the native scholarship has been addressed in the university by indigenization.

We got professor Frances Widdowson to come to UBC. She is a professor at the University of Mount Royal in Calgary. That went off without a hitch. One of the most controversial views and

the one getting a lot of press coverage at the moment is either Canadian identity or white identity.

We found professor Ricardo Duchesne from the University of New Brunswick. He came and is considered one of the most controversial professors in Canada. He came without protest or problem. We were able to see into his view or arguments, and to criticize him.

Then we brought, as a last testament to my tenure, Megan Murphy to talk about trans issues. That is one of the events that got the most controversy. Those were the four big issues that we thought that might need to be covered: Islam, white identitarianism, native issues, and transgenderism.

Those seemed to be the most prevalent and most talked about in our society right now. We decided to bring the four speakers. They have academic backing. That's what we ended up doing.

**Jacobsen: If we are looking at Article 2(b) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Canada, it provides freedom of expression. What have been traditional arguments across the political and social spectrum to restrict freedom of expression? What have been traditional arguments to expand freedom of expression in Canada?**

**Kosovic:** On that issue, I like to focus on the university. I think the university has a very special place in society. Outside of the Charter, under which the university falls, the university also has the obligation to hold the value of freedom of expression.

It is built into the school's academic culture or, at least, should be. Having the most educated students and academics in one place, that's the best environment for controversial speech to be had.

If we are talking about people in the public square or giving speeches in a park, that might be a little bit different. We are talking about the most educated members of society denounce or applaud ideas that are, perhaps, unorthodox or extremely controversially.

Maybe, it is to expose them to an academic sunlight that you wouldn't get in a normal academic atmosphere. Some of the reservations that I have had from some groups is having the views available to the public, essentially, grows their following.

I don't know if that necessarily follows. If you have a society that is harmonious, very satisfied with its current standing, these controversial views do not gain traction because people don't listen. That is probably a good thing.

The fear that these views are in some way destructive of society is more indicative of the problems of society more than the views themselves. That is the take that I look at it from.

If you are looking at expanding or restricting our ability to talk about viewpoints, I think the major argument is that some viewpoints are, in fact, a danger in themselves. So, when we had our speaker on transgenderism, Megan Murphy, the loudest criticism I received: you have vulnerable groups are going to be adversely affected by the existence of these views or the proximity of these views.

I do not believe in the proximity of these views in the age of the internet. Views of all sorts are close to us, wherever we go. We all have phones in our pockets. You can look up whatever you want from the safety of your own pocket. I do not really believe in the danger of proximity.

When it comes to popularity, it is the same thing. Having things said in the university or in the public square is not different, in my mind at least, than having it on your phone, I hear people suggesting that we need to remove views from social media and the internet at large.

I have to say: those things do not work. For example, white identitarianism has existed more than I've been alive. The fact that they're coming to fruition now. It does not demand restricting the internet. It means addressing these issues in an academic manner to discredit them if they are worthy of being discredited or, at least, understand what they are.

Most people I have spoken to, do not know what the other side is trying to say.

**Jacobsen: If we are talking about an individual or a group who wants to marginalize individuals who identify as white nationalist or others who identify as pro-Antifa or part of Antifa, then the sentiment in most of the population would probably be that they are correct to feel antipathy towards them.**

**However, they would be working in an incorrect methodology or strategy in terms of trying to shut these voices down rather than confront them in a rational way, in order to discredit them and marginalize them with society in a more long-term and effective way.**

**In that, if one shuts down a group, it only shuts them down temporarily or in the short-term. In fact, they may go underground and become more extreme because they then enter an echo chamber and become more dangerous.**

**Is that the basic sentiment and argument there?**

**Kosovic:** I would agree. Let's be clear about what it means to go underground, it is not as simple as having as having a small room in the back of a restaurant where people meet on every Friday and start talking.

**Jacobsen: [Laughing].**

**Kosovic:** When you're excluded from public space, private space may be as simple as your job or your party at your house, or just any sort of things, where people have localized homogeneities.

What I've seen in society at this moment, we're living in an atomized and localized series of homogeneities that on occasion interact with each other in terribly unproductive ways.

When you think about the bubbles that exist, that is what it means to be isolated and alienated from the rest of viewpoints. I have always thought of radicalization as a product of polarization.

It is undoubtable to me. That by sequestering views one might find reprehensible rather than addressing them. If they are so reprehensible, then they should be addressed. I have come to terms with the fact that a lot of the speakers we're bringing.

It becomes productive once the conversation ends. We have to understand moderation comes as a result of conversation. It is way better for society for everyone to be moderate.

**Jacobsen: If you're looking at passing the torch for Students for Free Expression at UBC, what is the plan, say 2019/2020? How do you go about mentoring and passing the responsibility onto another generation, with regards to student academic life, of students?**

**Kosovic:** It becomes really easy. Once I leave, my presence or what I've learned won't go away. When it comes to how the group after me will run it, there are no sorts of qualifications for this.

All you have to be is a good, honest, person who is curious about other ideas and will not antagonize people once they come at you. The four golden rules or commandments for this group are 1) never antagonize anybody because that is not your role as the leader of the group, as a host. You should never be in a position of antagonizing anyone at the event or part of the group.

Two things, you should know to be polite and know the role of the university when it comes to the foundation of free speech. The second rule is that you never put your hat into the ring. You never put your own views into the fight.

Realistically, we are all students running this. We do not have anything to say or to say in contrast to the millions of voices that are commenting on these issues. If it looks like we are in some way involved in a political party or involved, or invested, financially in these sorts of ideas, then that is going to break down any sense of good will.

The idea is to maintain good will by completely being isolated from these ideas. If you are, you have to keep this very private to yourself. The third rule is to always provide a Devil's Advocate.

One of the difficulties when we bring speakers to campus. We were never able to bring faculty to come who had opposing viewpoints. We really did not have any luck getting other students who represented the so-called marginalized groups to come either. Bringing opposition actually took double the amount of effort compared to bringing the actual speakers themselves, we begged them. We offered to pay for their ticket, and so on.

We tried our hardest to get the opposition of any of the views espoused to come. I think that is something, however fruitless, that needs to continue to happen. That is what establishes discussion. We are not here to establish an echo chamber. We're not here to grow any localized homogeneity than any other. We are not cultural warriors.

The fourth rule, if I remember this correctly – I should remember this, you have to be aware of the fact that you should never take personal attacks personally. We are living in an age when the internet is prevalent. I have certainly gotten a lot of hate mail.

**Jacobsen:** [Laughing].

**Kosovic:** [Laughing] we get all sorts of hate mail. Not just from left-wing people but from right-wing people, from faculty, from newspapers, the reality is that they do not know me. I really do not put myself out there personally. They do not have a stable definition of who makes me, me. If I take this personally, I am being an idiot.

If someone calls me a neo-Nazi online, they don't really know me or anything I think about it. I laugh and shrug it off. You're never supposed to respond to it in a way that makes it serious. If someone comes at you and says, "We think you're a sexist and a racist and want you off campus," why not offer to take them for a coffee?

Take them for a coffee, and talk about it, obviously, they are passionate. If you take the context from what they have initially contact you for, at least, they are passionate. You can respect that they have a sort of shamelessness to come and talk to you.

Maybe, they want to talk to you in person or want you to buy them a coffee. I don't want to say, "Oh yeah, Students for Freedom of Expression has very Christian virtues at its underpinning." But that is where it has come from for me. You never antagonize anyone. You always be nice to people. They don't know what they're doing when they say that kind of stuff to you.



That is what I am trying to give to the new people who are running this group. I want to write them a rule book and to follow it. If it is a group about a principle, we better have principled responses to all of these very predictable sorts of reactions to us.

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

**Kosovic:** Awesome! Thank you.

# Interview with Steve James – Executive Director, Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 18, 2019

*Steve James is the Executive Director of the Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York. Here we discuss his background, work, and community.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's start with some background, either family or personal, what are some salient details and stories?

**Steve James:** I was raised Catholic. My mother was a devout Catholic who made a bargain with my father that all of their kids would go to Catholic school and be raised in the church. He was a non-practicing Christian of an indeterminate denomination. My grandmother who also helped raise us kids was a devout Lutheran. I had 16 years of Catholic education, first with the nuns, and then the Jesuit priests. I was an altar boy (when the masses were said in Latin), and embraced the many aspects of Catholic life in a small urban parish.

But my upbringing in a home that contained different religions taught me that my religion was not immutable. My education with the Jesuits taught me to think for myself, and to rely on science and logic for answers. Somewhere in my college years I realized that I didn't believe in God, the angels, saints, and heaven anymore. I had "lost my faith." Still, I consider myself a cultural Catholic, continuing to appreciate the beauty of the Christian values articulated in the Sermon on the Mount. I miss many aspects of that way of life, especially belonging to a community that nurtures you in a worldview shared by everyone around you. It is a very comforting feeling, even though it is an illusion.

**Jacobsen:** How did you become intrigued and involved in secular issues?

**James:** The most important time in my intellectual development was 1977 when I read Ernest Becker's Pulitzer prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*, and his final work *Escape from Evil*. Becker had been an atheist as a young adult, and although he embraced a vague religious orientation in his later writing, he clearly discards traditional organized religion when he writes: "Religion is no longer valid as a hero system." Becker understood that death is the ultimate fate of all living things, and that humans are unique in our ability to know and dread our inevitable demise. Death, he says, is "the rumble of panic underneath everything." His writings led me to understand the purpose of religion, that religion offers an antidote to death anxiety by promising eternal life. Religion also offers one "cosmic meaning." It provides a purpose beyond the three-dimensional world we inhabit. Purpose and meaning are powerful defenses against death anxiety. I learned that you have to confront your mortality, the delusion of literal immortality, and the dependence on cosmic purpose and meaning to be intellectually free.

Similarly, every culture offers, in addition to religious eternal life, symbolic immortality. From ancient Egyptian pyramids, to medieval kingdoms, to empires, to multinational corporate empires today, humans have been devoted to creations that will live beyond their own graves. To be free, you have to confront these delusions as well. Culture also provides self-esteem, codified into heroism systems, another defense against the dread of death. Our present-day hero systems revolve around consumer utopia. As Becker puts it, "Modern man is drinking and drugging

himself out of awareness, or spends his time shopping, which is the same thing.” In this country many of us driven by a need for achievement, a dominant heroic role, and are devoted to America the superpower, another form of empire in the service of purpose and meaning.

As I came to understand what religion does, in conjunction with the other functions of culture, I began to realize that a secular, independent life was both challenging and liberating. I understood that we make our own purpose and meaning in our lives, and live with the uncertainty and struggles that that entails.

I have spent a great deal of my thinking and writing focused on these themes. My book, American Stew: Hope in a Toxic Culture applies the ideas of Ernest Becker to contemporary issues. My work with the Humanists explores alternatives to the predictable cultural values of wealth, fame, power, and beauty that are presented to us as reasons for living. As humanists we attempt to live by a few simple principles:

Humanism is a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of all humanity in this natural world, advocating the methods of reason, science and democracy.

We maintain that human beings, using their own intelligence and cooperation with one another, can build enduring peace and contentment upon this earth. Please join us in this effort.

**Jacobsen: How did the Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York start? What are the demographics of the community now? What is involved in the Executive Director role, tasks and responsibilities?**

**James:** The Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York (HSMNY) is a local chapter of the American Humanist Association. The chapter, as it presently exists, was founded in 1974 by Jesse Gordon and Corliss Lamont.

Corliss Lamont (1902-1995) is one of the most renowned Humanists in history. He is the author of 16 books, including *The Philosophy of Humanism* (originally published in 1949 as *Humanism as a Philosophy*), and *The Illusion of Immortality* (originally published in 1932 as *Issues of Immortality: A Study in Implications*), two of the most important works of Humanist literature. He is survived by his wife Beth Lamont who is a member of the HSMNY executive board.

HSMNY serves the New York metropolitan area with demographics as diverse as the city itself.

The tasks and responsibilities of the Executive Director are to organize and run the monthly meetings. This includes working with other members to pick a topic, find a video or speaker, write a meeting invitation, send out a Meetup announcement, coordinate email and other social media announcements, coordinate with the venue where the meetings are held, and provide audio-visual service to support the meeting. Other responsibilities include communicating with the membership regarding special events that may be of interest.

**Jacobsen: What have been important social and political activities of the Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York?**

**James:** HSMNY meetings are partially social in nature in that they take place in a restaurant meeting room and attendees order food and drinks for an hour prior to the formal meeting. The group is not overtly political, but the politics tends to lean toward progressive positions on most issues. We are, after all, concerned with “the common good.” Occasionally we become involved in demonstrations and marches in the city on an ad hoc basis.

These are the meeting topics for the last 12 months:

Education's Death Valley

Altruism in an Age of Narcissism

Being Wrong in a Time of Certainty

A World Beyond Poverty

Being Vulnerable

New Atheism

The Good Country

Abortion in America

Capitalism and Democracy Parts 1 & 2

War or Peace? Is a war between the U S and China inevitable?

Embracing Diversity

**Jacobsen: What are some new projects for the Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York?**

**James:** No new projects lately.

**Jacobsen: Who is an important person for secular work in New York? What are other important organizations in the area?**

**James:** New York has many secular organizations. New York Society for Ethical Culture is one of the oldest and best established groups. The Secular Humanist Society of New York describes itself as a leading freethought organization. NYC Atheists is an active organization of New Yorkers who care deeply about the Separation of Church and State as well as a wide range of secular issues and interests. Gotham Atheists reports a membership of 2,000 atheists. Other groups include the New York City branch of the Center for Inquiry, American Atheists a group in nearby New Jersey and Ethical Culture groups in Long Island and Westchester which are suburbs of New York.

Dr. Anne Klaeysen has been a Leader at New York Society for Ethical Culture for many years and is one of the more prominent secular voices in the city.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York?**

**James:** Find HSMNY at <https://www.meetup.com/Humanist-Society-of-Metropolitan-New-York/> and <https://www.corliss-lamont.org/hsmny/>. We meet every second Thursday of the month. You can reach me at [steve@americanstew.us](mailto:steve@americanstew.us).

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

## Ask SASS 2 (Rick and Wynand) – South African Banners, Flags, and Lions, Oh My!

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 19, 2019

*This is an ongoing and new series devoted to the South African Secular Society (SASS) and South African secularism. The Past President, Jani Schoeman, and the Current President, Rick Raubenheimer, and the current Vice-President, Wynand Meijer, will be taking part in this series to illuminate these facets of South Africa culture to us. Rick and Wynand join us.*

*Here we talk about secular marriages in South Africa.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** In terms of banners and flags as part of the outreach efforts of SASS, how did you develop them, how did you design them, and how did they turn out?

**Rick Raubenheimer:** I can help with the development. Essentially, Jani, with the assistance of her husband, Bertus, who has some graphical design experience, designed the logo several years back. I was instrumental in getting it changed from a bitmap to a vector, so that we can scale it to any size.

Wilhelm then took that and gave it to a company here, called Jetline, that can produce the things. We've distributed them to various parts of the country. Mine and Wynand's ended up in Pretoria, so he picked them up. Over to you, Wynand, seeing you've seen them.

**Wynand Meijer:** The banners came out well. They're quite tall, as well. I picked up the banners. That's the short and sweet of it.

**Raubenheimer:** We've had a flag, which is about three meters tall. You do understand meters in Canada, don't you?

**Jacobsen:** Yes [Laughing].

**Raubenheimer:** Good. Your southern neighbours insist on being a British colony and using British imperial units. Either way. There's a flag three meters tall, which is teardrop shape. There is, as I mentioned, a rectangular X-banner, as they call it because it's supported on a frame that is X-shaped and clips in at each corner.

The intention is to put a flag outside the venue and a banner inside, typically. That's all we could afford now because we got six printed for different parts around different Meetups around the country. Probably, when we're flusher with funds, we'll duplicate that and do another teardrop banner and X-banner for the Meetups.

They've now been distributed to several places, as far afield as Cape Town and the Eastern Cape, to Port Elizabeth, and then up here. I don't think we got a set to KZN because they don't have regular Meetups yet. Do you remember?

**Meijer:** No flags for KwaZulu-Natal, currently.

**Raubenheimer:** That's our south-eastern province. Contains the port of Durban, which maybe you've seen on a map somewhere. That's where we are now. We haven't tried them in action yet. We will see how they work. I'm planning a Meetups for the first Saturday of May.

I've scheduled our Meetups in Joburg for first Saturday of the month all the way through the year. We'll stick one on the road outside and see if people notice it.

**Jacobsen: How did this decision for banners and flags come in the first place? How were they seen as a part and parcel of outreach and public presentation?**

**Raubenheimer:** I've wanted it for some time as something that would be useful to display our identity and also, when we have Meetups in public places, make it easy for people to find us because they would be able to look for a large banner, and see that it says South African Secular Society, and then that way find us more easily.

The finances were available now, just about. We've used quite a bit of them, but it will be useful for the future. So, we went for it on the new executive.

**Jacobsen: For organizations who want to replicate them for similar purposes, what would be some of the discussion points that they want to take into account, when they're having, for instance, an executive meeting and they want to bring this as a motion forward to approve funds for them, in terms of feasibility, and so on?**

**Raubenheimer:** I have no idea how to answer that question. I think it's really a case of if people think it's going to be useful to display their identity, then it's useful. It's something to get. Obviously, they must be able to afford it. I think it's about R12,000 in total, which is about R1,000 per banner. So, it's not trivial, but I think a useful investment in terms of displaying our identity.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Rick and Wynand, you lions.**

# Interview with Dr. Mark McKergow – Chair, Sunday Assembly Edinburgh

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 20, 2019

*Dr. Mark McKergow is the Chair at the Sunday Assembly Edinburgh. Here we discuss his background, work, and community.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let us start from the top. What was early life like with regards to geography, culture, religion, or lack thereof?

**Mark McKergow:** I was brought up in the east of England, in a rural village. My father worked for agriculture. Both my parents were very religious Christians. My dad was a churchwarden for nearly 50 years. My mother played the church organ and was a brilliant musician.

I started off by attending, of course, as you would as a child. Then, I suppose, at about the age of about 13 or 14, gave up going, and found excuses not to go because, for the most part, it seemed to be of nonsense, the religious aspect.

You could see how also this thing worked as a community thing, even at that point. I abandoned Christianity at about 13, 14, probably. I did not abandon working alongside Christians, at that point. I volunteered with the Salvation Army for a while, in my gap year. I was very impressed with the commitment they showed to the homeless and the poor, and so forth, and was quite inspired by that at the time.

That's where I came from as a background, for myself. I was living in the country, but I had always been a town person. I don't quite know how that happened. [Laughing] As soon as I got the chance to go to college, I quit the village.

I went to a very rural boarding school, as well, which was perfectly good in its own way. It was rather non-denominational, notionally Christian, but not at all powerfully. Mostly it was about singing hymns together in the morning. There are worse things to do than that.

I abandoned church at that point. Later on in life, my wife became a humanist funeral server. We had talked about how good these humanist funerals were, and whether there should be a more regular gathering for humanists and those of that persuasion. We talked about it without ever getting off our arses and doing anything. Then the Sunday Assembly came along.

**Jacobsen:** How long have they been around in the locale you're at? I know they're new.

**McKergow:** The very first Sunday Assembly was on January 6th, 2013. It was in London. We were living in London, and close to that, at the time.

We went to the very first one, my wife, Jenny, and I, and immediately saw that it was fantastic. The spirit of it was wonderful, good. Having moaned about there not being anything and failed to produce anything ourselves, we decided to throw our shoulders to the wheel and help as much as possible.

That was when the Sunday Assembly started, the very first start. The Edinburgh one, where I now live, started in about August 2013. It was one of the first to start outside London. That was because we have a very big festival with a huge comedy component to it, every August.

The founders, Pippa Evans and Sanderson Jones, were both up here doing their comedy thing for the festival and decided to have a Sunday Assembly as well, as part of that. The people who did it liked it and carried on. There's been a Sunday Assembly here in Edinburgh since August 2013.

**Jacobsen: When people come to the Sunday Assembly Edinburgh, what can they expect in a normal service? As well, outside and surrounding the community, what else can they expect in terms of provision, via membership, or just general attendance and community?**

**McKergow:** We don't have a membership scheme as such. It's very much, "Rock up and come in." What can they expect? We run our events, our "services", as we call them, reclaiming the word, with a normal format. Across Sunday Assembly, there are some norms that have developed. I think you'll find out it's not unbiblical.

We start off with people get welcomed in, a cup of coffee, chat to people. There's music playing in the background. There are people outside handing out orders of service with information about the songs and the speakers and so on, welcoming people in. We kick off with two songs, always. We discovered that having one, the people are just getting going after one song, so we always start with two songs.

Then we have the host, who says hello and describes what Sunday Assembly is about, briefly. We do that every time. Talk about how our mission, our motto, which is, "Live better, Help often, Wonder more," is to celebrate life, and that we are a secular congregation. We don't spend time talking about our secular nature. We just do it.

Then there is a poet. There are some poems. Sometimes it's a poet reading their own work. Each service has a theme. We try and loosely link some of the contributions around that theme. The poet will try and do some poems that connect with the theme. For example, next Sunday, we are doing, "The power of the next small step," as our theme.

**Jacobsen: I like that.**

**McKergow:** We'll find some poem about that. Then we have a guest speaker, who does a 15 to 20-minute talk, a bit like a TED Talk, but don't tell TED that. [Laughing] They are jealous about what they call TED Talks. Think TED Talk type of thing. Our speaker, next time, is Rayya Ghul, who is an author, trainer, and therapist who works with the power of the next small step. She's written books about it. She's going to come to speak.

Then there's another song, a middle song, which is sometimes a more reflective song. Most of our songs are fairly up and at 'em, enjoyable sing-alongs. The middle song may be more reflective.

Then we have a slot called "Somebody's doing their best." This time, it will be Simon doing his best. That's a congregation member talking about something they've been grappling with, something they've been striving at, something they've succeeded with, something they've failed but learned from, something they're involved with that's worth sharing. It's an open slot, 5 to 7 minutes, for a congregation member to get up and talk about their own experiences.

Then the host leads a two-minute silent reflection, quiet time. It's usually followed by a little music. We have a live band, of course, for the singing. The personnel fluctuate a bit here, but we usually have a guitar, a percussionist, and a saxophone, and a singer who leads the music. The guitarist usually plays a little bit of guitar to take us out of the reflection.



Then there's a period where people have a chat with their neighbours, say hello, meet new people. We do a collection. It's just like church, in that regard. It's free to get in. That's part of our rules. Sunday Assembly must be free to get into. You can't sell tickets to an ordinary Sunday Assembly. But of course, you must raise money. We must raise money to hire the hall that we use and pay for the cakes and coffee, and things like that. A collection comes around.

After about five minutes, we call people to order again. We give out the notices, usually about the next assembly, about other events that are happening. We've just started a community notice board section where anyone in the room can get up and announce events that they are involved with or that would be of interest to the community that we have. That's been good. We also, then, publicize those events on our Facebook page and Twitter feed.

Then sometimes the host says a few words to sum it all up, bring it together, "What have we learned this morning?" Then we finish with a good, rousing song, altogether. Then people are invited to hang around for more coffee and chat. We say hello and gradually pack it up.

**Jacobsen: In terms of the music that plays throughout a service, what is some of the music that you would be playing?**

**McKergow:** Pop songs. [Laughing] You think Queen and The Beatles, that's a starting point. We have a great variety of pop songs. We try and make them relevant to the theme. They must be easy to sing, so it helps if they're known. We usually preview them on our Facebook page, so people have a chance to think about it a bit. It's all about community singing. It's not about excellence. It's just about having a good old sing together.

Lots of our people like that element. One of the challenges for people like me. I'm 58, so I know of songs from the 60s and 70s and maybe 80s. One of the challenges we have is bringing in post-2000 songs, finding modern songs that are still good to sing and that people know. There are a few of them, but I wish we could find more.

**Jacobsen: In terms of the demographics of the congregants, who is typically coming into Sunday Assembly Edinburgh?**

**McKergow:** We get about 60 people on average, sometimes more. We do it once a month, first Sunday of the month. We get 60, maybe 70 people, which is good. It fits our room well. We've expanded quite over the last 12 months. We were getting 20, 30. We built that up. It's a good mixed demographic. I think we have a good age range. We have a few kids who come with their parents. There's a colouring and a lego table for them if they want to do that. We have people right through from their twenties into their sixties and seventies.

Compared to some Sunday Assemblies, the London one is tending to get younger people. That's not a bad thing. It's just where they are. It reflects the people who are in London. Here we have a broader demographic. If I had to put a finger on it, I would say there are probably slightly more women than men, but reasonable balance.

And a few dogs. We advertise ourselves as dog-friendly as well as family-friendly. Several people choose to bring their dogs along. That's fine with us, and fortunately, fine with our venue, too.

**Jacobsen: Looking into 2019 and some of the themes, the thematic elements of some of the services upcoming. For those that may not be coming to Sunday Assembly Edinburgh yet,**

**but would like to come, what would be some of the ones that they could expect, whether in the themes of the poetry, or in the music, or in the service in general?**

**McKergow:** As I say, each service we have a different theme. That gives us an excuse to look at new things every time. Our themes are usually based on some part of our motto, “Live better, Help often, Wonder more.” That gives us a wide range to choose from. The first three months of 2019, we are doing “The power of the next small step,” in January, which is about living better, how we can improve ourselves. In February, we are doing one of our Eco-Congregations. A climate change officer is coming to talk about how we can individually, and as a congregation, think about climate change and do something about it.

The Royal Edinburgh Observatory is coming in March to talk about stargazing and talk about something in the night sky. I’m not quite sure what yet. That fits under our heading of “Wonder more.” Somebody comes and tells us something amazing that we did not know.

Those are some of our themes. We try to keep current. People want to talk about current things. We steer off politics, though. Part of our rules is that we are not a political organization, in terms of party politics. We are generally on the side of social justice, and the environment, and those kinds of things. We don’t class that as political, although I think some people might. We are not a political party. We steer away from Brexit and all that sort of nonsense now.

You asked about the wider community. We have several other things that go on. There’s the book club that discusses novels. These are not particularly godless books, although they probably are; they don’t have to be. It’s just a novel discussion group.

I run a live better group a couple of times a year, which meets for five evenings. It’s a peer support group to help each other to live better. In my day job, I’m a professional coach and facilitator, so I’m well qualified to lead groups such as that. I’ve done it for many years for corporations. I do it for Sunday Assembly as well.

We are just about to start a writers’ group as well. There’s the talk of an artists’ group getting together when the weather gets a bit better, to go outside and draw and paint together.

**Jacobsen: If you were to summarize your hopes for the next five years since it’s about five years old, for the Sunday Assembly, what would be your hopes for it?**

**McKergow:** Next five years. We had very explosive growth in the movement in the first two years. Since then, we’ve lost track of helping people to start. There have been very few start-ups. That’s because of difficulties finding a way of organizing it. I’d like to see us getting back to supporting new start-ups.

Running a Sunday Assembly is a tough gig. I was the first network manager for Sunday Assembly, right at the beginning, so I helped over 70 Sunday Assemblies to start up, in some way, by providing resources, and running training sessions. I’m supposed to know how to do it. Fortunately, I do. I would like to see us starting more Assemblies again.

We peaked at 70-odd. We are now down to something like 50-odd because, in the end, it’s hard to run them, and people get discouraged. If you get discouraged, then numbers begin to tank.

I understand completely how it gets too tough for people to run. You need energy and you need skill, too. There’s of skills required about how to set up a room, how to advertise it, how to get a sound system, how to find speakers, how to get the band together, how to organize everybody, how to get the coffee and cakes, how to engage people in helping to run it. We have a committee

of six people now and a wider supporters' group of about a dozen more who help to run the assembly. But it's not easy to do.

I would like to see us starting more assemblies. I would like to see us helping to consolidate the ones that are there. So far, we've had a gathering of Sunday Assemblies in a conference of organizers. I'd like to see that continue, as well. I think the more we can mutually support each other, the better it's going to be.

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

# Interview with Tris Mamone – Freelance Writer

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 21, 2019

*Mamone is a bisexual genderqueer freelance writer focusing on social justice and secular humanism. Here we discuss their current work and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** To start, and to set a different tone in the discussions for the secular, the most authoritative sources of morality for most humanists, probably, comes from conscience, individually, and the United Nations and its norms, internationally. For the duration of this interview, I will use the initialism LGBTI (United Nations LGBTI Core Group). What are some positive developments for the LGBTI community in North America?

**Tris Mamone:** Well as you know, the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising is coming up on June 28th, and I've been thinking a lot about how we've progressed since then. Hell, we've progressed a lot even since I was a child! Like I remember how controversial it was when Ellen DeGeneres came out as gay back in 1997. Now there are gay characters on TV shows, commercials, and movies; same-sex marriage is legal in all 50 states, and the US House of Representatives just passed the Equality Act, which will protect LGBTQ people from discrimination on a federal level. Things have certainly changed a lot since Stonewall.

**Jacobsen:** What have been some negative developments for the LGBTI community in North America?

**Mamone:** Despite all the progress we've made, we've still got a lot of work left to do. Poverty, lack of health care access, homelessness, addiction, and abuse are huge problems that affect the most vulnerable among us, particularly queer and trans people of color (QTPOC for short). Plus President Trump isn't helping one bit. He says he's for us, but if you remember when he said he would "protect our LGBTQ citizens from the violence and oppression of a hateful foreign ideology," he meant specifically Islam. We're on our own when it comes to everyone else that's trying to kill us. Trump is hardly pious, but white evangelical Christians are his biggest supporters, so he's more than happy to do away with our rights in order to keep the money coming in. The most recent examples are the HUD's proposal to allow federally-funded homeless shelters to turn away trans people, and the HHS's proposal to allow medical professionals to deny treatment for trans people due to religious beliefs. And this guy has the nerve to sell "LGBTQ For Trump" t-shirts for Pride Month, too!

**Jacobsen:** How can dominant secular culture help provide more of a space for LGBTI members of the community?

**Mamone:** Well more LGBTQ inclusion in conferences is a good start. And not just simply have, like, one trans speaker on just to talk about trans issues. Also, it would be great if secular activists stop treating trans rights as some abstract idea to be debated. I understand some folks don't understand what it means to be trans, but after a while we get tired of explaining over and over again that being transgender is not the same as some loony who thinks he's Jesus reincarnate.

**Jacobsen:** How have the secular communities been more accepting and nurturing of the professional development and organizational inclusion of the LGBTI members of the secular communities?

**Mamone:** It's getting better. There's a lot more recognition and acceptance of trans people in big name atheist organizations, like American Atheists and American Humanist Association (I serve on the AHA's LGBTQ Humanist Alliance). Of course there's still work to be done in this area as well. For example, some conferences will invite only one trans speaker to just talk about trans issues. It feels a lot like tokenism, y'know? Plus, when conferences do invite secular LGBTQ speakers, they're usually white.

That's why we at the LGBTQ Humanist Alliance put on a one-day conference back in March called Centering the Margins, which focused exclusively on secular QTPOC. Even though we only had a small audience, so many people came up to us afterwards like, "Thank you so much for creating this space!" We hope to do it again next year.

**Jacobsen:** What have been some new and popular topic discussions on The Biskeptical Podcast?

**Mamone:** I haven't done any podcasting since October of last year because I got burned out. Trying to find a new topic week after week is hard. I will say with the Trump administration, there were plenty of things to talk about on the Biskeptical Podcast, which was a commentary show. My co-host Morgan Stringer was a law student (she graduated and passed the bar last summer), so whenever a legal issue was in the news, she would always explain what was going on. Plus, it was a great way for us to let off steam about the news and yell, "Are you fucking kidding me?"

**Jacobsen:** What have been some new and popular topic discussions on Bi Any Means?

**Mamone:** That show, too, is on indefinite hiatus, but I had some wonderful conversations. Bi Any Means was an interview-based show where I would interview a different guest week after week about various topics. So of my favorite episodes are the ones that covered really controversial issues, like racism and sexual misconduct within the secular community.

**Jacobsen:** When will the Bi Any Means and the Biskeptical Podcast come back online? What would be some topics to discuss on the reboots?

**Mamone:** I'm not sure, to be honest. I'm thinking about starting a brand new interview-based podcast that won't specifically be about either atheist or LGBTQ rights (although those subjects will come up from time to time). It will be just me having conversations with people I think are interesting. But it's still just an idea right now.

**Jacobsen:** Who have been some up-and-coming LGBTI members of the secular community?

**Mamone:** When I was podcasting I made it a point to get a wide variety of guests on my show rather than just the same familiar faces. Two of them in particular are Diane Burkholder and Ashton P. Woods, with whom I've done workshops at the Creating Change conference both this past January and last. Even now whenever someone asks me about who to invite to speak at conferences, I always mention them. Like I said earlier, most secular conferences still tend to be white-centered, so I try to get people to pass the microphone, y'know?

**Jacobsen:** What are some new projects for you?

**Mamone:** I'm a freelance writer who specializes in LGBTQ news. I mainly write for Splice Today, but I've also contributed to Rewire News, The Daily Beast, HuffPost, INTO, and others.

**Jacobsen:** Who is an important author or speaker, or organizer, for secular work in your locale?

**Mamone:** Mark and Shannon Nebo of Be Secular live near Annapolis, which is an hour's drive from my home in Easton, MD. Remember the #NormalizeAtheism t-shirt campaign from a few years ago? That was them. I also have a friend named Samantha McGuire who leads the Southern Maryland Area Secular Humanists group. They do great stuff down there.

**Jacobsen:** Any new good books that you have read?

**Mamone:** I don't give myself time to read much these days. I should because I have a whole bunch of books on my Kindle that I've started but haven't finished yet. Like I need to finish "So You Want to Talk about Race" by Ijeoma Oulo some day. I started it but then got distracted with starting another book.

**Jacobsen:** What are the important organizations in your area? How can people become involved in them?

**Mamone:** I know an AHA chapter recently started in Maryland's Eastern Shore region, which is where I live, called Eastern Shore Humanists. I should give them a call to see if I can help.

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

**Mamone:** Nope, that's all I can think of for now. Let me know if you have any further questions.

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

# Interview with the Eastern Shore Humanists of Salisbury, Maryland

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 22, 2019

*Here we talk with the Eastern Shore Humanists of Salisbury, Maryland.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** If we're looking at the founding of the Eastern Shore Humanists, how did this happen?

**Eastern Shore Humanists:** About five years ago several Humanists in our congregation (the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship at Salisbury MD (UUFS)) felt there should be more Humanists speakers in the Sunday services, and that there was a need for a forum so non-theists, atheists, Humanists and free thinkers could meet on a regular basis.

**Jacobsen:** In terms of core values and principles of the group, what are they?

**Eastern Shore Humanists:** Our core values parallel those of the Unitarian Universalist principles:

The inherent worth of every person,  
Justice and equity in human relations,  
Acceptance of all and encouragement of growth in our individual members,  
An uninhibited search for truth and meaning,  
The use of the democratic process within our membership and at large,  
The goal of peace, liberty and justice for all and,  
Respect for the interdependent web and recognition of the role of humans in it.  
Further, we value science and reason and have no belief in the supernatural.

**Jacobsen:** Following the previous question, how are these related to core declarations of humanists (humanists seem rather fond of making declarations over the years)?

**Eastern Shore Humanists:** Our values are consistent with those expressed in Humanist Manifesto III.

**Jacobsen:** What activities are provided by the Eastern Shore Humanists for its constituency, its membership and community?

**Eastern Shore Humanists:** The Eastern Shore Humanists hold monthly meetings. Their focus is to further our understanding of Humanism by reading and discussing relevant current articles and books. We have two Humanist Sundays with outside speakers during the church year to which the community is invited.

**Jacobsen:** Sometimes, the secular can be on the defensive. How does this impact potential social and political work of the Eastern Shore Humanists?

**Eastern Shore Humanists:** We don't feel a need to be defensive because we believe in our core values.

**Jacobsen: What have been positive developments of the humanist community in the Eastern Shore locale since the founding of the Eastern Shore Humanists?**

**Eastern Shore Humanists:** We are building greater awareness about Humanism within UUFS and the community through membership in like-minded groups. We anticipate that our recent affiliation with the American Humanist Association (AHA) will expand our visibility here on the Delmarva Peninsula.

**Jacobsen: Any recommended authors, organizations, or speakers?**

**Eastern Shore Humanists:** A book that we are currently reading and would recommend is *Creating Change through Humanism* by Roy Speckhardt. Fred Edmonds, a former Executive Director, of AHA was a well-received speaker (He has a timely article in the September/October 2018 issue of *The Humanist* magazine.)

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

**Eastern Shore Humanists:** We're a small grass roots group and are being careful not to overextend our resources. However, we are considering a web site at some point in the future.

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



## Ask SASS 3 (Rick and Wynand) – Online Media for Secular South Africa

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 23, 2019

*This is an ongoing and new series devoted to the South African Secular Society (SASS) and South African secularism. The Past President, Jani Schoeman, and the Current President, Rick Raubenheimer, and the current Vice-President, Wynand Meijer, will be taking part in this series to illuminate these facets of South Africa culture to us. Rick and Wynand join us.*

*Here we talk about secular media.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Wynand, you are the webmaster. What do you do there? What are some developments in progress for SASS, online?

**Wynand Meijer:** We recently revamped the website from scratch. The site was already a few years old and was due for a revamp, which we then took on. After the revamp, we saw a lot of benefits in all the efforts that we've put into it.

We have looked at a lot of the industry standards, and are more in line with industry standards now, which also assists us with our workflow, in how we can onboard new users, as well as making use of payment platforms.

**Jacobsen:** What is the activity of the users? What are some social media platforms that you're currently using?

**Meijer:** The social media platforms are mainly the major players, like Facebook, as well as Twitter, where a lot of our content goes out to.

**Jacobsen:** What is the activity of the members, by what you mean, "online"?

**Meijer:** We generally post content related to actual events. The content that we posted, we tried to source local content, and have people question or participate in activities that might be more locally based, hence South African Secular Society.

Major issues, or major events, such as the latest burning of the Our Lady in Notre Dame, that also does get attention. We are actually very surprised at how mature most of our members look at issues such as these. Most of the members, we can say, do try to bring through a real secular view on things, and not just angry atheists trying to vent out on religion.

**Jacobsen:** What other flashpoint news items have been in the cycle recently aside from Notre Dame?

**Meijer:** Local news, a few weeks back, we had somebody that was resurrected from the dead...

**Jacobsen:** ...Purportedly [Laughing].

**Meijer:** [Laughing] Yes, which piqued a lot of interest. Something that also piques a lot of interest – that we've found – is book recommendations. What is a good book to read? People are quite interactive on those topics, as well.

Another topic that's also very prevalent is education or children. If any of these two topics are touched upon, you can see a spike in the responses that people do give and how they would interact relating to those issues.

**Jacobsen: What do you think is the reason for the increased activity or interest in books and in the education of the young?**

**Meijer:** I think people still love reading a lot, but really a lot. Having the opportunity to give them more info, more insightful books, is something that really piques their interest. They would like to gain more information. It's a nice topic to discuss around the table or just discussing with yourself at the end of the day.

When it comes to children, specifically, I think, the education of our youth is extremely important for that reason. People take an interest in that, in trying to see and understand how we can better educate our youth.

**Rick Raubenheimer:** The social media outreach is largely done broadcasting on Facebook. We get quite a bit of engagement on our Facebook page from articles. Christopher, whose job that is, generally posts an article every two days, or sometimes every day. We get quite a bit of engagement in that area.

What else can I say? We had a blog at one stage, which we were posting to regularly, but that fell into abeyance during the latter half of last year. Possibly that is something to revise when we find enough time to do it.

**Jacobsen: If you were to plug any aspect of updates to the website, or expansion of social media, what would they be in 2019/2020?**

**Meijer:** I think an awareness campaign of any running projects that we have, would be beneficial for us to market on the site, and get more engagement from our members, as well as potential members, and the public in general.

**Raubenheimer:** My thought has been to start an email newsletter, preferably monthly, in which we tell people what Meetups we have coming up, and any new articles on the website. However, it seems to be difficult for many of the centres to schedule Meetups as much as a month in advance. That one's not happening yet, and we would need somebody to put the newsletter together.

**Meijer:** Currently, how we do a lot of these Meetups, is mainly about two weeks in advance. Raubenheimer wishes it to be a month. To assist in that, we generally post these details on the electronic channels that we do have, such as our Facebook, our Meetup, as well as our Telegram channels.

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

# Interview with Boris Van Der Ham – Board Member, Humanists International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 24, 2019

*Boris Van Der Ham is a Board Member of Humanists International. Here we talk about his story, work, and views.*

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

**Boris Van Der Ham:** I was born in Amsterdam and raised in the countryside. My mother was a nurse. My father was a teacher at the Free University of Amsterdam. My parents were raised very religiously, but they left religion. My sister and I were raised in a humanistic way. It was strict. In that, you should keep your promises and act responsible, but without dogmas that excludes people.

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

**Van Der Ham:** I studied history at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences before being admitted to Maastricht Academy of Dramatic Arts. After graduation, I worked as an actor for various theatre groups. At the same time, I was a member of the Young Democrats from age 15; and from 1998 to 2000, I was its national chairman. In 2002, I was elected to the National Parliament of the Netherlands. All of those experiences had an impact on me. By reading old and new thinkers, watching theatre, and meeting a lot of people, I have learned a lot about ‘being human’. I am still learning. To me: art is the mirror of humanity. By watching it, you know: we are not alone in our struggles.

**Jacobsen:** When look at the ways in which European humanism differs from North American, African, and other forms of humanism, what seems the same, and what seems different?

**Van Der Ham:** Humanism in Northwestern Europe is different from other parts of the world. A majority of the people are non-religious, so there is less to fight for here. Laws are, in general, not excluding the non-religious. In some countries, like the Netherlands, Belgium, and Norway, humanists are even part of the official acknowledged ‘beliefs’. In the Netherlands, there are humanist counsellors in hospitals, jails, and the army. In the annual Freedom of Thought report, Belgium, and the Netherlands are the top 2 of most ‘free’ countries for the non-religious. That’s the biggest difference between other parts of Europe and the rest of the world. Maybe, there is also a bit of a culture of even-handedness in Western European and Scandinavian countries. Instead of polarizing, there is a culture of negotiation and institutional inclusiveness.

But there are problems too. Yes, the government and the law system are good, but the informal freedom is sometimes quite different. If you are raised in an Orthodox Christian or Muslim family, you want to make another choice than your family. To be a humanist, for example, some of them face huge social pressure. Last year, I co-wrote a book on ex-Muslims in the Netherlands. We got a lot of response to it. Another thing that worries me. Because there are no official threats to humanism in West-European countries; this comfortable position is taken for

granted by many. But freedom never comes and stays by itself. I think we have the obligation to use our good position to spread our views and give humanism more depth.

**Jacobsen: You are on the Board of Humanists International. What is the organization? What tasks and responsibilities come with the role?**

**Van Der Ham:** Humanists International is the worldwide umbrella organization of all Humanists, and other freethinking people around the globe. It's important to meet each other. Learn from other regions in the world and help each other. The annual Freedom of Thought report is made by Humanists International and is acknowledged by the United Nations as one of the core sources on the position of the non-religious in the world. In 12 countries, it's still a capital crime to leave your religion, and in many more its criminal to criticize religion. Humanists International is the only global organization to address this. We do this at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, but also at the United Nations in New York in the United States. It's tough work, because the very conservative Christian and Islamic governments, international organizations of evangelicals, are very vocal. Our voice is essential to counter that.

**Jacobsen: You have an extensive history with humanist organizations. Why this professional trajectory for you? Does a public profile come with this? If so, what is the sensibility of dealing with the media and the internal community in a respectful and diplomatic manner?**

**Van Der Ham:** Freedom requires association. Without small and large clubs, individuals are lost against the counterparts that will organize against those freedoms. That is why I have been a 'member' of many organizations from an early age. Only with united forces can you fight for ideals that ultimately strengthen individual freedom. I am a public figure in The Netherlands. It's important to be visible in the public debate. Show not only the things that you are against, but also what you favour, I also think that it's important for humanists to be 'happy' Humanists. What does inspire us? What can inspire other people? On [www.freethoughtvlog.com](http://www.freethoughtvlog.com), I have tried to do my part in this. It's also important to pick your battles to be effective., and show that humanism is not the underdog, but can actually lead us into a nicer world.

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

**Van Der Ham:** All Humanists organizations around the globe need people to do things. So, search for your local humanist organization or create one yourself. And yes, Humanists International is an organization that needs donors. You can be an individual member or donor and contribute to our international work. Just go to our website: <https://humanists.international/get-involved/?lang=nl>.

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

# Ask Herb 10 – Judgment: To Smith in Silver, Pith in Word

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 25, 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 who has done the most for the secular community as a writer, in the opinion of Professor Silverman: Dr. Richard Dawkins.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** In your work in writing, research, and reading, who, as a writer, seems to have done the most for the secular community in the written word? Why are writers important for the galvanizing of the community? Someone who speaks to the heart of the secular message, consistently over the long term.

**Herb Silverman:** If I have to pick just one writer who has done the most for the secular community, that writer would be esteemed scientist and outspoken atheist Richard Dawkins. Dawkins' many books include at least a dozen best sellers about science, culture, and religion. He is the most cited scientist alive.

Dawkins uses fact-based science to counter belief in the supernatural. In *The Blind Watchmaker*, Dawkins argues against the watchmaker analogy, an argument for the existence of a supernatural creator based on the complexity of living organisms. Instead, Dawkins describes evolutionary processes as analogous to a blind watchmaker, in that reproduction, mutation, and selection are unguided by any designer. Probably the Dawkins book most meaningful to the majority of atheists is *The God Delusion*, which became an international best seller, with more than three million copies sold. It has been translated into over 30 languages.

Several Dawkins books are offered free to download in Muslim countries, which sometimes forbid the distribution of such books. They have been translated into Farsi, Urdu, and Indonesian. An Arabic translation of *The God Delusion* has been downloaded approximately 13 million times. In the introduction to *The God Delusion*, Dawkins over-optimistically says, "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down."

Richard Dawkins has been called arrogant because he doesn't suffer fools gladly and because he criticizes religion, just as people criticize politics or choice of cuisine. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins says that a supernatural creator almost certainly does not exist. He does not make the categorical statement that no gods exist, just that he finds no evidence for existence. You are not likely to hear clergy say that God probably exists. So who is more arrogant?

I've always found Richard Dawkins to be a delightful and generous person. We shared a stage for a conversation in front of overflow crowds in my hometown of Charleston, South Carolina and in Clearwater, Florida. I was honored that he wrote the Foreword to my book *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt*.

I must add that the books by Dawkins did not change my point of view. I was a committed atheist before I knew who Dawkins was. However, his books did help me sharpen some of my arguments, especially about evolution.

Years before Richard Dawkins began writing, a famous author and mathematician changed my life at age 16. Bertrand Russell's book *Why I am Not a Christian* formed the complete atheist section of my local public library in 1958, and that was the first time I learned there were other people who thought like me about God. Russell transformed the lives of many in my generation. It was gratifying to read articulate arguments that confirmed and gave voice to our own lonely skepticism and doubts. Bertrand Russell has countless "nonspiritual" heirs, and I'm pleased there are so many different voices for atheism today.

The importance of writers to educate and galvanize how people think about religion cannot be overstated. Education and consciousness-raising are important tools to combat all kinds of indoctrination, including religious. The books by the so-called new atheists, including Dawkins, have helped change our culture for the better, especially among younger people. Through the Internet, many have learned about atheism and religions other than those in which they were raised, and a good number of these "nones" have chosen to exchange religion for rational thinking.

I'm curious to know what writers will be saying about atheism and religion fifty years from now. If only there were life after death.

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

# Interview with Rev. Helen Tervo – Vicar, St. Andrew's Anglican Church

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 26, 2019

*I wanted to explore some of the world of different Christian leaders, small and big. However, I wanted to report less on those and more in their own words. These will be published, slowly, over time.*

*This, I trust, may open dialogue and understanding between various communities. Of course, an interview does not amount to an endorsement, but to the creation of conversation, comprehension, and compassion.*

*Reverend Helen Tervo is the Vicar of the St. Andrew's Anglican Church at the time of the interview, conducted in 2018. As she noted to me, she is not speaking on behalf of the Anglican Church at any level in this interview.*

*Here we talk about her life and views.*

\*Audio was not perfect. Some information or sections may be inaccurate.\*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is family background? What is personal background?**

**Rev. Helen Tervo:** I am 67-years-old. I have been married for 45 years. I have three grown daughters and five grandchildren. I came to ministry later in life. I was in my 40s when I finished my Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in philosophy.

Then I moved onto seminary and graduated when I was 47-years-old. I enjoy music of all kinds, except rap. I could even, maybe, move there in a bit. I am reading less the older I get. But I have always been a voracious reader. I like Netflix and Facebook.

I have a strong heart for social justice and for healing. I always enjoyed working in tougher ministries, prison ministry and palliative care hospitals and nursing homes – working with people who are dementing. It is an opportunity to be present and friendly with them when they may be the most vulnerable.

**Jacobsen: When it comes to prison ministry and palliative care ministry, what are the pluses and minuses of prison ministry? What are the pluses and minuses of palliative care ministry?**

**Tervo:** That is a very good question. I never planned to work in prison. I was between jobs, as they say. That is something you say when you do not want to say that your soul has been scraped over.

**Jacobsen: [Laughing].**

**Tervo:** The position opened to work in a forensic prison. I was under, at least, a moral obligation. If I knew about it, I had to employ it, as I was not a politician. I applied. It was a short time. I realized this was something that was a calling.

I could put this in secular terms. I was very comfortable in the environment. One of the things I liked about prison ministry. I could be direct and honest. I could be compassionate but not gullible. Although, I am sure that I was gullible from time to time.

This was a place where people had real issues. For example, in ordinary white bread churches, you hear the words “love your enemy.” That has all sorts of intellectual turning around. Whereas, in prison, there is a guy three doors down who is his enemy.

How does he come to terms with that? That ideal. How does he come to understand that having to live side by side with someone who wishes to do him harm? It was that kind of depth that really drew me. That I wasn’t simply working on the more superficial levels.

I really got to work in the deeper zones with people. In palliative care, gosh, it is – to be with someone who is dying – where the masks are peeled off. In the face of dying, it is strange things that people have to resolve.

They are not things they have had to resolve, but they are the things that come forward. The times when they weren’t kind, when they failed their child. So, to bring about some level of understanding and compassion and peace, to create a space where that is possible, where people can find some sense of acceptance of their own lives, the downside of palliative care: people die.

It is over, right? You can have a relationship that is very deep but that ends. It might also be what is attractive about it. You do not have control over it. The downside of working in the prison. If you talk to people who work in prison, they will say that they have a tough day.

That is the least of it. The inmates are usually the least of the problem. The problem is working in system that ups the ante for working against itself. It makes it very difficult to work in that environment.

**Jacobsen: For an analogy, for people who want a more closed society or sub-culture, they can look to prisons. People change with more restrictive behaviour.**

**Tervo:** I do not believe that they do. I believe people will change if given a real choice and make the choice to change it. The change comes when someone gets angry and then they don’t smash the person across from them to bits.

They can maintain it. They can express themselves in a positive way.

**Jacobsen: You mentioned anger. Anger amounts to the sole emotion men feel permitted to express in Canadian culture. All emotions become filtered through anger. When I hear “anger,” I assume men. With that anger expressed, I would assume guys’ mask for the rest of the emotions.**

**Tervo:** It can be. What I learned from the Cognitive-Behavioural staff, it is a secondary emotion. It is a mask. You will not allow yourself to feel afraid, sad, or broken. It is anger. It is not only acceptable but also where you feel the strongest.

If you feel weak, anger is a good way to answer that. But it is a mask. It is the genuine feeling.

**Jacobsen: As a man, it is okay. I have felt broken, and sorry, even apologize based on that.**

**Tervo:** [Laughing].

**Jacobsen: I have felt heartbroken and sad. All these things. They are part and parcel of life.**



**Tervo:** What really surprised me, it is with people on the street as well. The emotional vocabulary of the 21st century person is incredibly limited. To not be able to speak of an emotion except happy and so on, there is nuance to every emotion.

There is a whole range of emotions. I had a list of emotional words. Rather than asking someone if they were angry, I asked if they were disappointed. "Did you resent?" I tried to nuance out the emotional life.

**Jacobsen:** I can give a good example. I apologized to people who I inadvertently offended years ago, who then came out to bully me. I apologized them years later for the inadvertent offense. It became a relief for them and myself.

**This seems like a core aspect of the Christian aspect. In a way, one can not be a Christian while acting within the code of ethics of accepted by Christianity.**

**Tervo:** That's true. Christianity for me gives the framework to understand the human impulse for forgiveness. The human impulse for forgiveness. The impulse for all that. It gives a framework for that. I can understand my life through that.

I do not think you have to be a Christian to understand that. You can be a different religion. You can be no religion. It can be different lenses. We choose our limitations.

**Jacobsen:** Now, what sect or tradition was seminary for you? What sect or tradition preaching in now?

**Tervo:** Historically and personally, I was baptized as a Christian. Basically, I developed this until I was 18-years-old. I got really angry at God, angry at the church. I stepped away for another 18 years.

**Jacobsen:** Why?

**Tervo:** Those were personal reasons. I had a nice family growing up, when I was younger. Alcohol took one of my family members. The promise hadn't been fulfilled. It wasn't until I started dealing with alcoholism. I went to Al-Anon meetings.

I approached alcoholism as a family event. Everyone in the family is affected by it. I realized that my response was to try and have as much control and to exercise that control over everyone that I knew. Most notably, my husband and three kids; I started to challenge and let go of that.

Spiritually, that led me back to a sense that I could relax, because there was something else in charge.

**Jacobsen:** What do you mean a spiritual change to a healthier state?

**Tervo:** Is that an anathema to you?

**Jacobsen:** No! No, I want to pin down or narrow the definition. In British Columbia, we have the SBNRs, the spiritual but not religious. These folks dominate. But much of the non-religious religiously affiliated here.

They claim spiritual status but with widely divergent definitions. People bring up the definition. I do not know necessarily know what they mean. I can assume some things. But I do not know for certain.

**Tervo:** It is such a slippery answer. Because, for me, I would say, “My spirituality takes place within the context of my religion.” I make a commitment to my religion because it gives me a framework to practice my spirituality. I need that framework.

I cannot walk by a river and feel as though I have really connected with my higher power – whatever that is. That amorphous blob of being. That does not do it for me. It is also self-serving. One of the things that my religion and many religions does is call us out of our self-serving impulse, into being drawn into making the world a right place, making the world a better place, addressing problems of racism and sexism.

My religion gives me the way to do that.

**Jacobsen:** If I hear you right, your religion gives a framework to interpret spirituality, which amounts to metaphors, the allegories, the language in other words, of spiritual experience, in order to practice out some of the “social justice” work, that is built into some modern faith practice, whether sexism, racism, and so on.

**What does a typical Sunday service look like for you?**

**Tervo:** I am an Anglican Christian and a priest. I am out the door at quarter after 7 in the morning to drive to my church. We have an 8 o’clock service. It is a common Anglican book of prayer, last edited in 1962. It is very old-style King James language. It is a small congregation of 12 and 20 people.

That is the first service. We follow the book. I preach a short sermon. It is a 10 to 14-minute sermon. We share communion together. Then the service is over. We get coffee. We get ready for the second service, larger and more contemporary. It has hymns and music.

It is more of a family welcomed service. We share communion at that service as well. I preside at community.

**Jacobsen:** In terms of theology, the formalities of the faith or the articles of faith. What differs in the Anglican tradition compared to some of the other ones, e.g., Baptist, Evangelical, etc.?

**Tervo:** Anglicans are born out of the Catholic church as a Protestant response. It is much like a Roman Catholic service. You could go to an Anglican service and not be able to tell the difference. We are a liturgical tradition along with Lutherans.

The thing I love about the Anglican church. There is high and low church. There are Anglo-Catholics. It is bells, whistles, and smoke. There are very Protestant Anglicans. There are simple services with more Evangelical components.

The thing I love about the Anglican Church. We are a church of discourse. We are a church where we have a climate. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the first among equals. We do not have a structure that is authoritarian such as the Roman Catholic Church.

It is much more communal and born out of an understanding of local differences between us. We tend not to be literalist when we read scripture. We tend to be more open to the ways God speaks with history and scripture, in poetry, in metaphor rather than seeing it as a history book of facts, which I think is a modern deviation from what has been the understanding.

Most Anglicans would – I may be shocked – see that evolution is probably true. Anglicans tend to be more tentative in their descriptors and more tentative in their theology. So, we would say, “It is probably true. This is the way I see it.” It is more relativistic.

I have problems with relativism. It is not the core. But in the best terms, we would listen to each other. We would exchange views knowing that the other would disagree with us.

**Jacobsen: In that way, it amounts to a buffer against fundamentalism. It is not a relativism or other forms of relativism, but more acceptance perspectivism centered on fundamental truths. So, the Golden Rule, the birth-death-resurrection of Christ, all these amount to fundamental truths to the faith.**

**However, we as a community speak about different issues of the community centered on those fundamental truths of the community. It is an ecclesia.**

**Tervo:** Right, we are always negotiating where we stand on things. It can seem wishy-washy. I went to college with a guy. We were in Saskatoon. We were in three different seminaries: Lutheran, United Church, and Anglican. I always wish I had the certainty of the Lutherans.

Because they really knew where to hang their hats. But I appreciate that when you get used to living with ambiguity, it is a very creative place to be.

**Jacobsen: What do you see as the problems of the contemporary church in general in a Canadian context?**

**Tervo:** I think the church is in the process of making significant changes. The biggest problem is no one is at church, very few people and very few young people. I am not sure that will always be. I think there are certain things the church needs to express itself on more boldly.

One of the things that made the church a difficult place to be: women went back to work. There was no one to do all this heavy lifting around the church.

**Jacobsen: For free.**

**Tervo:** Absolutely, for free, it made the church a harder place to be. The relationships started to crumble. But! I remember speaking to a young woman with a young family who came back to church. I said, “I apologize for more young people not being here.”

She said, “I was at the church where everybody was the same as me. I was surrounded by the same. I am so happy to be in a place where people are older. I can get to know them and understand their perspective.”

It is interesting having this conversation today. Did you see the wedding?

**Jacobsen: I saw the facial reactions to the preacher [Laughing].**

**Tervo:** [Laughing] You only saw some of the facial reactions because the media edited it. 2 billion people watched it. Many are watching the sermon. Michael Curry is the Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church in the United States.

He has been ordained for 40 years. He socked it to them. It was a very interesting event. I was watching the event live. Because I do that kind of thing. It is one of my quirks. Within minutes, the internet was like, “Who is this guy?! This is amazing.”

He has a way of preaching the Gospel. Christians have not been honest enough in what we believe. We have been presented as one little tiny fundamentalist faction of the Christian Church, which has only existed in the last 150 years and comes out of the Southern United States.

It has a very whacky view on the world. I think that is seen as the norm.

**Jacobsen:** The wackiness tends to come from the cultural overlays. Some of the Southern United States has wackiness.

**Tervo:** The right-wing dogma too.

**Jacobsen:** Some of it.

**Tervo:** I can take shots at it. It is not how I see the world. I really resent the people who I respect; the thoughtful and interesting thinkers of the church are being sidelined for the Franklin Graham's and others, or Liberty University. The Jerry Falwells and the Pat Robertsons, they are not speaking of my Jesus.

**Jacobsen:** To make it ancient, they seem to speak from a Constantinian Christianity rather than a non-Constantinian Christianity.

**Tervo:** What do you mean by that?

**Jacobsen:** Emperor Constantine in the Roman Emperor made Christianity the state religion.

**Tervo:** Exactly.

**Jacobsen:** In other words, if the religion becomes a religion of the poor, it does not become a state or empire religion. If it becomes a religion of the rich and the state, then it becomes a Constantinian Christianity.

**Tervo:** The whole idea of the United States as a Christian nation is not true. Most of them were Unitarians. They wanted to flee from religious persecution and authoritarianism. That's what it is about.

**Jacobsen:** In their defense, they can say it is a majority Christian nation.

**Tervo:** If you ignore the people you took the land from. They totally ignore them. Even these days, when the whole question of racism, you cannot ignore the question in the United States. They ignore the population of the United States.

**Jacobsen:** We should bear in mind. If you look at Canada, the general population identifies as Christian: split between Protestant and Catholic. If you look at the Indigenous population, not necessarily identical sub-Christian numbers, but similar general numbers.

Terry LeBlanc and Richard Twiss are, maybe, mixed race or not. They took the Indigenous spirituality of their heritage and adapted this within a Christian framework and formed an Indigenous Christianity.

I do not want to take a view, which is, in fact, a minority, that Christianity is at odds with, standard Christian theology.

**Tervo:** I have worked with elders and others. It is compatibilism. But the church has done damage in the community. We have much to atone for in that. We must listen. We must hear where we have gone wrong.

I think the onus is on us to do that for a few more generations before the balance comes up, before we can honestly together in some sense of being together in one place.

**Jacobsen:** Also, we have trends in those coming decades. In developed countries, most often, those amount to or equate to North American and Western Europe. They will become liberalized even further in their religion, or further non-religious.

In the rest of the world, the number of the religious will increase. By which I mean, those who identify with a religion and those who practice a religion, globally. Into 2060, Pew Research says the numbers of the non-religious affiliated will go from 16% of the global population to 13%.

That is already with a massive increase of the global population. If you look at the raw numbers, it is about the same proportion of people. It is the numbers of the religious who will increase, which changes the proportions.

**Tervo:** We, basically, met with stability and the numbers will grow proportionately?

**Jacobsen:** The number of the population will increase. The rate of the global population growth will begin to taper around 9 or 10 billion, maybe.

**Tervo:** It is 4 billion more than the Earth can sustain.

**Jacobsen:** With current technology, yes, Canada and the United States (before they existed) had 18 million (Ed. high estimate) Native American people. Now, the populations of these countries have 360 to 400 million people. In general, you have the general trend of the global population increase, the global population growth rate decreasing, and the non-religious globally decreasing as a proportion of the global population, but you also see the non-religious increasing in the developing nations into 2060, probably.

So, there will be those developments worldwide because 5-6% of the global population will be identified as Indigenous. The conversations are more upfront in New Zealand, Canada, and America, and so on.

In Canada, the number of religious may be along those lines of the increase while the number of non-religious may be on the decrease.

**Tervo:** What I see, the churches become unnecessary to a lot of people. It becomes something demanding something of them without giving something back. They believe their lives can go on without the church. I think there is a possibility this could change.

There is a place where, for me, church community can give things, which you cannot get anywhere else. You get intergenerational friendships. You get acceptance. You get people sharing their lives together. It does not happen in a Rotary Club or a Kinsmen Club or a fishing group.

It happens when you are sharing something within a spiritual zone accepting some greater power outside of you and focused on the greater power than you. You get things that you do not get anywhere else. I think that may become something people look for.

But given the genuine experience, 15 years from now, I will be in my 80s. You are going to have a completely different world than I had. I do not see us preparing for that. I do not see us trying to understand what that is going to mean, to even get plastic.

Plastic straws, we are having to have this legislated. We are going to have to make some decisions that are going to be very hard. I think there can be some value to deep community. People will need this. This individualist culture will not help us survive. We need to have a sense of connection to each other.

For me, it is a connection to God too.

**Jacobsen: I see a future for both. In this sense, a rational form of enlightenment or a rational form of individualism would include respect for the person while also where they are embedded. It would amount more to a systems analysis of the individual embedded in a society and how they relate to that society.**

**Some people can do plumbing better than others. They are part of a union. They are still a person. They could leave as an individual; the union can still exist. They can leave their family; the family can more or less exist.**

**Tervo:** Absolutely, we are afraid of the communal sense because we think we will lose our identity. However, I do not see this as a necessary expense. People will still be people. But we need to learn to rely on each other and to find places where we can support and love each other through difficult stuff.

**Jacobsen: There are secular churches, atheist churches, oases, and Sunday Assemblies.**

**Tervo:** God bless them. There is the Church of Consciousness. This is a church. I walked past it. My grandkids live close by in Victoria. It looks like it is about consciousness and mind rather than religion. It is probably not a God place.

**Jacobsen: It seems like one of the places saying, "That's religion." One thing I notice in terms of the demographics. Women, globally and in Canada, tend to be more religious. They attend more. They adhere more. The churches, currently, seem to appeal to them more.**

**In this sense, they will provide free child care. It seems to me, globally, the churches have a problem attracting men into the community. What is being done? It must be a part of the discussion. What is being done to solve, what is probably seen as, a problem?**

**Tervo:** It is difficult for men to be vulnerable. Those are not acceptable for men to speak up with other people. It is a struggle for men to find that in there. Men also are more comfortable with financial support of the church and those things.

Do not ask them to pray aloud, there is a lot of pride there too. I am not quite sure what is the issue. In my church, that is an issue. Most of the time, I am there. We have a female deacon. Our assistants are all female. There is a real women overload of the Sunday services.

That is an issue.

**Jacobsen: There is something. I want to share. It has a touch of humor to it. If you look at the Evangelical community, the academic style theologians, and if you look at the Intelligent Design community, if you look at the New Atheist community – in other words, the Firebrand and Militant Atheism community, what are the chances? You find one common trend.**

**You find a lot of men. You find a lot of men of European descent. Something is going on there common among very different groups of people with very different ideologies. Somehow, it is filling a need for a very narrow demographic of people.**

**Tervo:** Do you think men feel disempowered and this is a place for them? The fundamentalist persuasion, the black-and-white thinking, this is a refuge for men. It is right, or it is wrong.

**Jacobsen:** If you look at the timbre of William Dembski, he seems gentle. He is one of the founders of Intelligent Design. If you look at Richard Dawkins, he is a mix. If you look at Christopher Hitchens, he seemed like an alcoholic to me, seemed aggressive to me.

**Sam Harris seems hit-or-miss in terms of aggression. If you watch some videos of Sam Harris, he talks in a calm tone. If you look at some of the things written, it can seem different.**

**Tervo:** Did you see the Realtime with Bill Maher with Sam Harris and Ben Affleck? I note Maher backed off from it. He was anti-Islamic until Donald Trump came, who then out-Trumped him on that one. So, to align himself with Donald Trump on a topic like anti-Islam, he could not do it. He has backed right away from that.

**Jacobsen:** Bill Maher would identify as anti-religion in general.

**Tervo:** Yes, absolutely. But he is very critical of Islam, more critical of Islam than Christianity or Judaism.

**Jacobsen:** If I remember the video correctly, Sam Harris was trying to make a distinction between Islamists...

**Tervo:** ...Affleck, God bless him, took them both on. It was very sweet of him to do that.

**Jacobsen:** I do not know. There is a problem in discourse. People use epithets to defame someone to dismiss them. I did not like the entire conversation as far as I saw it. Although, I did not see all of it.

**If someone says, "I disagree with the ideas and beliefs of Islam," then the person responds, "You're racist." The person was critiquing the ideas. But then the person is claiming it is racist. The person claiming this is racist is actually racist because they are assuming when someone is talking about the ideas of Islam are Arab.**

**Tervo:** I do not think that is what was happening in the discussion. I think Affleck was saying you cannot paint all Muslims with the same brush as Islamists, terrorists. That kind of thing. You cannot. There are over a billion Muslims. There is a whole bunch.

**There is a tiny pocket of whackos. You cannot condemn the whole religion for the sake of that group. I think that is very true.**

**Jacobsen:** It is coming back to me. Harris, his example was concentric circles...

**Tervo:** ...you have got a way better memory than I do.

**Jacobsen:** The inner circle was Islamists. People like those preaching in the Red Mosques in Pakistan. People who want to impose Islam as politics merge. In other words, the merger of government and religion. Something like a Christian Dominionist.

**He was trying to make the distinction. I think Ben Affleck cut him off and said, “That’s gross. That’s racist.” If someone is casting aspersions, epithets, or invectives, the conversation did not even happen, really. That seems like a point of contention for me.**

**Honestly, I do not even know the full positions of those three people because it broke into an argument before the conversation happened.**

**Tervo:** Yes, that is probably true.

**Jacobsen:** Affleck also shied away. He was on television screaming epithets. Sam Harris never got to make the full points. If I recall the early parts, one group was Islamists. He was making the distinction made by you. You may be agreeing with Sam Harris.

**Tervo:** I might be if he was saying that.

**Jacobsen:** But then, that’s different than ordinary Muslims. I talked to Imam Soharwardy, the Founder and President to the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada. We were talking about having Roman Catholic and Protestant homes.

**You can have Sunni and Shia homes. Where the parents want the child to identify as Roman Catholic or Protestant, or Sunni or Shia, simply because the parents are that, rather than providing a basis for the child or the adolescent to develop critical thinking tools to question the faith; so, whether they believe it or not, they end up with a robust faith – I respect that – or they have reasons for not believing in the faith – I respect that.**

**Why? According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we all have freedom of belief and freedom of religion. So, if a parent, essentially, crippling a child from thinking critically, whether an atheist home or a religious home, I do not agree with that idea.**

**I agree with the premise that the parents’ duty is to provide the tools for a child to think critically in, at least, these circumstances.**

**Tervo:** I would agree with that. I would hope to practice that, at least a little bit. I know few people who would practice it. That is idealistic when it comes to be a parent. It might be that I know more people the average who would do it.

**Because I hang out with critically thinking people. I believe in critical thinking in lots of ways. I think that might be one of the challenges in any religious format. People get lazy in how they think; they get lazy in what they believe.**

**You can end up with people who are unable to pass that onto their children, because they are lazy and have not answered the questions themselves. They have not taken the intellectual or the emotional challenges and grappled with them.**

**There was an interview with Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop, and Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury. I think the question was, at one point in the interview, “Is this unconventional?” Justin Welby bounced around a little bit and said, “Christianity is not conventional. The problem is we get sleepy.”**

**We go to sleep with atheism as much as anything else. People will claim to be atheists because they cannot be bothered doing the other stuff. It will shut down a conversation why they uphold that structure. Christians do the same thing. We become unable to actually say what we believe, say what we think. It becomes posturing.**



That is the challenge these days. It is being able to engage people in some way, where we can honestly espouse our beliefs – in a way that makes sense to us. We can also accept no matter what you believe; there are places where it falls and does not make sense. We can be generous with each other around that.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your, Rev. Tervo.**

## Ask Rob 6 – Evil in Action and in Inaction, Choose Wisely: Secular History Rediscovered

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 27, 2019

*Rob Boston is the Editor of Church & State (Americans United for Separation of Church and State). Here we talk about legal training, human rights, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** If ordinary citizens want to learn about the history of grassroots work for the improvement of conditions in their locale, where should they start?

**Rob Boston:** Communities and neighborhoods often have a person who's known for local activism. Sometimes it may be more than one person. I'd recommend seeking this person (or people) out and asking what you can do to help. Don't hesitate to learn from those who have experience.

**Jacobsen:** For young people entering legal training, who have less experience but more time, or adult learners looking to retrain in law, who have more experience but less time, any advice for those interested in entering into areas of law oriented on secular and freethought issues?

**Boston:** I'm not a lawyer, but I work with the legal team at Americans United. The main thing I would say here is to have an understanding of what the law can and cannot do when it comes to promoting secularism. I say this because some people see courts as a kind of trump card to defend separation of church and state, and in the United States, the federal courts have become more conservative so that's not always the case these days.

It's important that we choose our cases carefully. We don't want to create bad law.

**Jacobsen:** Human rights provide a modern ethical framework for the secular and the religious. A bit like evolution, it's the only game in town for everyone to have a fair shake. What challenges face secular women and men into 2020 regarding their human rights?

**Boston:** In my view, the biggest threat to human rights at this time is the worldwide rise of neo-fascism. For years, we have just assumed that human rights would expand – and indeed they did. In the United States, we experienced the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, the LGBTQ rights movement, the immigrants' rights movement and others in short order. Now we're seeing a backlash. As I said, this is not limited to the United States. Xenophobic political movements that are often racist, anti-LGBTQ, anti-immigrant and anti-women are growing in power in many nations. Often, the people who align with these movements will cite some version of religious orthodoxy as at least a partially motivating factor for their program if not a major part of it. What they are trying to do is use "traditional" religious values as a vehicle to roll back the social progress we've seen in the past 60 years.

**Jacobsen:** Does a moral imperative exist for secular writers on issues within the ethics framework provided by this "only game in town"?

**Boston:** I would expand this question beyond writers and assert that humanists have an ethical duty to support human rights for all. It has to be part of our program. Indeed, the very foundation of humanism is the belief that we all sprang from a common origin and thus we're equal.

Obviously, writers have a special role to play because they can help shape public opinion, but all of us who consider ourselves humanists must speak out to oppose the fascistic movements I've mentioned and advocate for the people these movements seek to oppress. But anyone who aspires to activism must find his/her own comfort level. For some people, marching in the streets is empowering, but others may prefer to work behind the scenes. For some people, donating money and supporting causes is the way to go, while others may want to actually lead movements. Whatever activists choose to do is fine, but I would caution people not to try to take on everything. You'll get burned out that way.

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

# Interview with Gary J. Kirkpatrick – Administrator, “Atheism: The Step That Changes Everything”

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 28, 2019

*Gary J. Kirkpatrick is the Administrator, “Atheism: The Step That Changes Everything.” Here we talk about his life and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What was early life like for you?

**Gary J. Kirkpatrick:** I was frightened by the possibility of eternal torture for being naughty.

**Jacobsen:** How were religion and faith influential on you if at all?

**Kirkpatrick:** I learned the Catechism very well. I remember studying it in bed, so I could answer the nun’s questions the next Sunday. As an adult, I worry how young people are being filled with delusional stories that in some cases are constructed to encourage violence and other immoralities.

**Jacobsen:** How does religion around the world, and in your locale, appear to receive special privileges in the upbringing and the filling of the minds of the young?

**Kirkpatrick:** It appears to have been marginalized where I live. Around the world is another matter.

**Jacobsen:** What effect did thinking about and reading about non-religious belief impact personal perspectives on the world around you?

**Kirkpatrick:** I came to realize that the human species was infected with delusional stories.

**Jacobsen:** Did these impact friendships and relations with family

**Kirkpatrick:** I think it complicated some of my relationships, either by my zeal in trying to persuade them of the correctness of my religious beliefs or of the invalidity of religions.

**Jacobsen:** What books have been influential in personal philosophical life for you? What about films or documentaries?

**Kirkpatrick:** *End of Faith, The God Delusion, Religion, God is Not Great*, and Bart Ehrman’s *How Jesus Became God, Misquoting Jesus, God’s Problem, Jesus Interrupted and Forged*.

**Jacobsen:** If you reflect on some of the concerning developments in fundamentalist religions around the world, what trouble you?

**Kirkpatrick:** The return of the forces of ignorance — the Empire striking back.

**Jacobsen:** If we split the basics of the literals and liberals of the religious ideological groupings, are both bad or only some parts of each bad, or all they all bad, to you? What are the positives of liberalized, ordinary religion and the negatives of it, too?

**Kirkpatrick:** More liberal religious groups share my political views and views on how to treat others. They are more accepting of skepticism and reason.

**Jacobsen:** So, since you are living in two different places throughout different times of the year, what are your experiences of the different cultures of Spain and the United States? How do people express their faith in different ways?

**Kirkpatrick:** In Europe generally religiosity is much less intense than in the US. There are comparatively a few fundamentalists here and the rate at which people attend church and express belief in a deity is much lower than in the US. Part of that is it is due to historical forces. For example, in France, the church sided with the king in the time of the Revolution back in 1789. In Spain, the church strongly backed Franco, who remains intensely unpopular. These positions eroded support for religion.

Nowadays church attendance is somewhere in the 10 to 20 percent range. The general belief in a deity is 35 to 50 percent, higher in Poland. Church attendance is down to less than 10 percent, higher on holidays. I am using EU statistics. You can find by using the term “religiosity in Europe.”

**Jacobsen:** In Europe and the US, they have more advanced technology than most places in the world. How does this lack of religiosity reflect itself in the online spaces?

**Kirkpatrick:** There are many online debate groups. Our group is not one. It is intended to a support group for people who have recently shed their religious beliefs.

**Jacobsen:** Is it in any way influential in politics?

**Kirkpatrick:** Not in Europe with some exceptions, such as Poland and Lithuania in. My partner and I spent a couple of months in Poland last summer. It was probably the most religious country we have been in. However, it is about half of what it was during the Soviet era. During the Soviet era, the Church sided with the people’s efforts to improve their living conditions.

**Jacobsen:** If you look at that lack of caring, essentially, in the European context, how does this, in one way, reflect a certain getting over religion and, in another respect, potentially if a fundamentalist wave were to hit Europe a lack of potential preparedness?

**Kirkpatrick:** I do not see a wave of religiosity on the horizon. There is some Islamic fundamentalist.

**Jacobsen:** Thanks much for your time here.

**Kirkpatrick:** Okay! Take care.

# Ask SASS 4 (Wynand) – From WhatsApp to Telegram and Infinity

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 29, 2019

*This is an ongoing and new series devoted to the South African Secular Society (SASS) and South African secularism. The Past President, Jani Schoeman, and the Current President, Rick Raubenheimer, and the current Vice-President, Wynand Meijer, will be taking part in this series to illuminate these facets of South Africa culture to us. Wynand joins us.*

*Here we talk about internal communications.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's talk about an area of expertise, within SASS, for you, which is the WhatsApp grouping, as well as the transition into Telegram. Why the transition from Whatsapp into Telegram? How does this work in terms of some of the internal communications, and the group chats?

**Wynand Meijer:** We initially started our chats in Whatsapp. Whatsapp is a very familiar platform that multiple people use. However, we did find limitations within Whatsapp self as we progressed and as we grew our different groups. One of the limitations within Whatsapp was the fact that we cannot really administer or moderate some of the content that gets posted to the group.

Should an unsavoury image, or totally irrelevant advertising person come in, and post details in there, we've got no control over removing it. This became a bit of a problem later, with very unsavoury content being posted into the groups by fly-by-night people just come in, drop something off, and then exit the channel.

Telegram offered us a much better control over our groups themselves, not only in terms of the size of the groups that we can use, which is extremely longer.

Also, the fact that once you join a group, you can also go back into the history of the group and see what all the discussions are about, giving you a much better idea, where with Whatsapp, you get into the group, and that's where you start. You've got no background, or going back into the history of the group, or get a feel for what is being said.

Telegram also has a very nice feature called a broadcast, which allows you to only connect, and get messages that are being pushed, or broadcast, to you. There is no unnecessary chatter in those groups.

We are running quite several groups. We have various regional groups for the different provinces, or regions, where promotion is done for non-belief events happening there, like Sceptics events, or various other groups that we have come to know of.

The regional groups are not generally that busy. We also have our topic-specific groups. This would range from secular parenting, secular chatter, which is just a bunch of people chatting, a response channel, that informs other individuals, "Listen, there's something happening on the radio that might be interesting for you to listen to, or to give your input into."

We also have our Asking for a Friend channel, which is more open for somebody that's got some questions, and maybe not sure of things, just asking for a friend.

That's why, since we've got such a large array of groups that we do manage, as well as some of the limitations. At the same time, what Telegram also does, it has a very nice security feature, where your privacy is yours. You can hide your username or telephone number. It isn't like Whatsapp that your details are now exposed to everybody who is in the channel.

Also, the group management in there allows us to have moderators. Not everybody's an admin, but we can have more fine-grained control of what type of content can also be posted, and who may remove other people, or add other people. Then, the basics like the web client of Telegram is also extremely easy for us to work with.

There was a lot of consideration that went into this move-over. It did go smooth. One or two hiccups, or people that were not very happy with the transition, but the transition as a whole and what we've gained from what we had really was worth it to move over to Telegram.

**Jacobsen: Let's focus more on the convenience factor of Telegram. It provided more control, and therefore in a way, more convenience, through Telegram, rather than Whatsapp, are there other alternative programs that you looked at that might be more suitable to much larger organizations, or organizations that are much smaller, and simply starting out, if they're secular, for instance.**

**Meijer:** I reckon that's going to be a look at what you need and decide from there. We did look at one of the other options being Viber. One of the other reasons that we've looked from a back-end side at Telegram is also that you can have bots. You can programmatically approach this, as well. If you do have the resources, the finances, or perhaps the extensive knowledge in making use of that, you can have this little thing doing all your maintenance for you or help assist in certain things.

The programming aspect of it was also a very big factor for us. As I did allude to, Viber was one of the other options that we also did have a look into, but one of the selling points for Telegram was also the privacy factor. Many times there are people that do come and have a look or are interested in coming out, but they really want to keep their privacy for themselves.

Some of these people, their communities where they are in could be financial suicide for them if they just come out, so we try to respect all types of privacy. Even if it's just keeping your cell phone number for yourself, as privacy. We respect the privacy of our members and anybody who is interested.

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

**Meijer:** Thank you.

# Interview with Tsung-jen Wu – Asian Working Group (Taiwan), Vice-Chair East Asia, Young Humanists International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 30, 2019

*Tsung-jen Wu is the Vice-Chair of East Asia of the Asian Working Group (Taiwan) of Young Humanists International. He is important in the provision of a perspective from East Asia and humanism.*

*In particular, the youth culture of humanism there, in which Taiwan may become an important vanguard – in some ways maintains this status now, e.g., the first Asian region nation-state to legalize same-sex unions.*

*Here we talk about his life and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How was personal background? What's your story in early life? How would you tell your early life story in terms of your interaction with education, with family, with faith, in Taiwan?

**Tsung-jen Wu:** I'm from Taiwan. I'm going to be a graduate student from my university. My major is economics. The university I study at is a good university, which tops the list of the social sciences and business schools in Taiwan.

Before I studied at my university, I had a low grade in academic work. I didn't perform well in the past. At that time, I was not treated equally because of the environment in Taiwan. They view those who have higher grades as a better person, a better guy. They are believed to be the best people who can earn much money and they will earn the prestige from the society. However, this is not the case for a lower school, which has students with bad grades.

But this, I cannot imagine why people will say so. It is unreasonable. This is what happened when I studied at junior and senior high school. Towards the end of senior high school, I gradually got good grades on tests. Finally, I passed the tests and the examinations, so that I could get into the university I'm studying at.

I experienced two different faces, the good grades and the bad grades. I experienced totally different life experiences. I can clearly feel that this is totally not fair. Education should not act like this. Education should be the light or the fire to inspire, to light up anyone's idea and make them much more courageous to explore much more deeply about something unknown – the unknown and the knowledge.

To reach this goal, they have to respect individuals. They have to respect what they feel and what they are thinking about, what the student is thinking about. The concept of humanism comes into my mind. This is what happened in Taiwan. Educators and researchers in education fields promote humanistic education in our classes, and in our school, and in so many fields. This is the point why I focus on humanism. It was beginning at the field of education.



**Jacobsen: How prominent, for those who don't know, is humanism in Taiwan? How does humanism, in and of itself, reflect what some would see many Asian region values? Of course, it will differ and vary in many ways. Although, there will be trends.**

**Wu:** How much is there? It is far from enough, but, fortunately, we're starting to focus on humanism. You can see so many campaigns. They have their political ideas. They want to make the biggest community much more equal, no matter whether it is an LGBT group, or a low school that has bad grades, to encourage them to do something different. If they have different skills, like they are good at assembling something and can make all the gadgets into one machine, they should be encouraged to do so.

If you are one of the members of the LGBT groups, you can own some respect. It is gradual progress, but, in general, it is not common to see humanism. It is still not a time for humanism, the concept of humanism. The seed of humanism blossoms. It is not the time, but it is gradually happening.

**Jacobsen: How about yourself? How did you become involved in humanism? How has the trajectory of humanism taken place in Taiwan? How has it developed? I would say in culture and in young culture, youth culture.**

**Wu:** Youth culture. The first time I was involved in humanism. At that time, I didn't know if there is a humanist organization or not. I knew nothing about that. I participated in so many activities, like student consulting. The work I do is to share my experience in the university to the senior high school students to let them know what happens in university, and why you should prepare for your future, and what subjects you are going to learn.

I share the experience and ideas with senior high school students, for them. I try hard to break down the barriers in their minds. They are told to be a good person. However, I encourage them to be the person who is courageous, to be themselves. Something like this: share experience, share ideas. I try hard to inspire them.

Not only inspiring them, but I try to start up related courses, like user experience courses with my friends who are partners in business. We open start-up classes. We invite all the people around our society who are interested to take part in our classes and share ideas about what is the business of the humanist orientation and the concept. We share some skills with them. We share some tools to make them do much better.

In the past, in the economy, Taiwan was a manufacturer, a producer of so many things, but Taiwan is not the creator. They are not innovators. Taiwan has to change. They have to turn themselves from a producer into a creator. A creator cares for science, cares for the truth, for the people, what people think about, and care for so many human-based things.

In education and in the field of business, I do these things to improve them, to help them to change the ideas, to improve the design in the business field. We encourage the producers, the firms to make a good design, and based on human habits, which may make the customer more satisfied with your design and your product. It can leave a good impression in their mind, so that everything gets improved. We are not a manufacturer. We care for how to create something that is high quality. This is what I do.

After that, I got acquainted with Kevin, who started up the young humanism group in Taiwan. I was curious about why he did this and what he did. It is interesting. After along chat, I decided to

spend part of my time with him and to develop a deeper relationship, foster a good relationship with each other.

I share some human-based experiences in marketing and branding with the Taiwan Humanism Association. We cooperate with each other and help them to create some projects. I share ideas about how to make good marketing based on humans' requirements. This is the trajectory of my experience in humanism from education, economics, and humanist organizations.

**Jacobsen: That's exciting. What would you hope for young humanists in the Asian region, in general, for the rest of 2019 and into 2020?**

**Wu:** In Taiwan, in our organization, we hope to prosper. We want grow up and make other people know about humanism, what humanism is and what is the related concepts about humanism. For example, science, we are living in a world based on science and human orientation. It is important to make them know what is the core idea of the system. This is the first thing we are going to do.

We start to host some activities, fun activities, to attract people everywhere, from north to south, to participate in our activities. We want to try to let them know the trajectory, the development of Amsterdam Declaration's ideas from Europe to Asia and to know the history of this past.

In general, in Asian associations, we hope to connect with each other more deeply because I hear from Feng. Asia is a big family. However, we cannot foster a meaningful relationship as European countries did.

Why? Because we have a totally different culture. We have a different history and past. We have totally different religious beliefs. We have totally different languages. Even though a Singaporean looks similar to us, we can't understand what each other thinks about because we are living in a totally different environment.

To make a good integration is the first and also the most important thing to do. How do we do it? In my opinion, I hope we can start up our staff exchange project. For example, we can assign a country, which is going to hold an activity, to make feedback to the local development. For example, the Philippines can do this. They can do something meaningful for their local development, like health, education or public hygiene, and so on.

Other delegates and different associations in Asia can take part in their projects to make a deep understanding about what happened in their country. Other representatives can get acquainted and know more about each other during the process of making a service to the Philippines. This is the first idea. First the Philippines and Singapore, and maybe India, then Taiwan, can do this, can play this role. We can take turns every year.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Tsung-jen.**

## **Ask SASS 5 (Jani and Wynand) – Communication, Accents, Afrikaans, and Ethnic Diversity**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**July 1, 2019**

*This is an ongoing and new series devoted to the South African Secular Society (SASS) and South African secularism. The Past President, Jani Schoeman, and the Current President, Rick Raubenheimer, and the current Vice-President, Wynand Meijer, will be taking part in this series to illuminate these facets of South Africa culture to us. Jani and Wynand join us.*

*Here we talk about communication, accents, and ethnic diversity, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's talk about communications with different groups. How do you approach different groups in communication?

**Wynand Meijer:** We would generally identify a group via their online presence, and from there, arrange an in-person meeting. Whether we will be able to get to know of this group via a debate or a Meetup, or an event that's posted, we would engage, sit in, and once we've established either a repertoire with the group, or we've seen what they are about, we would approach them and ask if they do know of the Secular Society.

From this point on, we would start with a networking opportunity to see if there are any overlapping interests. We are not looking at making a group part of South African Secular Society or get the members into the society, but we do like to expose each other to, or bring an exposure level to these groups, so that Group A gets to know of Group B, and vice versa. That allows for groups to stay totally autonomous from each other, however, share interests.

It also allows for a better disbursement of resources, where various groups can start various types of interests or topics and inform each other of what is happening. This allows, then, for an easier interaction and a bigger variety of content. Specifically, with groups that we work with in Durban, as well as groups in Cape Town, where we would notify each other, "Listen, we've got this event coming." We would notify our people and vice versa. They would inform their following of similar interests.

We have found that this model is very beneficial, but it is a bit of a long-term project. You start seeing the value of this four, five months down the line, where groups are now more familiar with each other, as well as the content that they bring to the table, and at the same time, you would get the other group's people showing an interest in what you do, and also start following what you have.

The success, can I say, has been very good. Also, good networking relationships have been built with this. This also allows for greater expanding to various regions.

**Jani Schoeman:** If I may add a few things. What we have previously also done is do collaborating events with these organizations or other groups that we've engaged with. Sometimes that's very fun. If you have a small group, and they're also a small group, then if you do a collab together, then you get to meet a lot more people that you never see. It's not just the regular faces. That's always nice.

There was one other thing I wanted to mention, but now I forgot. Meijer, when you speak, then I always pay attention because you speak so well, and then I forget what I want to say [Laughing].

**Meijer:** [Laughing] Thank you, Jani. Just to give you an idea, Scott. How this has bloomed, if I can call it that. For instance, this evening, we're going to a talk, close by here, from the Sceptics in the Pub group, that is also a like-minded group, and we're going to talk about happiness, the various topics in and around that. Everybody's going to bring that to the table.

Sceptics in the Pub is also doing an outing on the 25th of May, to the South African Breweries, which is a whole beer thing where everybody just goes to, and have this outing, and enjoy it. A while back, we had an outing with the NHN. It's a very weird Afrikaans one. It's "Die Nuwe Hervormings Netwerk", which is a bit of an older demographic society. We went and explored some caves with that group.

There are various interest groups of different types of activities that you can partake in, and it's not always done under your banner, but as Jani mentioned, it's a collaboration, at the end of the day. That allows for a lot of activities of various kinds, and various people, demographics, everything, that you start to see.

**Schoeman:** I just remembered what I wanted to say. I was also thinking of NHN specifically, on my second point. When we got to know them, when we had our first meeting with them, it was very interesting for me to see an older generation, how they approach the secular world or the secular idea.

Also, it's a very Afrikaans group. Our group is half English, half Afrikaans, but we all speak English because Joburg is mostly English and it's accepted that everyone just speaks English as the default language. It was very beneficial to me, and insightful to me, to get to know how this other demographic of people approach secularism, as well, in South Africa.

[Pause]

**Schoeman:** Scott, are you frozen?

**Jacobsen:** No. I'm just Canadian.

**Schoeman:** [Laughing] Alright.

**Jacobsen:** Be careful. Arya might kill me.

**Let's then focus a little bit more, or deeper, into the subject matter of communication, of community building, as well as to a point Rick Raubenheimer, the current president, made in a prior session. It dealt with not simply a diversification in terms of gender dynamics within some of the secular groups within South Africa, which is a larger concern to some within the international secular community.**

**Also, he noted within South Africa, diversity in terms of ethnic background. How can secular groups in South Africa continue what many in the international scene see as a prominent historical development in South Africa in terms of going from one rather negative stage, in terms of ethnic relations, into one that's much more positive, moving into the present and hopefully, into the future?**

**Schoeman:** That was a very long phrasing of the question. If you can maybe boil it down in a sentence for me?

**Jacobsen:** Sure. How can secular groups in South Africa better represent the broader base of the population in terms of ethnic background?

**Schoeman:** That is a difficult one. I don't know if you have some ideas, there, Wynand. It's been something that's always been on my mind. When we're doing things, I've tried to cater for people of all ethnicities, and try to find something that's interesting to everyone, but I don't know how we can more actively try and bring diversity into the group. It's something that I've always wanted to develop more. Wynand, your thoughts?

It is difficult to think of active ways in which to attract more diversity to our group. I don't know if there's been any development on that. It's something that I've found difficult. Although, we do have people of many different ethnicities coming to the meetings, but I think we can do better.

**Meijer:** Some of the things that I've observed is that our ethnic diversity tends to be more of the Indian.

**Schoeman:** Yes.

**Meijer:** We get a lot of in-person activity from people of an Indian background, Eastern background. For the native population, I have noticed online, that there is a presence but even online, the presence is not that big.

One of the reasons, I suspect, is also the background itself. They also have a very strong religious background, and not only in a Christian or Judaic type of background, but also the "bygeloof".

**Schoeman:** Yes. Ancestry, and all of that.

**Meijer:** The ancestry. It's crap. Now me on-the-fly translator just broke.

**Jani:** [Laughing].

**Meijer:** What do you call "bygeloof"?

**Schoeman:** I don't know what's the direct translation of that.

**Meijer:** What do you call it when you walk under a ladder?

**Schoeman:** A superstition. Is it a superstition?

**Meijer:** Yes. There's quite a big superstition element in their upbringing as well, which goes together with the religious part, and the fact that it's, for lack of a better word, also very a conservative type of— What's the English word for "eng"? I'm not saying narrow-minded.

**Schoeman:** It's close to the heart. I'm trying to think, also. "Eng". [Laughing] You're bringing up some Afrikaans words that I haven't heard in a while and haven't needed to translate.

**Meijer:** A very narrow type of view of the world. In other words, "There's only this path," and the whole community works in this. It's very much a group thing. So, when you try to leave that, your social standing within your community is highly, highly affected.

As family is a very large part of it, it's not something you just want to get out of. I think a lot of the times, it's easier to break ties with your family coming from a white background, for lack of a better word, than it is from a black background, or a South-African native background.

I think that social part makes it very difficult for people coming out of their shell and coming to join. That's why the online presence would be more prevalent than an in-person Meetup.

**Schoeman:** You've just awakened something in my mind. I've never thought of the actual black-specific type of barriers that they may have in their culture when transitioning, or when stepping out of religion because as you said, they have many, many superstitious elements in the traditional African culture and/or religion.

I don't know how much about religion in Africa, Scott. If you're following the traditional African religion, it's very ancestral based. There's a lot of which doctors and things involved. It's like this very primitive – no, not primitive. It's a lot based in-

**Meijer:** Money rats.

**Schoeman:** Huh?

**Meijer:** Money rats is one of the main things. You can send somebody money, and they will send you a rat that will bring you money.

**Jacobsen:** [Laughing]

**Schoeman:** It's a lot not like Christianity at all. It's very much based on the land, and objects and things like that.

**Meijer:** On ever traffic light, you can possibly get a pamphlet for penis enlargement.

**Jacobsen:** [Laughing]

**Schoeman:** Yes. I don't think there's a strong culture of critical thinking, in general, at all.

**Meijer:** Those social challenges, I think, makes it much more difficult for individuals to come out and be part- as they will be shunned and ostracized from their communities and their families. For them, it is a very big risk at the end.

**Schoeman:** I don't think there's as much of an independence vibe in their culture, generally, as there is with Caucasians. I don't know, maybe Indians. They are very much into family, and looking after each other in family, sticking together type of thing. If you happen to be different, I think, and black, you're more likely to hide that, or you just don't have the option to come out.

**Meijer:** That is not only just for secular views but also for sexual orientation as well, that we have noticed. Yes, on all ethnicities, you would get that resistance or kickback from your immediate society, but I do think certain structures have a bit of a stronger bond to break at the end of the day.

**Jacobsen:** Also, even with the context of Indian culture and black culture in South Africa, what about Afrikaners, or white culture in South Africa, in terms of their own barriers? I know, Jani, you have provided some commentary in some of the earliest conversations we've had, on some of the evangelical upbringing. Are there any other contexts that you're aware of – Wynand or Jani?

**Schoeman:** Within whites or Caucasians-

**Jacobsen:** Yes.

**Schoeman:** No, I just know that there's a big difference between if you're a white Afrikaans person versus if you're a white English person. If you are white, and English, then I think it's less taboo for you not to be religious. On the other hand, if you're white and Afrikaans, it's taboos in most cases.

I don't know about English people, what denominations they are more likely to be in, here in South Africa. Maybe they are more into the evangelical side of things, or maybe Pentecostal a bit more.

Afrikaners are more into very traditional, conservative values. It's almost always the NG Kerk. Not always, but most of the time. So, they hold their family values very dear, and their religion very dear to them. It is tabooer, I think, overall, as an Afrikaans person, to step out of the faith.

Meijer: However, I do need to interject, there. Just an observation, is that a lot of Afrikaans-speaking people are becoming more verbal around this, not necessarily taking banners and doing protests or anything like that, but you do get the feeling that you are no longer alone. That's a big thing that I have noticed.

A few years back, it would be, "There's nobody else like me. I'm weird. There's something wrong. Maybe I'm just wrong." As you can start getting into these communities, you can see, "Listen, there's a lot of people that are much more verbal than you would anticipate." I do think that is good in its own view, as well.

This is not only atheist-related, but I think it falls into this whole sphere of "nones", where "not affiliated", "not interested", the whole "none" category. That is starting to show in a lot of the conversations, and it's becoming more. I don't want to say easier.

Sorry, just to go off on a tangent on this. A decade or two ago, bringing up the topic of sex would be not a taboo topic, but, "It isn't something we discuss." Now, it's easier that you can almost start talking about sex, and things that you can buy in a sex shop. It becomes part of conversation, where a few years ago, you would not even talk about it- a few decades ago.

I'm starting to see the same thing with religion, where you can easier just start asking questions and get a response. There's reciprocation. It isn't that somebody would not be interested and not talk to you. Living in the metro and metropolitan areas. That view might be totally different when you go to the rural areas.

**Schoeman:** Yes.

**Meijer:** The platteland, where you've got a population of 500, with 5 churches and 3 liquor stores.

**Schoeman:** Now that you've said that, Meijer, the topic of sex and all that stuff. I know this now because I'm in this whole world now of infertility. Even that. I found out as soon as I had my miscarriage last year. I found out that, "You're not supposed to tell everyone." That was weird to me, but from my family's side, my sister said something weird. She was like, "That's why you never tell anyone you're pregnant until 12 weeks." I was like, "Why the fuck wouldn't you?"

It is changing, and slowly but surely. Slowly but surely.

**Meijer:** I think that that split that we are seeing, we are going to see that, soon, hopefully in the ethnic cultures, as well, which will make them join.

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

**Schoeman:** All right.

**Meijer:** Thanks, Scott.

## Interview with Marissa Torres Langseth – Founder & Chairwoman Emeritus, HAPI

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 2, 2019

*Marissa Torres Langseth is the Founder and Chairwoman Emeritus of HAPI – Humanist Alliance Philippines, International.*

*Here we talk about HAPI, secular women, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What triggered the original formation of PATAS and then HAPI?

**Marissa Torres Langseth:** I do not need fame nor fortune. I created PATAS and HAPI with the Philippines in my mind. But I had bittersweet memories with PATAS and HAPI, the societies I founded with my own money, blood, and sweat.

Let me start with PATAS, I coined that word which means equality in Tagalog in 2011, but the video of Bill Gates giving away a computer for every child in the Amazon, was the first trigger. I wish to give out a computer every year which I started in 2011, in the name of atheism. I thought it was and still is a lovely way to share my abundance.

Then again, I realized that people in the Philippines, notably my family always go to church to ask for help instead of working, and I wonder, maybe I can do something better in that scenario.

I thought they relied heavily on a god to help them, instead of helping themselves. Growing up poor, I have experienced how it was to be awakened and kicked early morning to go to church on occasions, especially, Sunday mass and “timbang gabi” for Christmas. I saw the “waste of time” in those instances, even worse, I saw how the priests tried to abuse women, including myself.

With PATAS’ creation, I thought we can improve the livelihood and welfare of Filipinos, via education about “believing in oneself, rather than believing in a deity.” My journey in PATAS was not a bed of roses. When I started my activism, I was tormented online by unknown people calling me devil, whore, bride of Satan, and bimbo. These Filipinos believe that atheists are killers, prostitutes, and people of loose morals. There are even Facebook pages made just to bash me online.

However, just like in any fledgling organization, there were power struggles, and arrogance amongst officers and members. “Herding cats is a daunting task,” I said that in 2011 when I founded PATAS. There were a lot of infighting and issues amongst atheists. It was an organization, full of petty quarrels, jealousy and envy amongst these new atheists. I had heartaches and headaches galore at that time.

True enough, I experienced being disrespected, being mocked and jeered, and even disregarded as the founder, despite me bringing most of the funds to keep our society afloat. I even paid for most of the expenses in the very first South East Asian convention held in Manila in 2012. The last straw that broke the camel’s back was when they removed me from the main PATAS group that I initiated way back 2010.

That was in November of 2013. It was the lowest moment in my life, I even contemplated suicide. My husband saved me. He said it was just a waste of my money and time “making a



difference in the Phils” and that I am already a US citizen. These PATAS officers are ingrates and disrespectful despite what I have done for them.

My anger and passion kept me awake most nights, until I thought of a better avenue and strategy to make more impact and share my happiness. So HAPI was born, with a little help from outsourcing. HAPI was not without issues either, we also had peaks and valleys, scamming and dishonesty by those who looked at me like a gold mine, until after Sept 30, 2017, most issues were ironed out and I would say, I can travel the world, without fear of my society being stolen. At least 3 people tried to hijack HAPI, but the good always wins. The working class of HAPI won, so, here I am, still alive and kicking, never to let it go, because I learned my lessons well.

**Jacobsen: What were the main difficulties in a heavily Roman Catholic Christian country in the foundation of a freethought movement? Were these exacerbated or not as a woman in the Philippines?**

**Langseth:** The Phils is a heavily indoctrinated Christian nation, about 80-95% remain religious, being RCC at more than 86%, patriarchal in nature, so women leaders are not only bullied, but they are mocked as “not equal to a man’s strength.” Misogyny is still evident and prevalent in the Philippines, especially, with President Duterte at the helm. He even publicly laughs at rapes, and is very condescending to women at large.

Frankly, it was like a suicide for me, making non religious movements like PATAS and HAPI. I was tormented online. I made enemies in both camps. The atheists were sometimes worse than the theists. I stayed calm at first, and finally I fired back. I challenged them to see me when I went home in 2017. I even hired 2 bodyguards because I also had some legitimate threats. Of course, no one came to refute their accusations against me. I wonder why? Maybe because I am a woman and misogyny is still common in the Phils and with patriarchal orientation, these men thought that I cannot do anything, but “clean butts in the USA.” (Yes, most of them thought that I am a nursing assistant in the USA, with due respect to the nursing assistants.)

Some of them even made a lot of FB pages about me being a prostitute, photo shopping my face on top of scantily clad women, on bikinis, on top of donkeys, apes and monkeys and including Mao Tse Tung. I became so used to this kind of abuse online. I even said to them. “I will be more enthralled if you guys make a website about me.”

I got used to being bullied everyday, haters send me PM’s almost everyday... that, I missed them now. Funny, I had one stalker who donates just to get my attention. Few of my stalkers want my attention so bad, that they post my personal rant online.

**Jacobsen: What do you see as overturned hardships for the secular in the Philippines as a result of the secular movement there?**

**Langseth:** I can say that with the advent of social media and these two movements, I have seen a lot of new, younger nonreligious societies that sprouted online, some are becoming active offline already. I tried to reach out to them and send my congratulations, and without bragging, HAPI has become quite a model for them. (I was told.) Some even copied our activities, however, HAPI is the only society with REGULAR community outreach to far flung areas like Mt. Haduan in Central Luzon, Bicol, barangays in Bacolod and Iligan. We have prospered so much, that we have a volunteer with regular stipend, who moves about in and out of the islands to meet and greet them, to provide more credibility to HAPI. Many thanks to our regular monthly donors who helped materialize this endeavor.

**Jacobsen:** What are the more modern challenges for the next generations now, as, commonly, each generation comes with the accomplishments and failings of the prior generation and, thus, come with often novel problems – some unforeseen?

**Langseth:** It will take a generation for us to finally see the “effect of our advocacy” thereby, HAPI is banking on the young people. We do have a lot of youngsters, the youngest active member is 15, mostly in the bracket of 17-25 years old. We have HAPI kids in Manila with very, very young members and HAPI Juniors in Bacolod.

It is still a challenge for us to educate the young HAPI members, because some members come and go due to fear of being disowned by their families. I have seen some members who became theists again due to their parents’ threats and constant nagging. Some LGBT atheists are sent to a rehab program because the parents thought that atheism was the result of taking illegal drugs.

HAPI is a well diverse community with 40% male, 30% LGBT and 30% female. We try to be more inclusive, admitting religious humanists so they can be educated further, and see our “good without god” events. Some have become agnostic already. I am proud to say that we have educated and converted some of them. We even allow those who are “against our society”, so they can see what we do. We cannot preach to the choir all the time.

We have a lot of fresh ideas. We now have a humanist celebrant in HAPI to provide ceremonial services like weddings and funerals. Some people were against this idea as it has some religious connotation. But, we explained that most Filipinos’ psyche is in tuned with “believing in something,” and they should be handled with a velvet glove. More people will come when we employ our strategy of sharing happiness with honey.

With HAPI, we have eliminated the word “atheist” which is stigmatized in the Philippines. And we cannot use sarcasm and metaphors like Satan because most Filipinos take those words literally. With HAPI, we can be secular, religious or spiritual and we can always be ourselves as human beings with inborn human rights.

We still need a lot of work to do, especially, women and LGBTQ empowerment as well as pushing for more equality. The Philippines need to learn a lot from Scandinavia, but the culture of slave mentality and Stockholm syndrome need to be eradicated, so they can have self confidence and better self-esteem, therefore, we include this information in educating the young.

With HAPI in the forefront in the Philippine secularism, we can attract even those theists who bash us when we were still PATAS. Being a humanist has opened the hearts of those theists who once called us demons and devils in disguise. Humanism is such a positive word that those who left HAPI are trying to get in serendipitously.

I can say that being in HAPI made my life more colorful and less boring. If I want to get aggravated that day, I go to FB, although, I do not get as much bashing from theists anymore. The irony is that, those atheists who backstabbed me in PATAS and HAPI are the ones spewing hatred towards HAPI and badmouthing me whenever they can. But mind you, some are coming back to HAPI. We must be doing something great!

Maybe I can do more had my husband supported me from the get go.

But, we just want to have a HAPI ending.

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

Sources:

Duterte's rape jokes meant 'to make people laugh' – Panelo

Duterte's rape jokes meant 'to make people laugh' – Panelo Neil Arwin Mercado President

Rodrigo Duterte's rape jokes during his speech at the PMA Class of 2019 graduation was only intended t...

(<https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/198445-why-misogyny-bad-for-filipinos>)

(<https://asiasociety.org/education/religion-Philippines>)

([https://dirp3.pids.gov.ph/webportal/CDN/PUBLICATIONS/pidsdps1544\\_rev.pdf](https://dirp3.pids.gov.ph/webportal/CDN/PUBLICATIONS/pidsdps1544_rev.pdf))

In the Philippines, GANDA Filipinas fights the culture of misogyny to let women and LGBTQI people speak out – Access Now

## Interview with Bridgett “Bree” Crutchfield – Founder, Minority Atheists of Michigan & Founder, the Black Nonbelievers (Detroit Affiliate)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 3, 2019

*Bridgett “Bree” Crutchfield is the Founder of Minority Atheists of Michigan, the Detroit Affiliate of Black Nonbelievers (2013), and Operation Water For Flint (2016).*

*Here we talk about women in secular communities.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What have been the major progressions and regressions for women in secular communities?

**Bridgett “Bree” Crutchfield:** Major progressions, women are no longer awaiting opportunities to arrive on a silver platter from men. Women are taking it upon themselves to survive this slowly evolving community. And in order to accomplish that- it takes a tenacious attitude, helluva thick skin and an equally strong support network. There are women secular groups, women podcasters, women scientists (Hi Sci Babe)-women who refuse to take shit any longer. It’s a beautiful thing to see. I’m a proponent of the quote by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Well behaved women rarely make history.” What appears to be ‘misbehavior’ by society was/is necessary for women to take our rightful place in society.

Major regressions: women in the secular are still not readily believed when claims of sexual improprieties against us/them are made. Patriarchy is still a stronghold.

**Jacobsen:** When you left the Jehovah’s Witnesses, what were the difficulties and dynamics for women and men leaving the faith?

**Crutchfield:** I had no difficulties as I was already angry at having been forced to sacrifice my childhood/teenage years by being a JW. Leaving at 18 was a rite of passage, if you will. Most children JWs leave at 18 because it signifies you’re an adult in addition to on some subconscious level-wanting to be respectful of your parents. In retrospect, I’d say the biggest dynamic I (and others experienced) was total rebellion against the Organization (nickname for JW religion). I had cussed, became a stripper, lived my life totally polar to that of JWs, still do. I do know of many women (men too) who experienced/are experiencing chronic resentment and depression after leaving the faith. This is particularly common among those who left later in life, i.e., 30s and older.

**Jacobsen:** Following the previous question, have those difficulties and dynamics changed over time? Or are they the same?

**Crutchfield:** In light of the power of the internet-the difficulties have changed-as it’s more public. People have taken to social media to share their experiences and in the same vein-the Organization also utilizes social media. That is hilarious as it hammered into us to not be ‘of the world.’

**Jacobsen:** You founded Minority Atheists of Michigan (2011) and Black Nonbelievers (Detroit) in 2013. What have been the major developments since 2011 and 2013? Does

**treatment as a woman leader differ than if a man leader in secular communities? If so, and if from experience, how, and why?**

**Crutchfield:** Major developments: in 2011 you could name organizations on one hand. Not today. There are innumerable groups, organizations, podcasts, FB groups etc. Additionally, there were a handful of conferences held yearly. Today, there is a conference being held several times a month somewhere in the world and it makes my heart glad. The visibility we now experience is profound.

Yes treatment differs between women leaders/men leaders. Men are seen as consistent, stable and powerful. There is plenty of talk pertaining to being supportive of women (in the secular community), but little implementation. All the more reason, I perpetuate the idea of women taking their places in the community versus waiting to be 'rewarded' with the opportunities.

**Jacobsen:** **There is more discussion about the inclusion of more women within the secular communities. Whether leadership or membership, what seem like positive ways to include more women in secular communities? What seem like negative ways in which to have more women in secular communities.**

**Crutchfield:** Positive ways: listen to and implement ideas by women. Women create spaces for women due to not being taken seriously in the secular community. Also, those spaces are safer for women. Literally-SAFER.

Negative ways: having more women in the community in order to have them/us do the grunt work. Delegating work to women only. Taking over groups formerly lead by women.

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

# Interview with John Rafferty – Former President, Secular Society of New York

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 4, 2019

*John Rafferty is the Former President of the Secular Society of New York.*

*Here we talk about his life journey and views.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's start from the beginning, with regards to family and personal background in brief, what is it? Maybe what are some pivotal moments in the development of personal worldview in those?

**John Rafferty:** To begin, I am 85 years old. So, I grew up in a Catholic Church of the 40s and early 50s, which was far more rigid, backward, and reactionary than it is today. Not that it is all that great today!

I was growing up as a nominal Catholic, not a strict one or in a strict family. I didn't like it, but my parents sent me to the usual catholic religious instruction etcetera, and I was expected to go to mass. But they didn't push it. I did not have a real problem with it all until I had, as did so many kids, a confrontation at one point where I realized that it was all crap.

I was accused of doing something I hadn't done. Even though I protested my innocence, I was made to go back to confession and confess it. I thought, "Here, now, everything's going to get straightened out, because nobody lies in confession."

The priest shouted, almost screamed at me, "Say that you did it. Confess. Say your penance!" That's when I realized that people could lie in confession, could lie to God, and that this guy is just not listening to me. Turned me right around at age 11.

Subsequently, through a pretty good education, I lost all interest in religion.

I just didn't pay much attention to it, it wasn't important to me.

I married a Jewish girl. We both agreed that the kids would be brought up with no religion, which we did. My four sons have no religion, and their children have no religion. I did not pay much attention to it,

Then came another turning point was in the early 1990's. I had not been politically active. I voted, I was aware of what was going on, but I was not doing anything since the assassination of Bobby Kennedy. I had been very active when I was young. I had written soapbox speeches for speakers during Bobby's senate race. Not for Bobby himself, but for local speakers. But after the trauma of the assassination, I had given up on politics.

Then, one day in the early 1990's, I am scanning through the New York Times in the morning. I see a picture on an inside page of 40 or so congressmen and congresswomen, senators, standing on the steps of the Capitol in Washington to honor the Rev. Sun Myung Moon. Who was a lunatic and a convicted felon. I thought, "What the hell is going on with my government? What the hell was going with my nation?"

So, I started picking up on politics again. At about the same time, 1992, 93, 94, the Republican right was ascendant, and Newt Gingrich was saying that Secular Humanism was the worst

possible thing that could happen to America. In fact, he simplified his whole message later, when he said that Secular Humanism was a threat to America worse than Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia ever was. I thought, "If someone as rotten as Gingrich feels that way about secular humanism, maybe I should find out about it." So I did. I became active. Soon I joined the Secular Humanist Society of New York and began writing for its newsletter, which I still do. And I became more active politically.

That brings me up to date.

**Jacobsen: Who have been some prominent and important humanists?**

**Rafferty:** It is not like we are in church. Some of the biggest names in atheist and freethought circles include Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett. Some call themselves secular humanists. Humanism is a broad term that encompasses people who look for human-based solutions to our problems, our desires, our dreams. Humanism in general incorporates also religious humanists. But secular humanists kick out the idea of a supernatural answer, anything of greater power, or "the force", or whatever.

Religious humanism, or people who tolerate religion and humanism, include Unitarian Universalism and Ethical Culture, and others like that. But secular humanists put aside the religious, or the supernatural.

**Jacobsen: If we are looking at Secular Humanism in NY, what are some things of the community?**

**Rafferty:** The Secular Society of New York is more a social organization than a politically active one. You come in to a meeting of ours, you'll see either grey hair or no hair. We are superannuated, which is a problem throughout the freethought community. I have had conversations about this and about developing membership, and developing younger membership, with people like Roy Speckhardt, Executive Director of the American Humanist Association, and Tom Flynn, who is the Executive Director of the Council for Secular Humanism.

It is always the same general feeling. Our problem is the typicality of my own story: a young person who in high school, college, early twenties, is active, involved, doing things. I marched in Washington against Vietnam three times, and even caught tear gas.

Or take my number two son, Colin, who has been in more damn marches than anybody else I know, has been arrested and been knocked down by cops. But now he has children, is on the board of his co-op, runs a group of people at work. He's busy with life.

Politics, religion, social problems and ideas are important, and young people have the time for them. Then comes marriage, family, career. They've got more complicated lives.

Then their kids grow up. They are living it. Career is solid. They're starting to look forward to "How long until I retire?" And then they start waking up again, just as I did.

Something triggers you in middle age. After the marriage-and-career years of the late 20s, early 30s, into the 50s, people start waking up again.

Our humanist organizational problem is that we try different ways to do outreach, to get people involved, and to get them to us. You've got to talk to Jon Engel who has taken my place now as the president of the Secular Humanist Society of New York. Jon will tell you: he goes out, he

talks, he badgers faculty at the colleges all around New York to come to them and talk about secular humanism. If he got an acceptance from a college in Arkansas, I am sure that he'd be on the next plane.

He goes and talks about humanism, and secular humanism specifically, to students, to college-age people. He works at it. They are interested. They are excited. They march. They petition. They work at it and all. But they do not come to our meetings because they have their own, with their peers. In ten years, they'll be on their career fast tracks and getting married for the first and second time [Laughing].

After having kids, they'll be back. If we, the Secular Humanist Society of New York, are still around, and it's a pretty good bet that we will be, then they will be with us. But we'll be missing them for twenty to thirty years. That is the biggest problem, the biggest demographic problem that the movement faces — atheist, agnostics, humanists, secular humanists, skeptics, rationalists, naturalists, whatever the hell they call themselves.

**Jacobsen: What are the ways to deal with this demographic problem in the community around North America?**

**Rafferty:** That is the 64,000-dollar question. I do not know. We reach out. We try. But the point is you can't get people, when they are 20 years old or even 25 years old. There are lots of things that they can get involved in and get excited about. But when they are 35 and 45 years old, everything else comes after marriage/family and career/security. That is the natural order of things. We can't do anything, really, about that. We can't expect people, except for unusual people. We can't expect 9 out of 10 people to say, "Yes, I'll start devoting more of my time to the political or the social scene."

All you have to do is to look at the pictures of any mass demonstration. Yes, there are middle-aged people in the crowd. But for the most part they are young.

[Pauses dramatically]

So, I do not have an answer for you. I do not know how to get around this problem.

**Jacobsen: When it comes to individuals who devote their time to the social and political activities over and above family and career, how does the larger culture treat them?**

**Rafferty:** We live within our little bubbles that are part of bigger bubbles, which are part of bigger bubbles. I live on the east side of Manhattan, in New York City. It does not get more liberal than that in America. So as far as the culture — immediate culture — that I live in, that the Secular Society of New York operates in and lives in, we do not have a problem. As a matter of fact, I have always said that one of the reasons why we do not get even bigger is that people in New York do not need us. If you are L-G-B-T-Q whatever, or politically extremely left-wing, or have some other thing that puts you aside from run-of-the-mill of humanity, you come to places like New York, or Chicago, or LA, because that is where you can live without pressure to conform.

New York is different from some small town where the main street, the two main streets in the town, have a cross and a church on each corner. You can live here.

When you go outside our little liberal bubble here in New York, into the larger bubble of mainstream America, you have to face the extreme right wing, who are a pain in the ass and who are a threat to our democracy ... to our being and our life, for Christ sake.



But you have to keep it all in perspective. One of the first things I wrote for the Secular Humanist newsletter — I have been the editor of our newsletter since '04, and I intend to continue until I die, frankly. But one of the first things I wrote. I wrote some woman who had been a member of the society far longer than me at that point. She wrote that 'It's hard to be a humanist, especially in America.'

**Jacobsen:** [Laughing].

**Rafferty:** I wrote, "especially in America ... it's hard to be a humanist, huh?" Especially harder than, let's say Pakistan, or Uganda, Saudi Arabia, or anything like it. In spite of all our problems, America is still tolerant. Yes, we've got that one-third of our nation that is on Trump side. But even there, I do not think we have people who want to lock up humanists or atheists.

We can still write what we want to, say what we want and when we want. Assemble where we want to, for whatever we want to protest, or support, or whatever. Is there a threat from Donald Trump? You bet there is. There is a terrible threat from Donald Trump and the people who support him.

[Sighs]

You got me talking.

**Jacobsen:** [Laughing] Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

**Rafferty:** I recommend highly, that you speak to Jon Engel. I served as the president of Secular Humanist Society from 2008 to just a few months ago. It was a great joy. Humanism is definitely the future of the country and of the world. That doesn't mean it is immediately around the corner. Jon comes from a family that has been part of that. His father was the Engel of "Engel v. Vitale", that ended school prayer. He is a dynamo. I am glad to be associated with him.

I was glad to be the President of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, to be part of the humanist movement. And still now, part of the humanist movement in America. I stepped down from the leadership because it was time, I wanted other people to continue what I have done, which they are doing – which is great.

Consider that in the 1970s any poll of Americans would say that up to 80 percent or more of Americans identified themselves as Christians. And, of course, many of them lied that they were regular churchgoers.

**Jacobsen:** [Laughing].

**Rafferty:** Now we are seeing the rise of the "Nones", N-O-N-E-S. We have seen a rise in the Nones from a few percent, now to over 20 percent of the general population, who, when asked what their religious affiliation is, say "None."

Over 20 percent, in several polls, and when you're talking about the younger generation, the 18 to 35s, you're talking over 30 percent!

That isn't going to change. Those young people are not going to send their children to religious schools. They are not going to bring their children up to believe that there is pie in the sky when you die. No, it isn't going to happen. Their children are going to live secular lives, as I do.

Is that a yellow brick road to some secular utopia? Absolutely not!

We will have religious revivals again. Probably for as long as there are people. But generally speaking we will have a humanist and a secular society, and politically that is what the founders of this nation wanted. They specifically made it a secular society, and we are going to continue that way.

Ups and downs, ins and outs, back one step and two steps forward, and one step back. We are moving in the right direction. I am pleased, essentially, as well as disheartened and unhappy as I am about the current political scene in America.

I grew up in the far, far distant past of the 1940's. Believe me, it's getting better.

**Jacobsen: Thank you much, sir, take care.**

# License and Copyright

## License



*In-Sight Publishing* by Scott Douglas Jacobsen is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Based on a work at <https://www.canadianatheist.com/>.

## Copyright

© 2012-2020 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen and *In-Sight Publishing* 2012-2020. Unauthorized use and/or duplication of this material without express and written permission from this site's author and/or owner is strictly prohibited. Excerpts and links may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to Scott Douglas Jacobsen and *In-Sight Publishing* with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.