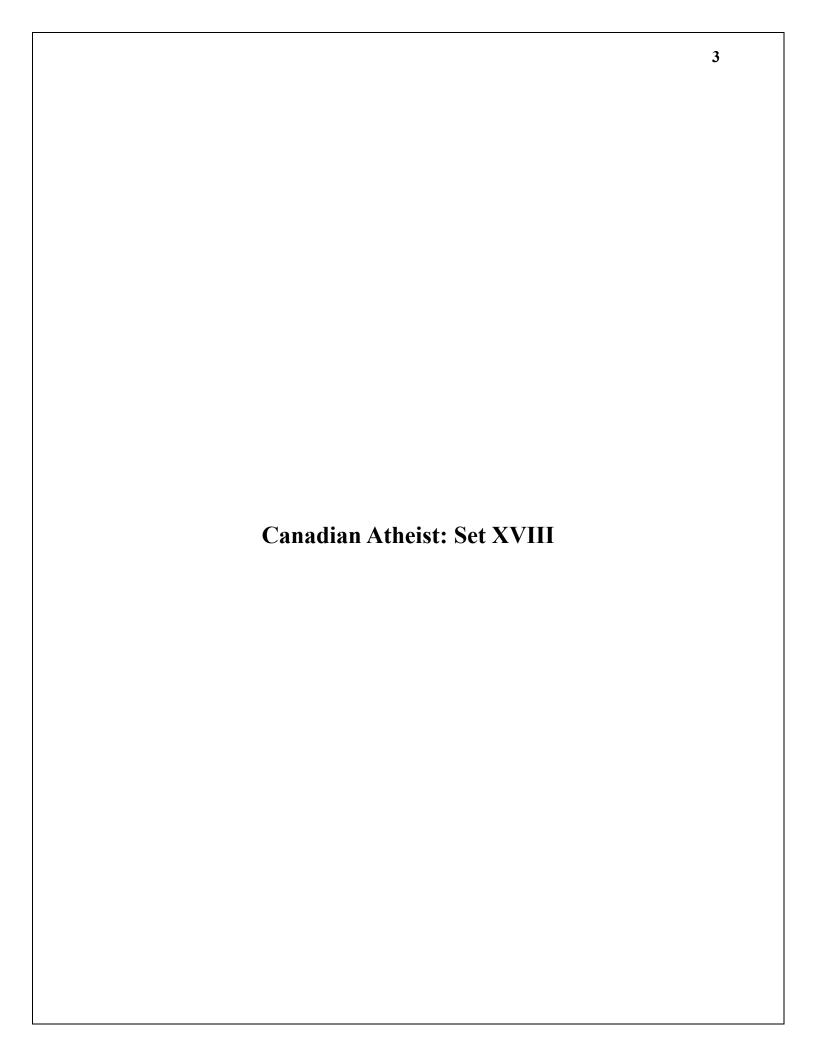


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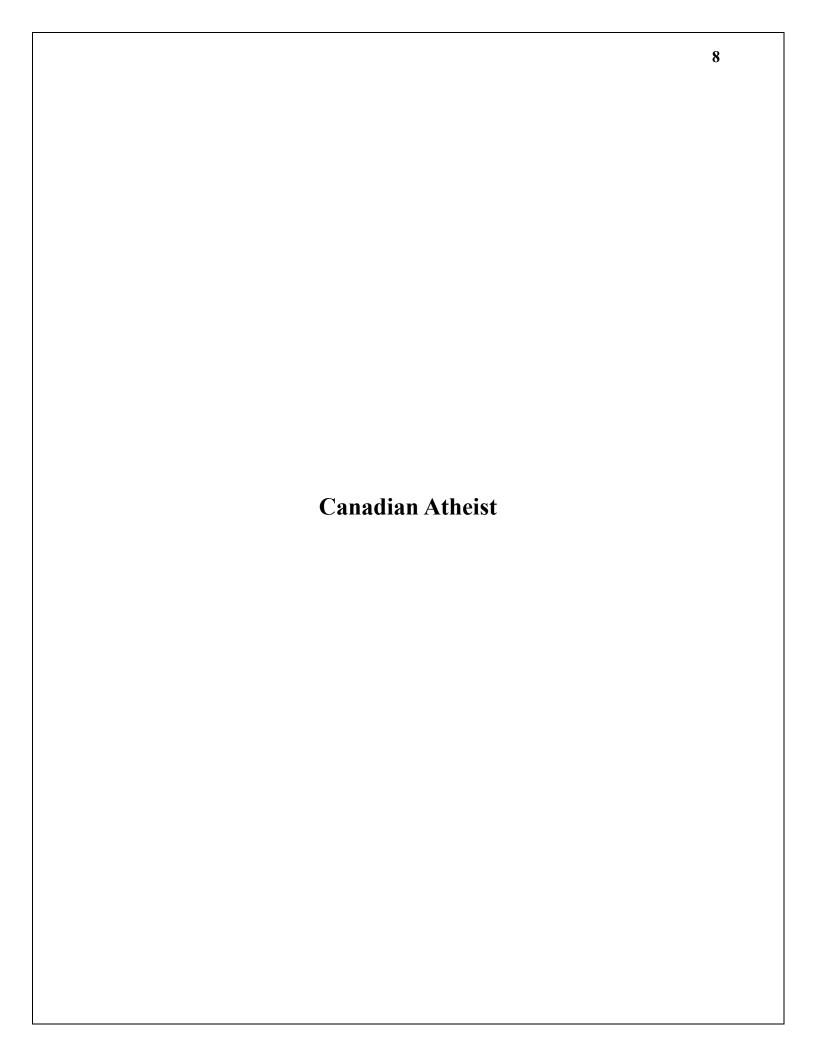
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Scott



### Interview with Bob Reuter – President, Allianz vun Humanisten Atheisten & Agnostiker

Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 5, 2019

**Bob Reuter** is the President of the Allianz vun Humanisten Atheisten & Agnostiker.

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

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

**Bob Reuter:** I was raised in Luxembourg, a small but rich country in the middle of West Europe that has been traditionally roman catholic, multilingual (Luxembourgish, German, French) and multicultural (nowadays around 50% of inhabitants have an immigration background). My dad worked as an engineer for an US American international company and my mom worked at home as a mother and housewife. I did spend my early life in a rural area with my parents and my younger brother. I was raised in the catholic faith, because that was the default position back in the days, and I did develop some interest in the "big questions" about the meaning of life, the universe and everything.

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

Reuter: My school career was rather "linear", after primary school I went to secondary school where I took "natural sciences". During the first year of secondary school I decided to become a (moral & ethical) vegetarian, which brought me to self-educate myself (with the help of books) about nutrition and cooking. At the age of 16 I started to read a rather large anthology about the history of philosophy, which introduced me to a wide range of philosophical and religious positions and perspectives. Later in secondary school I developed quite an appetite for biology and also for theology (and even considered for a short period to study it after secondary school). At the age of 19, after finishing secondary education, I went to study abroad, to Brussels, Belgium. I studied experimental cognitive psychology and later did a PhD in psychology (in the field of consciousness studies). While I was an undergraduate I read a lot of books from a range of subfields of psychology, but also from connected disciplines, like anthropology, evolutionary biology and computer sciences. These readings allowed me to discover atheist authors like Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, Daniel Dennett and the likes, allowed me to get rid of my default metaphysical position (the need for a creator god to kickstart the universe, life and consciousness) and allowed to come out (later) as an atheist.

# Jacobsen: What is your current position in the Allianz vun Humanisten Atheisten & Agnostiker? What tasks and responsibilities come with the presidency?

**Reuter:** Since 10th May 2019 I serve as the president of the Luxembourgish Alliance of Humanists, Atheists and Agnostics. Before that I had been a member of the executive board for a few years, serving as the treasurer. My tasks and responsibilities are those of a president of any non-profit association: organize meeting of the executive board; set up a strategy for short- and mid-term actions; design, plan and execute actions (together with the other members of the executive board); motivate members to participate in our actions; write messages to our

members; prepare printed annual reports about our activities; represent our association in the (national) media, etc.

### Jacobsen: How does the organization provide a space for community of likeminded individuals?

**Reuter:** In the past, we have organized some events where likeminded individuals could meet and discuss, like parties, movie screenings, general assemblies followed by a shared drink, talks by invited speakers followed by informal discussions and we have a page on Facebook where people discuss their viewpoints. I recently started to organize "Cafés humanistes", but not so many people showed up... In the future, we would like to develop more such spaces to grow the Humanists in Luxembourg community, ideally by having a physical place where interested people can come in, explore books and meet people.

# Jacobsen: Who have been prominent individuals visiting the Allianz vun Humanisten Atheisten & Agnostiker or coming out of it?

Reuter: So far, we have mostly hosted speakers from Germany like Michael Schmidt-Salomon and his daughter Lea Salomon, Carsten Frerk, Hamed Abdel-Samad, Philipp Möller, Ulrike von Chossy & Michael Bauer. We had Edwige Chirouter from France present her ideas about how to do philosophy with (young) kids. But we also have had the honor to have Michael Shermer for a world-premiere talk about his book "Heavens on Earth: The Quest for Immortality and Perfectibility." Recently, we invited Natalie Grams, a medical doctor and public speaker to talk about Homeopathy as a quasi-religious cult-like practice and community. We also had a movie night with Chris Johnson where we showed and discussed "a better life".

### Jacobsen: Any recommended authors or speakers from Allianz vun Humanisten Atheisten & Agnostiker?

Reuter: Since all of our members of the executive board act as volunteers and work in areas not directly related to humanism, atheism or criticism of religion, and since our association is still relatively young, we have not yet really have had authors or speakers emerging from our community. But I am pretty sure that anyone from our former and current executive board would be able to speak about our past and current experiences in setting up and running a non-profit association of humanists, atheists & agnostics in a country that has long been traditionally catholic but recently shifted towards a more secular society. I would however recommend as speakers the following people: (1) our former president, Laurent Schley because of his professional expertise in zoology; our former vice-president, (2) Taina Bofferding because she is currently serving as Minister for Home Affairs and as Minister of Equality between Women and Men and (3) our former secretary general, Manuel Huss because of his passion for astronomy and the beautiful pictures he has been shooting of a variety of outer-space objects.

#### Jacobsen: What are the main difficulties for the community there now?

**Reuter:** Our main challenge now that a large part of our political agenda has been achieved will be to move on to a more positive promotion of humanism as a life stance. We have indeed spent the past 10 years pushing the separation between the State and the Church (please read here: the various recognized religious communities but with a dominant Roman Catholic Church at the forefront), criticizing the Catholic Church as an organization and criticizing religious faith. We will keep being critical of religious believes and institutions and would have loved to push the (financial and cultural) separation between the State and the Church further, but we also will

have to move on. We will try to grow a humanist community in Luxembourg where ideas can be shared, discussed and shaped about how to "live a good life" based on humanist values.

Jacobsen: How can other organizations learn from the real successes and honest failures of the Allianz vun Humanisten Atheisten & Agnostiker?

**Reuter:** That's a good question. We were actually very lucky in the last years to catalyze a political change that nobody thought would be possible and would happen so quickly in our country. Not even we had dreamt it to be possible that the separation of the State and the Church would happen so quickly and swiftly. This change has been made possible by the convergence of many factors of course, but we can be rather confident to say that our first public campaign helped many secular-minded politicians to dare to take the steps necessary for this big reform. With our first campaign we had invited non-religious people in Luxembourg to dare to stand up for their rights, to be proud of their life stance and to dare to show their lack of faith. This campaign has been very well received by many "closet atheists" (and very badly but the "dominant" catholic community) and made it visible to the general public and politicians that there had been a major shift in religious believes in our country. With the weight of the illusion of a monolithically catholic population lifted, a coalition of mostly secular-minded politicians who came into power in 2013 dare to fight the financially over-privileged position of the Catholic Church. However, I would not dare to give other organizations any recommendations on how to use this stories to bring about similar changes in their own communities and contexts, because there were many factors involved in the development of this major political and cultural change.

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?

**Reuter:** The easiest way to become involved is to visit our website <a href="www.aha.lu">www.aha.lu</a> and to contact us via email. We are also very active on Facebook (<a href="https://www.facebook.com/ahaletzebuerg/">https://www.facebook.com/ahaletzebuerg/</a>). We have around 800 members who entirely finance our association via their membership fees and donations.

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

**Reuter:** Thank you very much for the opportunity to think about our association and for the exposure to your readership. It's always interesting to shape, rethink and reshape the stories we tell ourselves about who and what we are.

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

# Ask SASS 6 (Jani, Rick, and Wynand) – The Stork Theory of Online Communication

# Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 6, 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. The whole SASS-y gang join us.

Here we talk about online communication some more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to press releases and outreach and building a greater public image in South Africa, how do you go about it? What have been some notable publications or press releases or events that have garnered some further attention for SASS?

**Jani Schoeman:** Anybody's welcome to answer. I'm quickly searching for the article on the website.

**Wynand Meijer:** I would just like to make a brief observation. What I have noticed in interactions on our social media platform is that articles pertaining to children and education and religion are generally very interactive, where people would have a type of interaction. My onthe-fly translator is broken again. There's much more interaction with people.

**Schoeman:** What's the word? Tell me.

Meijer: "Deelname."

Rick Raubenheimer: Participation.

**Schoeman:** It's participation.

**Meijer:** That's the word. Thank you. Yes. I think, specifically, the article that Jani was referring to earlier, when it comes to politics. We would touch on some government policies now and again and things like that but not really get into the politics side per se. I think that's possibly what made that article stand out that much.

**Schoeman:** Exactly. Now that you say that, the court case was something that involved all those aspects. It involved the government. It involved children, and education, and religion. That's why, also, that court case was something that was very well-known in the country when it happened.

Jacobsen: What is it in South African culture, where the focus is on education, the focus is on the young, in these particular cases, of church and state separation that makes them flammable and noteworthy?

**Schoeman:** I think that would be something that is, around the world, probably going to be flammable, when something happens in that space. South Africa is a third-world country, so education is still getting there. I think that people here, now, are really starting to wake up to education.

I think most people care about their kids, and most people care about religion, and when you put the two together – or even government and politics. In the beginning, when we were talking about the aim of SASS and what we are going to do about politics, we decided that we're going to try and stay out of it a little bit, which is maybe one of the reasons that we haven't been noticed, really, or gotten that much media.

I think if we were to go more into that space, we would probably. But this marriage officer project is also something that touches on government and religion. It's been one of our most successful and popular projects. It just took off. It's almost like it needed to happen. That's what I think.

Jacobsen: What about you, Wynand or Rick?

**Raubenheimer:** Wynand has children at school, so he's a good one to talk at this point. Wynand?

**Meijer:** I've got a lot to say. I actually have an appointment with some of the school's legal representatives tomorrow regarding things like that.

Schoeman: Go! Yay! Go, Wynand.

**Meijer:** That's why I would like to reserve comment for now. Let me go through all of the hoops and then I would like to revisit this topic a bit later. So, yes, I do have a vested interest in this. I would like to elaborate on it, but now it would be a bit premature.

**Schoeman:** Yes, and you probably have to leave now.

**Meijer:** Yes. This is for a debate that I'm organizing in July. I'll let you guys talk about that one.

**Schoeman:** I think we've just touched the tip of the iceberg, here. [Laughing].

**Meijer:** I will need to excuse myself, currently. Guys, it's been fun. Thank you very much. Scott, I will see you in two weeks. Jani and Rick, I will see you this weekend.

Jacobsen: Rick, how have you seen the changes in the educational system over time?

**Raubenheimer:** The major change, of course, was at the advent of democracy in 1994 when we changed from Christian National Education, which we've talked about previously, to the democratic era, at which point the change was from everything supposedly being under a Christian ethos to, "Differences are not tolerated, they are celebrated."

An ethos that has not filtered down to all the schools yet, by any means. The schools that are giving us the most trouble are what we call former "Model C" schools, which relates to the old education system.

Model C schools were schools that were given a lot of autonomy and run largely by parent governing bodies. They tended to adopt an Afrikaans ethnic character. They haven't quite caught up with the idea that other cultures are both welcome and celebrated. They tend to have the Christian ethos and the Afrikaans Calvinist ethos, as well.

Where we haven't really done much penetration is into the black schools where, of course, Christianity is rife as well. However, we have a much smaller percentage of secular parents in the black community. We haven't, as far as I know, made any contact with them to find out whether they're having the same problem, which they probably are.

Schoeman: Yes.

Jacobsen: Jani, I'm not sure how appropriate it is or not. If you're planning a family, how are you looking towards these things in a different light now?

**Schoeman:** I must say I know that it's going to be an uphill battle. It's something I know I'm going to have to face when I get there. All I can say right now is it seems like a mountain in front of me because I know I'm going to run into some problems. I'm not going to be okay with letting it go. I think I'm going to be a bit like Wynand. I'm going to end up seeing the school and seeing the legal people and all of that.

It's something that I've been thinking about. It's going to be an uphill battle, for sure.

#### Jacobsen: I suspect that this may tie into press release items.

**Schoeman:** Yes. I think the moment it involves education, children, and religion. There's probably going to be a lot more attention than any other topic.

Just a side story for you guys, I'm on this fertility app called Glow. It's for people who are trying to conceive. A lot of times, I see comments on there. It's a little community. They have several forums on there. A lot of the time, you'll see comments like, "I'm praying for you," and people saying like, "I'm praying for my miracle baby," and all of this. It was a little bit irritating, obviously, to see that.

They have this little poll feature on there, as well. People can post questions and have the community answer them.

Somebody on there posted today, "Is your partner the same faith as you?" They had these answers, options. I think the first one was, "Yes, and it really matters to us." The second one was, "Yes, we are the same faith but it doesn't really matter to us." Then there was, "No, we are not the same faith but it doesn't matter," and "No, we aren't the same faith and now there are problems."

There was a fifth option which said, "Other / Comment." I went on "Other", obviously, because they didn't have there, "Lack of faith". I pressed the last one, for "Other". They sort these comments according to the most popular. The top comment on there was, "We share a lack of belief." I was so surprised to see that it got something like 800 or 900 likes and a whole bunch of people commented on there saying, "We share a lack of religion," or "We also don't believe in anything."

Some people were saying, "It's very important that both of us believe in objective morals or the scientific method. It's very important to us." Some people are saying, "I don't think that I could be with someone religious," and stuff like that. It was very interesting to me to see that that community seems to really be growing.

When you think of families and people, a lot of the time, people used to think of atheists as loners, or maybe people that aren't really into family. Actually, for a lot of people and a lot of families, now, it's becoming more normal. People were like, "Why wasn't this an option? Why wasn't lack of belief an option up here? Why didn't you put it up there?" I was very surprised to see that. I just thought I'd tell you guys.

**Raubenheimer:** Jani, it sounds like you should do some recruiting in that group.

**Schoeman:** [Laughing] it's a global thing. I think most people on there are from the USA, from all over the world, actually. If it had been a South African group, I would have been super surprised, obviously. I think it would have been different.

Jacobsen: That's good. If there are 900 people, you might find another South African.

**Schoeman:** Maybe. I commented on there. I said something like, "Yay. Happy godlessness from South Africa." I think someone else from here might see that.

Jacobsen: So, you had the 900 likes. What was the comparison?

**Schoeman:** Yes. That was what was quite cool. The second top comment was a Christian that posted, "We both accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and savior." That comment got half the likes that the lack of belief comment got.

Jacobsen: Something about technology is skewing the results.

**Schoeman:** Yes. I think it's the Internet. I think so. I don't know. It just seems like when I'm looking physically around me, and meeting people around me, the majority are Christian, but when you go online, as soon as you go online, then it's more even.

Jacobsen: Rick, you want to say something. What's up?

**Raubenheimer:** It just occurs to me that possibly; it's people who are focused on science and technology that are happier on the Internet, and particularly happier about communicating their points of view on the Internet. Hence, yes, as Jani says, of course, this particular group, Jani, it sounds science-based. Although, you get the people praying, as well, so not entirely. There might be a bit of a bias towards science and rationality in the group.

**Schoeman:** Perhaps, yes. If you're using an app to track your fertility, and as a tool in your efforts to try to conceive, I think you're already taking a scientific approach to conception. Although, you do see a lot of religious people on there.

For example, my family and other people I've mentioned our journey to, a lot of people will be like, "You just need to relax. It will happen when it happens," and all of that bullshit. "God will send you a baby when it's the right time." Like, please. Come on. [Laughing] If you want to get pregnant, I think you need to do something about it if you're serious about it.

Jacobsen: The way they phrase that, too, "God will send you a—" It sounds like there's a stork that's going to fly in with a...

**Schoeman:** [Laughing] Sometimes, I just want to say to people, "You actually need to have sex to have a baby. Do you know that?"

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Raubenheimer: I think you should, Jani.

Jacobsen: That's funny.

# Interview with Dan Fisher – Editor-in-Chief, Uncommon Ground Media Ltd.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 7, 2019

<u>Dan Fisher</u> is the Editor-in-Chief of <u>Uncommon Ground Media Ltd.</u>, formerly <u>Conatus News</u>. Here we talk about the work of Uncommon Ground Media Ltd.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's talk about a shift, so, with regards to Uncommon Ground Media, which is now incorporated as a business, it is a new publication. It is taking material from an old publication. What is it intending to do 2019/2020? What is new?

**Dan Fisher:** So, with Uncommon Ground, in many ways, we are a direct successor to Conatus News. We are carrying on with the same themes, the same topics, as before. But we are doubling down on our values.

Those things that we believe to be the core of Conatus News or what Conatus News was doing differently. It still seems like we are the only site out there, the only organization, which is taking the stance that we are taking.

Everything should be criticized. Everything should be analyzed. If you want to improve the world, you have to be willing to answer the questions. No person is above question. We want to pursue this from a genuine perspective of wanting to improve things.

We feel there are many people insincerely asking questions as there are those who ignore them. We want to be the bridge between them if you like. We want to really emphasize the importance of critical thinking, having an open mind, which is a double-sided approach that we feel is lacking elsewhere.

I had a slogan: equality, education, environment. It's mentioned on the site in some places. It is not the main focus, but it gives us some indication as to our direction.

So with equality, we are not talking about the Soviet Union. We are not talking about everyone being exactly the same. We are talking about equality in law, equal opportunities, equal education, not just in one country but the whole world. We believe everyone deserves the same rights and opportunities. We are still quite a bit a way off that.

With education, not just education of children but also, including continuing education. It is about continual learning.

Children, in general, are so important to us. After all, they are the future. It boggles my mind that governments could neglect education, neglect children's welfare. They are the ones you should be investing in as a country. We do not have a future without children being educated.

It's the same for the environment. Again, there are multiple meanings. I mean both ecological and other issues.

We have to deal with both climate change and also the social environment of people. That's also important. The way that we relate to each other.

Jacobsen: If you're taking an orientation of not only a how but a why, what is an example of provocative articles, not necessarily popular but one, that provides a new analysis in a new way on a dull topic?

**Fisher:** We have published conservative authors, including people who've written for The Federalist for example. But we never publish something, as you say, that is not taking a unique angle on a topic. Perspectives from all sides are important to build an informed position.

For example, of an article which would be considered controversial in left-wing progressive circles, we published one entitled "Dylan Omar and the Vicarious Redemption of White Allies."

It is talking about how instead of atoning for your own issues and problems, if you can make somebody else suffer then you can feel cleansed of responsibility.

I really like it. It takes on the idea of scapegoating, witch hunting, the idea that somebody else can suffer for your redemption, which goes to the core of Christianity.

#### Jacobsen: It does sound like retributive justice.

**Fisher:** This is a criticism of this concept in Christianity, which you don't see very often. I find that very fascinating. He talks about how in the American Civil War. These circumstances where Union soldiers would effectively get their black compatriots to gang rape white Confederate women.

This can be seen as reparations for slavery. Of course, it is nothing of the sort. It is total brutality. But it is revelling in power with a veneer of retribution if you like. This is something that we have to be really aware of, really critical about, because this approach of making people suffer to improve things; in fact, it just makes things worse.

We don't improve the world by causing more suffering. That's just not how it goes. People claim to be doing the right thing and then use this as an excuse to hurt other people.

They are some of the most dangerous people around. People say, "It is for a good cause." But the fact that something is for a good cause should make us even more skeptical [Laughing] and even more critical of what is being done.

You look away when somebody is on your side. Of course, there is a danger of being overly critical of the world. Again, it is sort of that balance. I thought this was a really interesting article.

So, we publish a lot of stuff that we don't necessarily agree with. We will take things from right-wingers. The question is if it makes us think about the topic in a different way. That, I think, is key. We don't want to be in an echo chamber.

Hearing things over and over again is a risk in providing a platform for people who do not have any other platform. You can get things excluded from elsewhere over and over again.

We don't want to reject people who can't go elsewhere. But we are wary of doing too much on any one topic and locking ourselves down. It is important to take a wider view rather than focus on only one or two issues.

Jacobsen: What is the filtration process for a centre-left publication? For example, someone comes with an article rejected by the far-right, by the right, by the centre-right, by the centre, by the centre-left, by the left, and by the far left.

# Then they send it to you. If you are sent these to you and if you are aware of these rejections, what is the filtration process? Is it further consideration or automatic rejection?

**Fisher:** We wouldn't reject anyone simply for being rejected elsewhere. In fact, it would make us more likely to value them. We value each article on its merits. I think that's really important to give everybody a fair shot.

Certainly, we have had people send us articles claiming to be unable to publish elsewhere. But they are simply a rehash of things you can find all over the place. Because, ultimately, everybody believes they are being persecuted and discriminated against.

It is our job to read between the lines and figure out what is really going on. It is something that we are really aware of. Simply providing a platform for voices that you cannot hear elsewhere, of not having any views ourselves and elevating others, that is impossible.

That is why the mantra of listening to the voices of marginalized peoples always falls down because the person who hosts the platform allows who can and cannot speak. We cannot be entirely neutral.

We will always have to pick and choose. That is the nature of running a website. We try to be careful with our approach to that, as to who we accept and who we reject.

Jacobsen: If you're looking at the media landscape now, what are some rapidly rising topics of import? Those topics or subject matter tapping into a vein of concern across the board.

**Fisher:** All of the issues around transgenderism is one of our absolutely hottest topics. Of course, you've still got plenty of interest in religion, in Islam, issues around it. I would say that these are our two hottest topics.

You might think that the debate around Islam would have cooled down by now. But it is as raging as ever. We are trying to navigate that, trying to bring a thoughtful and nuanced view to it.

# Jacobsen: Two questions following from there: 1) Why transgenderism? 2) Why religion in general and Islam in particular?

**Fisher:** With transgenderism, you've got this topic, which is very, very controversial, essentially. You have these polar opposites in terms of perspective.

I am not going to pretend that I don't favour one side. But trying to be as objective as possible, it is very emotive. You have people who are very, very passionate. It is a lot of people's personal experiences coming into play, fears, traumas.

This is a conversation that really needs to be had. It is being shied away from. You hear the phrase, "this is not a debate." As far as I am concerned, anyone saying, "this is not a debate," is already engaged in a debate.

We need to get those discussions going on this issue. There will be plenty of people who call us hateful and prejudiced for letting these views be aired, in terms of allowing people's views to be aired on our site.

We are satisfied with what we allow people to say on our site. We are quite satisfied that we would not allow anything to be said that is hateful or prejudiced to certain groups. But again, you

have this situation where everybody is ready to accuse everyone else of hatred and prejudice. But we have to make that judgment call for ourselves.

The last few decades have been really interesting ones in terms of the conflicts between different religions, atheist movements, the conflicts within atheist movements as well, and so on.

These debates are still going on: Islamic terrorism, Islamophobia, skepticism. I think these are questions, which have very much not been resolved.

They have been raised over the past few decades. But we are still in the process of answering them. Until Islamic terrorism dies down, as it were, we will keep going back to these topics of questioning the core concepts within Islam. How much is cultural? How much is political? How much is religious?

With the Syrian war potentially drawing to a close, maybe we will see less of it. It remains to be seen. I have said before; I think even if ISIS is defeated militarily; the ideology will continue. We still have countries like Saudi Arabia pumping out propaganda.

The left, by and large, has doubled-down on its defence of Muslims, which is understandable. Questions remain as to how they are going about it. Again, it is what we are allowed to criticize coming up.

My criticism around cultural relativism, how radicals in third world Muslim countries are not being given their fair dues by the West. They are seen as counterproductive to anti-imperialism. These are questions that still need to be addressed and discussed, even if some people are tired of seeing the same stuff.

You've got to keep asking the questions until they address the point. Certainly, we are still willing to publish articles on that topic.

Jacobsen: What is the process for the editorial team when they are sifting through the submissions that are given on some of the main topics published now? What should submitters keep in mind when they are giving material?

**Fisher:** One of the things, we work with people having strong views, as partisan as you like. Obviously, you have to have some sliver of respect for the people you're criticizing. You have to recognize them as human beings.

There are perspectives. We are not about dismissing them with ideological labels either. If you want to say that these are a conservative viewpoint, you have to explain why and why it's wrong. Because conservatives aren't necessarily wrong all the time.

Don't be afraid to tear into things that you disagree with, but do this from a perspective of understanding; they're not just evil. They're not simply out to cause as much pain and misery as possible.

That is one of the keys for us. Other than that, it is about being original. We don't want to bring out the same stuff over and over again. As long as it makes some interesting points, we are not expecting Ph.D. theses.

Just try to make people think more than trying to just export your perspectives on everyone else, try to shake other people's views up a bit. Aim to reach out to your opponents as much your own allies.

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Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dan.	
Fisher: Great to talk to you.	

# Interview with Panayote Dimitras – Co-Founder and Spokesperson, Humanist Union of Greece; Board Member, European Humanist Federation

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 8, 2019

**Panayote Dimitras** is the Co-Founder and Spokesperson of the Humanist Union of Greece, and a Board Member of the European Humanist Federation.

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

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

**Panayote Dimitras:** I grew up in Athens in a devout Orthodox Christian family, which, though, was open to other religions: hence, when we went to Paris for three years, I attended as an intern the Catholic Ecole Pasteur in Neuilly, which included Catholic catechism and church-going.

Not so practicing in my late high school and undergraduate university years, I became very practicing in an Orthodox Christian church in Lexington, Massachusetts during my Harvard graduate years, including assistant chanter and assistant educator in catechism!

Subsequently, a Christian wedding and two Christian christenings of my children attended by bishops. Sometime around when REM wrote the "losing my religion," I "lost" mine and became a "devout atheist" as this best helped explain the world and the emerging in me human rights culture.

The second marriage was civil. My name appears in a series of ECtHR judgments against Greece for the then-mandatory religious oath, since then abolished as a result.

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

**Dimitras:** Undergraduate in Athens School of Economics and Business with major in economics, master's in Public Administration, and Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government at Harvard University – the latter included a seminar on Christian Marxism at the adjacent Weston School of Theology, while in my last year while in France for my theses research, I was immersed in Esprit the personalist review created by Mounier some decades ago, where I met several left Catholics.

Jacobsen: What is your role at Humanist Union of Greece? What tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

**Dimitras:** I am a co-founder and Spokesperson, and also a member of the board of the European Humanist Federation. HUG relies on volunteers; hence, we all do as much as we can in advocacy, publications, campaigning (e.g. against blasphemy laws to be abolished on 1 July 2019), meetings, etc.

Jacobsen: Who are prominent members of the Humanist Union of Greece community?

**Dimitras:** "We are all prominent."

Jacobsen: What are some of the social and communal activities of the Humanist Union of Greece?

**Dimitras:** See above about our work – there is little room for social and communal activities.

Jacobsen: Any political activism in Greece through the Humanist Union of Greece? If so, what? Who are the traditional opposition to freethinkers, humanist, atheists, and the like, in Greece?

**Dimitras:** See above. We have often been treated as non-Greeks because we are atheists by media, bishops, politicians and found judges asking us why we do not want to take a religious oath

Jacobsen: Who are important authors, speakers and organizations fighting for humanistic and secular values in Greece?

Dimitras: Besides HUG, the Atheist Union of Greece.

Jacobsen: What are some important developments in the rest of 2019 ad into 2020 for HUG?

**Dimitras:** Having a bad experience with the abolition of religious oath which has been ignored and hence most courts and investigating officers still use it, we will intensify the monitoring and reporting of its implementation as well as the implementation of the abolition of blasphemy laws. We will continue to strive for the removal of religious symbols from all public institutions and schools.

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?

**Dimitras:** They have to contact us and explore how best they can contribute depending on availability of time and other resources.

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

**Dimitras:** I am grateful as you are the first one to ask such questions and thus offering me the opportunity to present all these things, most of which are unknown to most people.

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

### Interview with Alyssa Jorgensen – (Incoming) President, Secular Students at Virginia Tech

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 9, 2019

**Alyssa Jorgensen** is the (incoming) President of the Secular Students at Virginia Tech, formerly the Freethinkers at Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University.

Here we talk about personal background, the new role, and the rebranding of the organization.

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?

Alyssa Jorgensen: I grew up in Virginia, in what some Christians would refer to as a "lukewarm" Christian household. My family believed in the Christian God, but we stopped going to church when I was young and the Bible was rarely brought up. I'd occasionally watch VeggieTales and that was the extent of my Christian education. I basically had the simplistic belief that if you were a bad person you went to hell and if you were a good person you went to heaven, so I didn't worry about whether I would go to hell or not since I was a good child. However, when I was in seventh grade, I realized that there were more steps to getting into heaven while on the internet where I learned that according to Bible you were supposed to repent of your sins and dedicate your life to Jesus. That day I truly believed I was going to hell and that fear caused me to become a born-again Christian at thirteen years old despite not being raised as a strict Christian. I de-converted by senior year of high school, and in fact, most of my family are secular now.

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

Jorgensen: I have only just recently begun formal education since I am entering my second year as an Undergrad at Tech. I personally love school and going to classes, so I'm excited to continue my higher education. As far as informal self-education goes, I do enjoy watching YouTube videos on a variety of topics primarily environmentalism, politics, religion, and intersectional feminism. I have learned a lot from YouTube and some of the videos I have watched inspired me to think more critically and do my own research and formulate and defend my own positions on a variety of subjects. I have recently started watching The Atheist Experience and Talk Heathen on YouTube which have helped me with my epistemology.

Jacobsen: As the Freethinkers at Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University closed down and became the Secular Students at Virginia Tech, and as you're the incoming President of Secular Students at Virginia Tech, what are some the preparatory parts of the position?

**Jorgensen:** Right now, I am primarily brainstorming ways that I could make our organization even better than last year. I have already created a document with my goals for this organization and how we can accomplish those goals, along with thirty discussion topics and twenty-three activities, so I'm confident we won't have to worry about not having anything to do at our meetings. I will have to start planning for Gobbler Fest as well, which is an event that Virginia Tech holds every year where organizations get together on the drill field and advertise

themselves in order to hopefully get new recruits. I actually decided to join the Secular Students after talking to the previous president at Gobbler Fest.

#### Jacobsen: What are your plans for the Secular Students at Virginia Tech?

Jorgensen: My main goal is to improve our engagement with our members and people outside the organization so hopefully we can gain and retain more members. Since last year was our first year on campus, we were a very small group with about only seven to ten recurring members. We were also working on establishing ourselves and figuring out how to actually run this organization, and although there were a few rough patches I would say that the first year was a success; although, I definitely recognize where we could have done better and I have developed ideas to hopefully fix those issues. For example, I realized that we always had better turn out at our discussion-based meetings than our activity-based meetings, so I decided to have all our meetings be discussion based with social activities on the weekends when more people have time to hang out and when we can have better, more fun social activities than what we could do during the week like picnics, hikes, movies nights, and maybe even laser tag. One of the goals of this organization was to have this be as much a social group as it is an educational and discussion-based group, so I definitely plan to carry that same goal into this year because I do want secular people to be able to have a place where they can easily make friends and bond with people since not everyone bonds through intellectual discussions. I also plan on getting our group more involved in community service this year. I'm hoping to organize a service project that can engage the Virginia Tech community.

# Jacobsen: What will be the rough demographics and size of the Secular Students at Virginia Tech community?

**Jorgensen:** If it's anything like last year it would be a small group and primarily White and Male. Only about two of our recurring members were women including me. I do expect our group to grow this year, however, now that we have an idea of what we are doing and where we can improve, I can expect our organization to have more active members because we have a lot of interested people on campus who sign on to our e-mail list and express excitement upon hearing about our group, but then we never see them again, so hopefully I can help our group become more appealing, so more people want to take time out of their day to engage with the group.

### Jacobsen: Who have been important mentors or faculty members in the development of the Secular Students at Virginia Tech?

Jorgensen: Dr. Shaily Patel is our faculty advisor, so she helped make this organization possible and I'm thankful for that. Christjahn has been especially helpful in guiding this organization in the right direction as an older graduate student who has been part of secular organizations before and as a mature atheist. One concern of having a secular organization of young college students is that we may end up attracting stereotypical pompous atheists who just want to mock religious people and exert their logic and rationale onto everyone. Fortunately, we didn't have too many problems with that since as it turns out most atheists are just normal people, but what Christjahn has taught me has equipped me with the resources to handle that situation if it were to arise. I have had one guy come up to our table and excitedly ask if this organization was about making fun Christians, and I had to tell him that we want to avoid doing that and instead we want to foster respectful discussion.

Jacobsen: If we look into the ways in which secularism is seen in the Virginia Tech community, what is the view of it? How are the religious viewed by comparison?

**Jorgensen:** Virginia Tech is one of the best places to be a Christian. The three largest organizations at Tech are Christian with several other smaller Christian organizations. Through our Ask an Atheist booths we have spoken to a variety of Christians each with complex religious beliefs who all are clearly dedicated to living their life for God. There's even a chapel on campus which holds mass on Sundays. My first day on Campus I walked outside my dorm for about five minutes before running into two Christian girls asking me to join their organization. Christianity is extremely prevalent here, so I would say Christianity is viewed very positively here. I'm not too sure about how other religions are perceived here. That may be something I can explore this upcoming year. As far as secularism goes, I would say people are either neutral about it or they get excited when they see us whether it's because they are secular themselves or they are a religious person who is excited to talk to us. I have had a secular woman hug me because she was so excited to see that our organization exists and we have a positive relationships with many religious people outside our organization, but I have also experienced dirty looks from people at our Ask an Atheist booth and have heard stories of angry preachers on campus but haven't experience it myself, so it is pretty much a mixed bag, but primarily positive here when it comes to people's feelings about the secular community. We have never encountered any angry religious people while doing our Ask an Atheist booths and our organization has never been treated differently from any other organization as far as I can tell, so I would not describe the campus as overtly hostile to secularism.

Jacobsen: Who seem like stellar leaders in the work for secularism in the older cohorts and in the younger cohorts? Why them?

Jorgensen: Jack, our former president and upcoming vice president, has done amazing things for this group and I expect him to keep doing amazing things. He was the one who organized Dan Barker to come speak at our campus, and he also organized a trip for a few of us to attend the American Atheist Convention in Cincinatti, Ohio this year which is pretty amazing. Christjahn, for previously stated reasons, primarily for his guidance in keeping this organization on track. Claire has been a big help in giving insight into the group from a perspective outside of an officer position which has helped me in deciding what we could do better this year. She is taking an officer position this year as our social media coordinator and will have tremendous influence in improving our social media presence and engagement with the community.

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?

Jorgensen: Since this is primarily a local organization, if anyone is a student or a faculty member at Virginia Tech, they are welcome to join our group, and anyone in the Blacksburg area can attend our public events. Since we are a chapter of the Secular Student Alliance, people can help by donating and supporting them. People can also follow us on social media our Instagram is @secularstudentsvt, our twitter is @secularvt, and our Facebook page is Secular Students at Virginia Tech. People can e-mail secularvt@gmail.com for more info or questions.

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

**Jorgensen:** I just think it's important for campuses to have a community where secular people can feel welcome with zero judgment and where they can plug into a support group when they get to campus. Especially if someone comes from an environment hostile to secularism, it is so important to let them be in a place where they can be free to express themselves and be honest about who they are and not worry about rejection from their peers.

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

Jorgensen: Thank you, Scott.

# Interview with Chrissy Helton – President, Tri-State Freethinkers

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 10, 2019

Chrissy Helton is the President of the Tri-State Freethinkers.

Here we talk about her background, presidency, views, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start from the top then. How did you become involved in free thought and the free thought community?

**Chrissy Helton:** I've grown up always wondering why people are nice to each other. A lot of family drama and things of that nature. I had taken a little bit of a break from my job and just really wanted to get out into our community and try to make that difference and other issues that needed to be addressed.

My husband Jim said, "We don't want to do things with organizations that proselytize." So, that's where we came up with, "Why don't we create a group ourselves?" So, that's what we decided and we formed Tri-State Freethinkers back in 2012 to be able to help our community and try to do it in more of a secular way.

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

**Helton:** A lot of hands on, of course, kind of delegating and overseeing these projects, to make sure that I have enough folks who are able to run it and to organize it.

Jacobsen: If we're looking at some of the community activities now, what are some community activities that are being done in the Tri-State area through Tri-State Freethinkers?

**Helton:** We do about 55 community service projects a year. They consist of actually going and feeding people at the shelters, cleaning up our highways, we do a lot of work with the local food banks as far as helping them do their power packs for their needy kids. As far as other things that we get involved in, we're actively involved with anything that has to do with women's rights, women's reproductive rights. We work really close with Planned Parenthood. We're a big supporter of the human rights campaign to advocate for the LGBTQ community.

Jacobsen: If we're looking at some of the modern context of the threats to women's rights in the United States, what are some of the ones that are more local to your own situation as an organization?

**Helton:** Like I said, we work very closely with Planned Parenthood. Obviously, there's been so much in the news as far as the abortion bans and other restrictive things; that they're trying to do with birth control and things of that nature. Ohio is one of the last few states that did ban the 6-week ban. We're trying to work with Planned Parenthood in fighting for these rights to appeal them.

So, that women can continue to have their choices for what they need for their healthcare and personal family life. We attend many things for them and send people to do the day passes to represent Planned Parenthood.

Jacobsen: Have there been any notable victories, even in light of some of the aggression in the last year or half year?

**Helton:** Last year, the ban didn't pass by like one vote. Here, recently, I think three months ago when DeWine came into office. Unfortunately, that ban ended up passing. We were able to hold it off for a little while, but when Mike DeWine came in and took over as governor, the bill came back up and it ended up passing.

Jacobsen: What about in the educational realm, in the critical thinking and education realm? What is being done, whether it's university activism or advancing pro critical thinking and science education in elementary, middle and high schools?

**Helton:** One thing that we are very passionate about and have made some really good strides with is sex education in some of the public schools. We just got it passed for Cincinnati Public that they will offer comprehensive sex education that is gender neutral for grades K through 12 and that's going to start in the fall.

That's one of the things that we're very passionate about, which is to make sure that kids have proper scientifically and medically accurate sex education and trying to remove the abstinence only out of the school. We've had really high success on that. We've had a few schools. Again, we work with Planned Parenthood in trying to educate these schools and reforming their curriculum.

Jacobsen: What have been some of the main organizations that have been opposed to your work around women's rights, around LGBTQ issues, as well as proper evidence-based sex education?

**Helton:** Your main resistance has been some of the religious organizations of course. They're the pro-life folks in the legislative. People who have beliefs rather than seeing what the facts are. The main abject through a lot of these obstacles we face are people who are influenced by their faith or their beliefs versus what's medically or scientifically proven. Groups like us are out there advocating for those folks.

Jacobsen: What can people do to become involved with the Tri-State Freethinkers or at least support them in some way, whether social media outreach, finance, or volunteering their skills?

**Helton:** You can support us through PayPal. We have a link on our Facebook page, which is Tri-StateFreeThinkers.com. You can find us on Meetup, searching Tri-State Freethinkers where you can become a member. We have different levels of membership if someone wanted to actually join and pay for a membership, but we don't require it. Our membership helps us to continue to do what we do, but it's not required.

Jacobsen: Any recommended authors or speakers?

**Helton:** We do an educational piece each month on the first Wednesday of each month where we try to have speakers obviously talk on the topics that are important to people. Andrew Seidel with Freedom From Religion is someone I would highly recommend. Right now, he's on tour. He has a book out. I highly recommend Andrew Seidel. Aron Ra is another one who does really good podcasts, to name a couple.

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

**Helton:** In starting this organization in 2012, we started with less than 10 people. Now we have just under 3,000 members in the 7 years that we've been doing this. I think what we try to do is we don't make the religion issue the biggest thing. Obviously we know that that has a lot to do with some of the conflict in our world but we have a common goal with some organizations. We work with the nuns on the Death Penalty Project. If we have a common goal, you can set aside what your beliefs are to do the right thing.

We've been making that a big mission. Just because you are of a faith and we're not, that doesn't mean we can't come together on the issues that are important. And to show that atheists are good people. We have that outreach that it doesn't matter, as long as you care about this, we don't care about whatever. But, in the same breath, we do fight the separation of Church and State when it is necessary.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for the opportunity and your time, Chrissy.

#### Ask Kim 1 – Sir/Madam, We Have a Quest for You

# Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 11, 2019

**Kim Newton, M.Litt.** is the Executive Director of Camp Quest Inc. (National Support Center). We will learn some more about Camp Quest in an educational series.

Here we talk about the popular activities for the kids and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: With respect to the national organizational structure and operations of Camp Quest, for this educational series, some were covered in <u>a previous interview</u>. What are the most popular and the main activities of Camp Quest for the kids?

Kim Newton: Camp Quest offers a wide variety of programs, from traditional outdoor adventures like hiking and canoeing to specific activities based in science, ethics, philosophy, and more. This summer, we've had camp programs based around themes of "Pirates of the Questibbean" (Camp Quest Michigan) to "Making Waves" (Camp Quest Texas) and "The Sorcery of Science" (Camp Quest Kansas City). At Camp Quest Texas, for example, campers explored how they could be positive change-makers on social issues that they care about, "making waves" in their communities. They also did crafts and other fun activities such as exploring local plant and animal species, contributing to current scientific research via National Geographic's iNaturalist app. Our knowledgeable and experienced volunteers are always quite innovative in creating meaningful opportunities for campers to both learn and have fun!

One of our Signature Programs is Famous Freethinkers<sup>TM</sup>. This activity raises awareness of positive contributions made by atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, and other non-theistic people to our society. A camper or counselor will often present about a Famous Freethinker before a meal or at a campfire session, drawing information about that person's life from a card featuring their photo, accomplishments, and quotes. We teach children about these freethinkers, some of whom they may have heard about in school, or others they may not know about, like Frida Kahlo or Alan Turing. Thanks to a grant we received from the Stiefel Freethought Foundation, we'll be updating this program in the coming year, focusing on increasing the diversity of people included in the program. We're always open to opportunities to collaborate with other secular organizations on program development and expansion.

One of the kids' favorite activities is Socrates Café, a moderated discussion about a philosophical question or other topic of interest. This activity promotes open dialogue that is marked by challenging each other's ideas while treating one another with respect. This is perhaps one of the most important aspects of how Camp Quest puts humanist values into action. Our future depends on young people having the social and communication skills necessary to navigate an increasingly complex and globalized society. Cultivating opportunities for young people to have constructive dialogue about important topics and questions is vital if we want our fragile democracy, and our planet to thrive. This is part of what I think makes Camp Quest so special, and why supporting our programs is the best way to ensure that humanism remains a relevant and vibrant aspect of our campers' lives once they are adults.

Jacobsen: How does the provision of a secular mentor leave the young to develop their innate capacities and pursue their more natural interests compared to other organizations such as the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides?

**Newton:** I believe that Camp Quest is unique in its approach to mentorship, primarily because our volunteers understand that their first responsibility is to foster healthy and respectful relations between campers and to model this behavior as well.

Traditional youth-serving organizations may run successful programs, but too often the focus is on children's obedience to a higher order or law rather than on self-discovery and empathy with others. It's important not to overshadow the essential reasons that children participate in such programs, to be socially connected to their peers and gain life skills. The obsession with authority and traditional hierarchy at other organizations is evidenced by the emphasis, in the United States at least, on children's' adherence to oaths and pledges, and their conformity to social norms (reinforced by traditional trappings of uniforms, badges, etc.)

You won't find this type of conformity at Camp Quest. Rather, our campers are encouraged to pursue their own interests and to explore their developing identities. We support this by providing a variety of programs and allowing campers structured time to self-select what activities they participate in. Counselors mentor campers by encouraging positive interactions and servings as coaches and guides to the campers' self-directed learning process, rather than acting as authoritarian instructors.

At Camp Quest, all campers are welcome and accepted for who they authentically are. Other youth organizations are only just beginning to understand that their traditions of exclusion (of other genders, of LGBTQ people, of religious and non-religious minorities) is detrimental to their continued existence. Since our beginnings in the mid-'90s, Camp Quest has been a leader on issues of inclusion and diversity. When we let youth know through our actions that they are respected and valued for just being who they are, then they can start to build the sort of self-confidence that leads them to pursue their natural interests and develop their capacity for healthy relationships and community-building. I think all of the adults that work thousands of hours year-round to make Camp Quest possible understand that this is what it's really all about.

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

# Interview with Charlee Vance – President, Maverick Secular Society at The University of Texas at Arlington

# Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 12, 2019

**Charlee Vance** is the President of the Maverick Secular Society at The University of Texas at Arlington.

Here we talk about Charlee's life, work, and views.

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

Charlee Vance: I was born and raised here in North Texas, just two hours North of Arlington. I'd say I had a pretty traditional American family. I tell people that I was raised secular, because I can't recall a single instance where my parents put me in the car and took me to church. It just never happened. I would sometimes go to church with friends or extended family, and when I came home worried for my parents' salvation they just brushed it off. They would tell me they believed in God, probably just to shut me up, but they didn't want to go to church. Later when I realized I was an atheist, we had a more open conversation about their perspective and while I don't think either one of them would want to identify as an atheist, I consider them that way. I went to a very small conservative school on the outskirts of my hometown. The assistant principal would often invoke God when talking to students, and teachers at all grade levels would be very open about their belief. Our AP Biology teacher refused to teach evolution to us. "Evolution is crap," she told us, "It's chapter \*some number\* in the book if you want to read it." At the time I really didn't think too much of it, though I was a little surprised. In that same class, when students didn't know the answer to a question on a test they would write "Jesus is always the answer" and receive one point on the test. Looking back, I wish I would have been more aware of what was happening; that teacher was breaking the law and pushing her dogma onto her students. If an atheist teacher promoted their non-theism to students in that way they would be fired immediately, and vilified in the community.

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

**Vance:** I am a senior at UTA this year, so I will be getting my bachelor's degree in May of 2020, but the public library has always been my favourite place to learn new things.

Jacobsen: Freethinkers of UTA at University of Texas Arlington was the original group. It collapsed. Why? It became or a new group was formed called the Maverick Secular Society at The University of Texas at Arlington. How old is the new group?

**Vance:** The Freethinkers group dissolved a few years ago when the leadership of the group graduated and they didn't have anyone to pass the torch onto. When I came to UTA there was still talk about the conflicts between the Freethinkers group and the rest of the campus community, so we started a new group with a new name to distance ourselves from the negative impressions some people had of The Freethinkers. The Maverick Secular Society became an official student organization in March of 2018.

# Jacobsen: As the President of the Maverick Secular Society at The University of Texas at Arlington, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Vance: Typically, I plan and coordinate our weekly meetings as well as events in the Dallas-Fort Worth area at large. For meetings this involves lining up a speaker or discussion topic, getting the paperwork approved to reserve space on campus, and then advertising for the meeting. Of course, I sometimes need to enlist the help of other officers or members to get all of that done every week. I also coordinate our tabling and involvement fair activities where we let other students know about our group and invite them to join us (I've been told I'm our best recruiter). I'm basically the go-to contact if someone wants to plan an event with our group, on or off-campus. When the other secular groups in the area are hosting events or activities, they usually reach out to me directly and I report back to the Maverick Secular Society and encourage them to participate.

### Jacobsen: How do the surrounding religious communities treat secular communities in Arlington?

Vance: I think it depends. Especially if we're talking about the secular groups in Arlington or the Dallas-Fort Worth community. People are generally very polite and respectful when we have social events or other get-togethers in public spaces. However, when we participate in activism events like protests or other awareness-raising campaigns people become less polite. For example, we marched in the Arlington 4th of July parade with another atheist group in the community and, for the most part, people were polite to us. Of course, we got a few comments from people that felt the need to speak out, but overall it was a great time. When we keep to ourselves the surrounding communities don't pay much attention to us, but when we make ourselves more visible we get a little more feedback.

### Jacobsen: What is the general religious and secular community like on The University of Texas at Arlington grounds?

Vance: The religious community at our campus is large and diverse. There are 17 different religious-based student organizations at UTA (11 of them are christian affiliated) and there is one group on campus for non-religious students. There are also several buildings on campus that are owned by one or another of the religious groups and are used solely for their regular services and activities. Our group isn't as big as most of the theistic groups on campus, and we certainly don't own a building, but we are a close community of students and friends. As far as the campus itself, everyone is welcoming and friendly when they see us around. If they are uninterested, students will politely keep walking or respectfully ask a few questions and then carry on. Even the religious organizations at UTA are welcoming to us, but that is in part because we go out of our way to market ourselves as non-threatening and non-exclusive. Every now and then we meet someone that is excited to learn about our presence on campus and eager to join us, this actually happens more than you might think.

# Jacobsen: What are some of the fun social activities of the Maverick Secular Society at The University of Texas at Arlington?

Vance: We just kind of hang out. We tend to tell students that we are a social group, and that every meeting is a place to be social and chat. We've had a few cookouts, we go out to eat after every meeting, we've had a movie night, several members came to my apartment for Thanksgiving, and so on. We don't have any regular social activities, just plan things as they

come up. This month some members are going to the San Marcos River to swim and escape the Texas heat.

Jacobsen: Who are important mentors and supporters of the Maverick Secular Society at The University of Texas at Arlington?

Vance: Well, we wouldn't even be an official organization without the support of our two faculty advisors, Dr. Daniel Levine and Dr. Sally Parker-Ryan. They have to approve all of our on-campus activities before we can submit any paperwork, and they provide valuable guidance to our group. We are also supported by the countless other non-theist groups in the DFW area. Mostly all of our off-campus events are in partnership with a secular organization outside of the campus. We are very closely tied to the Metroplex Atheists, but we also attend events with the Fellowship of Freethought, FFRF Dallas Chapter, The Crossroads Assembly, the Atheist-Christian Bookclub, and more.

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?

Vance: You can find us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as Maverick Secular Society! You can email me directly at <a href="utarl@secularstudents.org">utarl@secularstudents.org</a> or reach out to us via our social media channels. Membership, unfortunately, is only available to students of UTA, but all are welcome to come to our meetings and be apart of the conversation! We keep our profiles, mainly Facebook, updated with all of our upcoming events, both on and off-campus.

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

Vance: It's my understanding that Canada is considerably more secular than the United States, while Texas is one of the least secular states in our country. Groups like the Maverick Secular Society, Metroplex Atheists, and many others are formed in direct response to the overwhelming religious presence in our communities. At times it can be frustrating to see just how pervasive the theistic dogma is in the public sphere, particularly in public schools in the South. We, along with others, exist to show our community that their worldview is not universally adopted, and that we as atheists, agnostics, or what have you, are very normal everyday citizens. So many students are shocked when I tell them I'm the president of the atheist group on campus. "You mean you're an atheist?" they ask with wide eyes. It's as if those that have been deeply embedded into religion truly view us as an immoral "other" and are very surprised that an atheist could be a friendly classmate. Of course, not all students have this reaction. But for many on campus, interacting with us is the first interaction they have ever had with a professed atheist.

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

Vance: Thank you!

# Interview with Masereka Solomon – Director, Abrimac Secular Services Ltd.

# Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 13, 2019

**Masereka Solomon** is the Director, Abrimac Secular Services Ltd., formerly Kasese Freethinkers Club.

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

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

Masereka Solomon: I have grown up from Kasese, Uganda; thus, the Rwenzori mountainous region in a family of about 32 siblings and different loving mothers with different religious beliefs. I speak over 4 languages; Lhukonzo/Kinandi is my first language. I was never exposed to a single religion. My father passed on when I was still very young, but I was observing whatever he used to do for the short time I saw him live. He was a businessman, a loving man, who wished to have a better informed community, not only for his children, but he cared for anyone that was in need including the churches. He used to fund church construction in our villages. Those churches still exist. He funded school constructions like Karambi Secondary School and that school still exists. He encouraged his children to be in school. He supported many to complete school. He died when he had switched from the Christian religion because he also had unanswered questions. He was an informed individual who considered uplifting the wellbeing of people not just their happiness and this impacted my mind from childhood. I grew asking myself why one would switch religion and believe in other things. I had questions that had no correct answer from the right people. However, I have always seen education, love and care in my family.

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

**Solomon:** In 2013, I got a university degree in Information Technology from Makerere University Kampala. In High school, I attended a very religious school called Seroma Christian High School, where I studied Geography, Economics, Languages, and Fine Arts. I got more exposed to religion, but I was never a victim of indoctrination because I had a critical background of looking at things.

After university, I felt I preferred being my own boss. I valued my ability to use technology to live my life. While in Kasese, early 2014, I gave most of my time to charity works; thus, I started volunteering to help students in schools to get the best while at school since most schools in Kasese currently lack what students need and defining a school environment is still a problem to many school administrators.

I started helping students of Kasese Humanist School with computer lessons. I have taught in this school several lessons not limited to politics, social and economic conditions. I have got more exposed to the education system of Uganda. I have offered to help in explaining humanism to my students and other teachers. I find humanism a better definition for life and always have

continued to encourage my community to consider humanism as a lifestyle. It's the best way we can have peace in our communities.

I have been to school to learn, but I have also continued to learn through working with the young generation, rich is not how much you have, but the conditions of those around you define how rich you are.

#### Jacobsen: Why, and how, was the Kasese Freethinkers Club founded?

**Solomon:** I and some informed friends realized students were getting less than they deserve. They were missing things we thought able to solicit for them through our skills. We organized and the club was formed to find better solutions and pass on skills of critical thinking – We looked at encouraging sports, gardening and dance for the students, we helped the students get sports equipment's, organized friendly matches – we formed a sports academy to help improve some talents and provided a parenting atmosphere thus making sure the students love school and avoid school dropout – I personally believe the young generations picks from what the elders do, as a humanist I believe we make communities and our existence will cause the existence of others only if we accept to use wisdom than getting trapped into the ignorance of failed legacy and identity.

The club did well in mobilizing for the local school I help, we organized sports activities and debate topics to help the children understand what humanism is than running away from it and also help in passing on critical thinking skills – this club was generally to enlighten the children that we associated with through giving them what they lacked and talking to them about training their minds to find solutions to problems as human beings. Humanists are meant to be good people, people who believe that they're the source of the solutions to problems, they're people who wish for a better world than they found – imagine a Christian and a Muslim with their argument, humanists got a bad name in communities and our arguments seem to be landing on old hard rocks. Kasese Freethinkers Club was a club founded by people who want to honestly define humanism for people to buy such a good argument that respects human intelligence, we consider giving realistic efforts as opposed to just talking – for humanism to progress, there's need to uplift the well being of these people and as a club now a Company we want to see well off people not just happy people who can't even afford common life basics.

### Jacobsen: Why was the club changed into operation as a company called Abrimac Secular Services Ltd.?

**Solomon:** Changing the Club to a company status came as a result of more need and the weight of services we plan to give to a much wider area. There are many students and people in the community who are not well in life. There's limited access to information. The education system is not the best. We have a suffering community. We found it wise to operate as a company to help communities change their mindsets through our different projects, which are not influenced by religious beliefs but aimed at created well off communities. Religion thrives most in religious communities and these are the same communities we operate in so we can't preach, we teach better. We give secular services, services that are very basic to everyone whether rich or poor, we don't promise prayers, we give what is missing in peoples lives, we give charity and teach — we improve the well being of humanity and only limited by resources to serve the community members.

Jacobsen: What are some important parts of secular activism there?

**Solomon:** Many people in my community think we're originally founded on a religious foundation, it's very wrong because they are not sufficiently mature. The level of ignorance in my community is very high even when we have schools and teachers, with secular activism it's possible to impact lives because the mind is activated when things are questioned and when one starts doing activities without the influence of religion. I have always shown my students the real meaning of a school, a school is not a religious center even though it's founded by religious people, when religious people are accepted to establish schools, and they diluted what could have been something good into a poison to the human brain. Secularism is not promotion of immoral acts, secularism is using the human brain to find solutions and making this world a better place – humanism is what secular activism requires.

It's very important to care for the young generations thus seeing them through school, secular activism is not fighting with the religious follows – secularism and humanism is about doing what is right because it's right from a mature mind.

## Jacobsen: What are some important political and social activities of the organization?

**Solomon:** Our political and social activities are not limited to;

- · Promoting respect for human rights through helping victims of human abuse.
- · Promoting respect for human intelligence thus encouraging the public to act with wisdom and avoid making rulings out of ignorance.
- · Promoting education not indoctrination, involves getting scholarships and scholastic materials for vulnerable students in our communities. The Company plans to connect students in the Kasese region with city students thus increasing their chances of success and access to information, it's possible.
- · Promoting sporting activities in our communities through organizing youth to form teams and get chances of interaction with other communities. Sports involves many activities, sports equipment's are necessary to have a successful activity.
- · Promoting health through helping the vulnerable girls get menstrual pads and accurate reproductive knowledge. Health activities involves prevention measures like getting mosquito nets to vulnerable communities, health is important because people need to be health in order to be productive.
- · Providing better accommodation to students from distant places, Company is in the process of establishing hostel and transport services that are clean and secure for Human life the Company needs resources to have this project moving.
- · Promoting environmental conservation through encouraging the planting of trees, we need trees on our mountain slopes of Rwenzori.
- · Establishing entrepreneur projects to help in creating employment opportunities for people, as a Company have several ideas to have many people get employed and earn health incomes while serving their communities positively.

## Jacobsen: Who are some interesting public intellectuals speaking for the freethought and secular community?

**Solomon:** I have listened to and read notes of different intelligent minds like David Mills writer of Atheist Universe, Christopher Hitchens, and James Randi. Freethought and secular

community is not for stupid people. It's for people who have not grown imperfectly into adulthood.

Jacobsen: What will be the developments for Abrimac Secular Services Ltd. for the rest of 2019 and into 2020?

**Solomon:** The Company has several developments it's working on, we're establishing physical structures in areas of operation in order to best help our communities. We continue to do more activism in our communities aimed at improving people's minds positively. We are activists of humanism which defines life better – we have what we call Luck Hacking; it's a viewpoint being written by one of our friends in East Asia. This is the same view that defines humanism too. We save glasses from falling. We remove glasses from dangerous positions, take people for a glass placed at the edge of a table, if you can't switch its position well, it's likely to fall and break. It will break and anyone may step on those broken parts and get hurt, Abrimac Secular Services Limited aims at saving many people through switching positions of several vulnerable people to better positions through sharing and giving what these communities lack.

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?

**Solomon:** People can get involved through joining us in kind, our company is limited by guarantee so we continue to welcome guarantors who understand the need for waking up humanity – associate yourself with us and you're part of our company activities. Our company operates on monetary resource's and human labor, the company accepts all resources to reach out to many people, the company works with teachers in different schools, medical practitioners, political leaders, security operatives provided they understand their duties in their respective professionals. We need these people to help us in passing correct information to the public, we avoid pseudo beliefs – leave a message

here <a href="https://www.facebook.com/BetterHumanServices/">https://www.facebook.com/BetterHumanServices/</a> for all acts of kindness towards our works or we can receive items through our postal address Abrimac Secular Services Limited, P.O. Box 196, Kasese, Uganda. We have many students in need. We have communities with limited access to information and medicals resources, we have many vulnerable children, women and men that have been ignored and neglected. We exist in order to reach all these people.

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

**Solomon:** "Your mind is the basis of everything you experience and every contribution you make to the lives others. Train your mind." These are lines from Sam Harris in Awake. We have people with an ignorant mind and those with an informed mind; however, we need people to perfectly grow into adulthood.

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

**Solomon:** Thanks also for your efforts of reaching out to people through your skills of writing.

# Interview with Carlos Celdran – Filipino Artist and Political Activist

# Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 14, 2019

**Carlos Celdran** is a Visual Artist, Performance Artist, Writer, and Activist from Manila, Philippines, and, at present, a political exile from the Duterte Regime.

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

Scott Jacobsen: When you were growing up, what was the perspective of a secular worldview? What was the surrounding religious culture? How is it different from now?

Carlos P. Celdran: I had no idea of a secular worldview. I grew up upper-middle class in the Philippines in a family that was Roman Catholic. However, I would not say that we were devout. My parents believed in Roman Catholicism, but my grandfather was your typical cafeteria Roman Catholic. He was in charge of bringing us to church. He had a peculiar belief that if you go to mass after the sermon, then it classifies as a "full" mass. So, when I was growing up, he would take us to a coffee shop to eat chicken sandwiches throughout most of the mass and enter the church, and only go after the sermon. So until I was around 12-years-old, I thought that Catholic masses were about twenty minutes long.

Catholicism is everywhere. It surrounds you. The phrase "God bless you" is emblazoned on the walls of schools and buildings. There are crucifixes in government offices and other supposedly secular places. Roman Catholicism is literally part of the Philippine identity and landscape.

However, if we are talking about the problems of Roman Catholicism, I can personally remember the guilt. The guilt over masturbation, over sex, over questioning scriptures, over disobeying parents and all that. It makes you feel terrible, but I never saw the wholesale damage that it did on a social level. Until, I became a tour guide and saw it through the poverty on Manila's streets.

Because I grew up upper-middle class, I understand that there are two types of Roman Catholicism in the Philippines. The Roman Catholicism of the upper class, which holds power, and the Roman Catholicism of the masses, which feels the brunt of that power. The poor are the ones that hold Roman Catholicism as a saviour for their condition. So, the masses are more prone to the damage given by religion. The upper classes can always find a way. They can just donate to the church or confess.

Jacobsen: If someone speaks out, in a secular way, or in a critical thinking way, or they are openly secular, what are the impacts on the social life? What are the impacts on family life?

**Celdran:** Believe it or not, somewhere inside the Philippine heart is something secular. We aren't extremist and that comes from somewhere. But more than subscribing to an organised religion, the real danger is the Filipino penchant for fanaticism – and fanaticism for many things. The need for a supreme leader, an unquestionable religion, or even the devotion of a movie star. It is a country with no in-betweens. It is so extreme.

Jacobsen: What about professionally? If someone were to state that they have written for secular publications, or be a member of HAPI, and so on, would this impact them?

**Celdran:** It would be fine. HAPI is fine. No one's going to bomb a HAPI meeting nor a Filipino Freethinkers meeting any time soon. As a matter of fact, Atheist and Humanist principles are rather inaccessible to the average Filipino. It is such a complex issue that it is hard to explain to the greater majority.

Perhaps, Filipinos aren't brave enough to be humanist as well. In the mind of a Filipino, if a plane is crashing, what would a humanist do? The greater majority would rather pray the Hail Mary while a plane is crashing than invoke the power of science or simply be resigned to death.

Historically, the social structures that most Filipinos know are Roman Catholic social structures. That is the only thing they perceive as solid and consistent. We never had an established king. We never had a truly stable government nor a president that was infallible. So, for centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has controlled the mental, political, and social structures and provided this "infallibility." It simply is all they know.

## Jacobsen: What is the main stamp on this, on the psyche of the country?

Celdran: The result is that Filipinos end up looking for gods, not leaders. Even the way Filipinos voted for Duterte follows this, we are not looking for self-actualization and control over our destiny. That takes too much effort and is too risky. We follow a saviour mentality established long ago by Roman Catholicism and religion. Most Filipinos are not capable yet of becoming humanists because they never experienced the benefits of science and modern economics. What has science done for the average poor Filipino? Filipinos will wilfully believe that the world is flat if it promises them a way to get out of their present condition.

### Jacobsen: What is the level of poverty there?

Celdran: 60% or more. It's ridiculous. It is just ridiculous. There's no middle class. It seems the middle class has gone abroad. Because Philippines is a globalized country where English is our national language, it is easy for the Filipino to get out of the Philippines. So, if there is the Filipino that has felt the positive effects of a proper economy, the effects of proper education, and even proper diet; that person now has the capacity to migrate and sing on the West End, work as a nurse in the US, or become a maid in Dubai. They literally can leave. So, what you have left in the Philippines, the elites and the all-believing toiling masses.

## Jacobsen: How is this 'strongman' reflected in other countries? What is the common theme that we are seeing rise around the world?

**Celdran:** In the Philippines, I've noticed this desire for a "father figure." It seems Filipinos are always looking for a master to provide for them. We are not entrepreneurial nor proactive. Filipinos believe that hopefully someday – through luck or fate – they could win the lottery, or maybe that they'll have a leader who could provide them all with an Xbox, a college education, or a karaoke machine in every house. They do not know that the actual development of a society takes work, and more importantly it takes thought. Thinking is tiring in the Philippines.

## Jacobsen: What are some of the prevailing superstitions?

**Celdran:** There are pervading traditions based on superstitions, which are based on Catholicism and some that pre-date it. Some are rather macabre. Some believe that lashing your back and hammering nails to your hands on Good Friday will provide redemption. Some are all out

damaging on a social level – like the ban on divorce being enshrined in the CONSTITUTION. So, there are definite effects that religion imposes upon society.

So, it's a really schizo country where there are great scientists, lawyers, journalists, and academics, but share the land with those who believe that monsters fly around town looking for foetuses to eat.

Apparently, there were two lost kingdoms in this world: Atlantis and Lemuria. Atlantis was a kingdom where everyone was an intellectual. Supposedly, the Philippines was the opposite of that. It was Lemuria, a place where the people where everyone was overly spiritual and where everyone depended upon a higher force. You can see this dependence on higher powers until today. One can call it fanaticism and superstition or one can call it devotion and "faith".

#### Jacobsen: Who are some famous freethinkers there?

**Celdran:** The group Filipino Freethinkers first comes to mind rather than a particular individual. The problem is that humanism or freethinking is difficult to explain to the average Filipino so the movement really needs more promotion and publicity. There's the economic differences as well as language differences that make humanist education out of reach for most of the country.

## Jacobsen: What about writers and organizations?

**Celdran:** Aside from HAPI, Filipino Freethinkers, and Philippine Abortion Coalition, there are not many organizations I know that openly support humanism.

Jacobsen: What had been important activities of theirs, in terms of political and social activities, movement in other words?

Celdran: The demographic is young and upwardly mobile, mostly, so they are savvy in social media. They also have lots of meet-ups and are creative in expressing representation like showing up in costumes for gay pride or a protest rally for free speech. They also are active in pushing for abortion rights online with great memes and posts. Podcasts are also a part of their agenda but it's mostly in English. I would say that humanism has not reached the masses yet because of this. Humanist philosophies are mostly within the realm of the Filipino upper classes. The people who can afford things, who can afford to think. When you're poor, you do not have time to think, but you do have time to believe.

Jacobsen: What about the levels of malnutrition, so, in other words, the kids who may have the ability to think well, but do not have the nutrition to think properly?

Celdran: The Philippines has been notoriously undernourished for generations. My father is a paediatrician. Malnutrition was a problem already back in the 1960s he said. Back then, he actually started a feeding program in Manila's depressed areas where set meals (full meals) would be provided for a particular child. He would monitor the child's physical and mental development. This project failed. Why? The mother would bring the set meals home for the child. Instead of giving it directly, she would divide it among everybody else in the family and household. So, the child ended up not having the proper amount of nutrition. Overpopulation and Malthusian theory were already at play back then. Yes, we can make a connection between cerebral development and malnutrition; and it's resulting belief in gods and all that I guess.

Jacobsen: What is status of women there?

**Celdran:** They are empowered, yet subtly and systematically oppressed.

### Jacobsen: How so?

**Celdran:** Filipinas are capable of becoming the president and holding positions of power in career and politics. There's no glass ceiling in the corporate nor political realm. But since they are denied divorce, abortion nor proper reproductive health programs, they get all the frills of feminism on the surface, but, in reality, have no control over their body nor their heart.

## Jacobsen: How does this play in the internal dynamics of a marriage?

**Celdran:** It is not possible to get divorce. We are the last country in the world where divorce is illegal. To counter this, some people create interesting situations where they are single and have other partners, but yet stay married legally. But for most, they are trapped within the marriage, which could be a nightmare – especially for the wife. An annulment is possible, but at a high cost of money and with a lot of effort. Only the wealthy can really afford to get "divorced".

## Jacobsen: Outside of the heterosexual community, what about the LGBTI+ community?

**Celdran:** Once again, like with women, we are seeing representation, but without the rights. There is representation on TV, media, corporate life, and even within the family. For example, a trans daughter that now works in Japan as a dancer is readily acceptable to a Filipino family if they are the breadwinner or a trans candidate can win a seat in congress. But since there's no law passed yet for equal marriage, equal rights, and protection against violence. They get frills on the surface, but are still endangered in reality.

## Jacobsen: Who do you think speaks articulately to the concerns of the secular, in the Philippines?

**Celdran:** HAPI, Filipino Freethinkers, or the Philippine Abortion Coalition are perhaps the only leading lights, but sadly they are still among the elites. I do not think there's a MAJOR celebrity out there, nor a government agency, who would openly support it.

## Jacobsen: Is there almost a sense of people who do not believe spirits are in the trees, or God is watching over them, do not exist?

**Celdran:** It is difficult for many to be truly secular in a place as exotic as the Philippines. It seems like a nation where logic has never taken root. Its history is so insane, so surreal. It practically writes itself. So sometimes, one does need a little bit of a "mystical" handle so that things can make "sense". Sometimes, Filipinos need a placebo to mitigate the nightmare.

Truth to be told, I myself believe in "dwende" or mystical dwarves [Laughing]. When I lose my keys, I, sometimes, think that one of these "elves" has stolen it. I believe in many things that are considered, probably, a no-no in Humanism. I loosely believe – or dabble – in horoscope, in ghosts, the tarot. I even go to the black Nazarene in Quiapo on a yearly pilgrimage. I do this however, as a personal thing, like a yoga practice, And I'll never impose my practice upon anyone else.

### Jacobsen: What were you formally charged with?

**Celdran:** I was charged with the crime of "Offending Religious Feelings" – Article 166, of the Revised Penal Code of the Philippines – and found guilty. However, there is nothing in the Penal Code, that specifies any particular religion. This creates a very vague situation and is a slippery slope. It is now possible to offend ANY religion and anywhere. If you believe in the Flying

Spaghetti Monster and someone offends you at the local Spaghetti House, they can file a case against you because that is the home of their beliefs. It's crazy.

#### Jacobsen: When was this law last ratified?

**Celdran:** In the 1970s, I am not sure which date. It was revised under Ferdinand Marcos, but it was revised as a method of protecting minority religions. Unfortunately, they did not specify which minority religions they wanted to protect. So, the majority religion – Catholicism – was able to use it to their advantage.

Actually, it was not the Roman Catholic Church that filed those charges against me. It was a fanatic lawyer named Atty. Ronaldo Reyes. But his name never gets any mention in any of the articles, people and the press directly blame the church itself, which is strange.

### Jacobsen: What are the consequences in personal and professional life, and emotional life?

**Celdran:** My current condition of being in self-imposed exile in Spain was the result of a series of unfortunate events resulting from my "Damaso" protest action in the Manila Cathedral. Ironically, it wasn't in protest of government policies. I did the act actually in favour of policies pushed by the former administration.

Back then, former President Noy Aquino pushed for the passage of a bill in congress called "The Reproductive Health Bill". This bill aimed to provide birth control consumables (condoms and pills) and teach sex education in public schools. It was a G-Rated Reproductive Health Bill, no abortion anywhere in there.

This performative protest used two elements: the image of our National Hero hero Jose Rizal (my costume) and the name of a character in his novel, an abusive priest named "Damaso" (the placard).

And luckily, this combination of image and word mobilized the RH movement on a social media level. It created a rallying call. The image Jose Rizal's costume with a sign calling all the bishops of the Philippines Damasos, became the "face" of the RH Bill movement. It was all that was needed to tell 90 million Filipinos that we need separation of church and state. That we need proper reproductive health programs.

It covered the issues of human rights, the issues of women's rights, the issues of birth control, economics, and population management in one picture. I did not need to write a manifesto nor translate my views into multiple Filipino dialects. This performative art image pushed the RH Bill to its final conclusion as a law.

This is what created my career. Unfortunately, though, I used that extraneous fame and mileage earned from the Damaso act to campaign for a former candidate for the Philippine elections in 2016, who was running against Duterte. Frankly, this campaign drove me nuts and squandered the mileage I earned. I had a Britney Spears-level meltdown on Twitter – basically telling everybody, "Fuck you! Why are you all crazy and voting for this madman?"

So by the time elections hit and Duterte was at his peak, I had become the most hated person on social media by openly campaigning against him. And in a way, I do admit I was unhinged. I seriously couldn't believe these same Filipinos who chose to defy the Catholic Church and push for reproductive rights would backslide and vote for fascism and choose killer for a president.

Fast forward to 2018. After five years of my court case languishing in the Supreme Court, the Damaso case comes back to life. In August of 2018, I received a letter from the Supreme Court upholding my sentence. Naturally, I filed an appeal. That appeal was rejected about a month later. This is quick for the Philippine Justice System, lightning speed practically.

After one more appeal, the courts finally sent me their reply on Christmas day in a very alarming way. In the Philippines, after being notified by courts, you only have one week or so to file an appeal. Everybody knows that in the Philippines, nobody worked between Christmas Day and January 1. That letter was sent over this break. Luckily, before vacation ended, my lawyer passed by his office, found the letter and called me, "I found a letter, we have seven hours to file an appeal."

I freaked out. I left for Hong Kong on the next flight and stayed there for a few days to see if they were able to file an appeal in time. Because if they did not, I would retroactively lose. That is when I realized that the Supreme Court was knocking on my door. Do I want to fight it? Do I want to risk going to jail under THIS particular political climate? Do I want to risk my jail term being extended from 1 year, and 1 month, and 11 days in jail to 2 years to 3 years, to 4 years?

Who knows what's going to happen to a critic of the president in jail these days? I believe that I am in exile because of political persecution as much as religious persecution.

Jacobsen: How do you define 'fanaticism' within a Filipino and a Filipina context?

**Celdran:** It is blind faith. Whether it be for a president or for a religion, that belief of power being beyond "us" is all-pervasive.

Considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs: food, shelter, social acceptance, then, finally, self-actualization, we've perverted the pursuit. We think we are democratic; even though, we aren't anywhere near the social development required for using it properly.

Jacobsen: What does this do to the psyche of the public? The psyche in terms of the blind faith of not questioning parental authority, governmental authority, even in spite of vile acts done against his own citizenry.

**Celdran:** Parental authority is in our national oath.

To believe in the power, and the state, and to follow parents, it is called Panatang Makabayan, the oath to the nation. You'll see in there [Laughing] to believe in the school, the church, the state, and my parents.

Jacobsen: What do you think would extricate this mindset, this blind faith and fanatical mindset?

**Celdran:** Proper economic development.

However, that is going to be hard in our democracy, though. Because in a state where they can barely even know where the next meal is coming from, it is hard to convince the majority to believe in the long game.

Especially in the day of social media where our attention span has been sliced down to size, how do we fit all the teachings of Keynes, Heidegger, Nietzsche and so on, into a twee? How the hell does one teach self-actualization and liberalism on Facebook?

I am not saying that Humanism is elitist. However, I said it.

In the Philippine context, I say this with all the love in the world, because I am one of them. I have the hardest time trying to get these thoughts to the greater majority.

Jacobsen: How long will development take if there was a further strong move towards the development, towards economic development?

Celdran: We are trying strongman move once again. Because the Philippines looks around itself. Many of our neighbours have gone up, from third world to first world without the Maslow's hierarchy of needs. China, Indonesia, Singapore, they all achieved economic success without the frivolities of popular mandate, freedom of speech, and human rights. So, the Philippines, believes, if we just compromise things like these, maybe, we can become Singapore or China. Because, frankly, what has democracy, self-actualization, and humanism done for the majority anyhow? This echoes from the upper classes all the way down but the upper classes are better in forming tweets.

Jacobsen: What's the next step for you? How do you stay safe?

**Celdran:** I am not going to lie. It's all about self-care for now. [Laughing] I have no grand plans in the store anymore, nor do I want any. I am almost 50 man. I did my best for the Philippines. I'm ready to fade out.

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

# Interview with Carol Hope – Organizer & Member, Secular Humanists of Rochester

# Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 15, 2019

Carol Hope is an Organizer & Member of the Secular Humanists of Rochester.

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start with some background, either family or personal, what are some salient details and stories? How did you become intrigued and involved in secular issues?

**Carol Hope:** I was raised in a family of non-believers, who attended a Universalist Church. My husband was also raised in a family of non-believers, who attended a Unitarian Church. The two churches, both in Rochester, had a joint youth group called Liberal Religious Youth. The two religions officially merged many years ago.

As a teenager, I attended a UU summer camp, and I lived for those two weeks every year. When our sons were young, my husband and I went with them to a Unitarian Church so that they could meet other children whose families shared our values.

That worked well, but, in the long run, we found that even the Unitarian Church was "too churchy" for our tastes. We've always been atheists, but I didn't fully "come out" until about five years ago.

#### Jacobsen: How did the Secular Humanists of Rochester start?

**Hope:** For the past few years, I've been a member of the Atheist Community of Rochester. However, I knew that some non-believers didn't feel comfortable calling themselves atheists.

For that reason, in December of 2017, I established the Secular Humanists of Rochester as an alternative. I'm pleased to report that it's proved to be quite popular. It's actually a "sister" group to the atheist organization, and many of us belong to both groups.

## Jacobsen: What have been important social and political activities of the Secular Humanists of Rochester?

**Hope:** We aren't politically active at all (although we all loathe Trump, of course). Our purely social activities consist of monthly dinners in restaurants.

In addition, we have a joint book group – shared with an atheist group – that meets once-amonth, and we meet monthly for discussions on various topics. We meet in libraries or in the community room of a local bank.

### Jacobsen: What are some new projects for the Secular Humanists of Rochester?

**Hope:** We have two community service projects. Once each month, several of us volunteer at a warehouse that gathers and distributes food to hungry people in our community. We also have a highway-clean-up project in which we pick up litter along our assigned stretch of road.

This activity is sponsored by the State of New York, which rewards our efforts with signs that give our group credit for our labour. Our most recent project arose because, unfortunately, one of

our suburban towns regularly opens its town board meetings with a prayer or invocation (usually Christian).

I recently gave a secular invocation to open one of their meetings. In addition, I recently gave a presentation on secular humanism to a group of high school students who were attending a daylong event at a local college about different religions.

Jacobsen: Who is an important person for secular work in Rochester?

Hope: Me! There are also the two UU churches, the atheist group, and a group

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

## Interview with Minister Bruce McAndless-Davis – Minister, Peninsula United Church & Curator, ThirdSpace Community Café

# Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 16, 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.

Minister Bruce McAndless-Davis is a Minister at Peninsula United Church & Curator of ThirdSpace Community Café (CafeChurch). He is responsible for Outreach, Pastoral Care & Communication.

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start from the top. What was some family background? What was some personal background?

**Minister Bruce McAndless-Davis:** Okay, I am not sure what to tell you. I was born in Japan. I spent the first 11 years of my life there. My parents worked for the church in the Korean church in Japan. My dad was a pastor.

So, I have that in my history. I went to high school in Scarborough, Toronto. I spent most of my teen years and beyond there. I went to the University of Toronto. I went out here to do my masters here in Vancouver. I went to the Vancouver School of Theology.

My family and I ended up raising our family here. We love being on the West Coast.

Jacobsen: If you reflect on the church in earlier life in Japan, and if you reflect on the churches that you had in Scarborough and in Vancouver here, before and after the Vancouver School of Theology, what were some common facets or aspects of them? What were some differences?

**McAndless-Davis:** I think the common denominator in all of the churches that I have been a part of is a sense of a deep connection between people. Sometimes, that was more easily felt than others. But I feel a real sense of community between people. I, certainly, felt a part of that as a child and then a young person.

I felt like I belonged. I think that sense of belonging is really a key component of any church that I have been a part of and connected to, regardless of theological differences and different expressions of faith and traditions. It is a sense of community is, certainly, a really important thing.

The differences, I think, were more cultural than theological. In a way, it is that different churches have different personalities. Certainly, there are common denominators within the same

tradition. In fact, within the same denomination, you get different church cultures depending on different factors.

The leadership of the ministry and where it came from are important parts of that. It depends on what they're passionate about. If they are passionate about children and youth, then they will be about that. Right now, I am passionate about social justice and community engagement, particularly those who are marginalized in one way or another.

We have an emergency shelter. We connect with a community in rural El Salvador.

## Jacobsen: Why El Salvador?

**McAndless-Davis:** That's interesting. I think it was a personal connection with someone in the congregation to start with. People were invited to visit. So, a small group initially went from the church to visit this community.

They saw an opportunity for us to be helpful and to build a relationship. So, there was a need for that community, which was made up of displaced people from different parts of El Salvador who were displaced by the war – so they can have homes and farms to cultivate.

So, these folks came back from that trip and asked people in our church if we could help. They collected money and were able to help people in that community to buy land. That began a relationship that has lasted for more than 20 years now with different folks in the church going down.

Our whole youth group went a couple of times. There are quite a few people in the church who have been down many times. There have been others down a couple of times. That's where that came from.

Jacobsen: If you could reflect on some of the Vancouver School of Theology experience, and training and education, what was, or what is, the dominant theological stream there? And why?

**McAndless-Davis:** Historically, the Vancouver School of Theology was formed when both the Anglican and the United Church colleges came together and the Presbyterian, which had a very small school in Vancouver, also joined in later on.

So, it has been primarily a place of training leaders in the United, Anglican, and Presbyterian Church. Primarily around pastoral clergy leadership, but actually, over the last 20 years, it is being more and more around social leadership.

So, people who didn't want to become ministers necessarily, but who wanted to offer and felt called to offer leadership and other parts of the faith. Whether it is organizing the community or various things, the theological strains, of course, come, primarily, from those traditions, I'd say that there has always been a spectrum theologically at Vancouver School of Theology.

It has always tended towards the more liberal, progressive side of theology compared to other Christian traditions, certainly. But they have had different principles from different faculties and traditions. This has been a time when there was a strong feminist emphasis in that school.

It was fairly strong when I was there in the 90s. But that is still, certainly, present, but not nearly as strong now as it once was. I think the faculty represent a fairly broad ecumenical spectrum, including, now.

A member of their faculty is Jewish Rabbi. The Interfaith connections have been built that wasn't really happening in the way when I was a student there.

Jacobsen: How does this inform church teachings in the pulpit? How does this trickle down into those who have graduated and who are leading communities at a church?

**McAndless-Davis:** Right, speaking for myself, being at an ecumenical school like that, it helped me appreciate my own tradition more and to learn about, and appreciate more, other Christian and some other religious traditions as well.

It helped cultivate a sense of openness and an appreciation of other traditions. I think, certainly, in my ministry – and those of the colleagues who I know; we have, often, been active in local ministerials or other organizations that bring other religious leaders together for civic society to serve their communities.

I know, for example, where we are now in South Surrey. We have built a really meaningful relationship with the Muslim community in South Surrey called the White Rock Muslim Association. It started with simply sharing some events together. Where we were trying to help members of our community learn about Islam because we saw a lot of misperception in the community, it was during a time.

Really, it was in response to the bombing in Paris. The blowback that a lot of the members of the Muslim community were experiencing as a result of it. That blossomed into us working with refugees in Syria. We have done a number of gatherings since that time.

That openness to other faith traditions and working collaboratively in community is something that I would say is part of the ethos of my training.

Jacobsen: Who is an outstanding expositor, or just teacher, to the general public of Canada about the Christian faith across denominations?

McAndless-Davis: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Who is someone not doing that, the opposite of that?

**McAndless-Davis:** I think there are some wonderful and articulate spokespeople in church. I think most of them are not well-known, certainly by the general public. I think there is a healthy and, sometimes, unhealthy skepticism about high-profile religious leaders.

I am not sure who I would point to, at least in Canada, as an exemplary expositor. There are some great preachers out there. Some of them are in obscurity. Others in more high-profile and relatively larger churches.

I think one of the heroes that I have within my own tradition is not from Canada. But John Bell is one of the leaders in the Iona community out of Scotland who I really appreciate. His books, his speaking, his workshops that I have taken.

The church has probably heard of him. But the general public may not have. In terms of being critical of someone in particular, I mean, locally, there is an ultra-conservative group called Culture Guard. That is really fighting a war against inclusivity around folks, specifically SOGI 123. The provincial resource within the school system to help teachers and students create safe environments for everyone in school.

There is a lot of those folks who are fighting against that in the name of their Christian faith. I find that particularly disturbing. That they're spreading hatred and misinformation and taking a very extreme position, calling those of us parents with trans kids who we support – one of my children is trans – them and their choices, and their journey in making a transition in terms of a gender identity, child abusers.

They refer to it as a child abuse. For anyone to do that is appalling, but to do that in the name of Jesus Christ, who I believe represented remarkable love and inclusivity in his time, is truly appalling to me.

Jacobsen: If we look at misrepresentations, whether knowingly or not, by the secular community, what are some of those misrepresentations or misunderstandings on the part of the secular community at large, or in individuals? In other words, what are some common ones?

**McAndless-Davis:** I think there is a fairly broad perception among folks that Christians are generally anti-gay, which, I would say, is certainly a misunderstanding. Like any religious community, like any community, period, most broad communities anyway, there is a diversity of perspectives, and so on.

Christians have a wide spectrum of social beliefs as well as theological beliefs. I think a lot of people don't appreciate that. I think there is a lot of misperception of how literally many of us Christians take the Bible.

The Bible is not a scientific text of any kind [Laughing].

## Jacobsen: [Laughing].

**McAndless-Davis:** So, it's narrative descriptions of Creation and other events are important theologically and spiritually. I actually think it is interesting to see connections between those very ancient narratives and what scientists have come to understand about how the universe was formed.

I would suggest that the vast majority of Christians in Canada do not understand Genesis as descriptions of how the Earth was actually formed or how the universe and the Solar System were formed. That we have a much more nuanced understanding of the place of that literature in our faith and in our lives.

I think a lot of people don't realize that [Laughing].

## Jacobsen: [Laughing].

**McAndless-Davis:** I think they assume we have some weird and primitive ideas from the Bible. That we are not critical or thoughtful about how we apply those. That may be true from some Christians. It is, certainly, not true for me.

Even for those who are more conservative than I am would have a much more nuanced understanding, those would be two examples anyway.

Jacobsen: If you look at the secular conversations, the individuals who tend to be pointed out are Ken Ham, the Ark Encounter, the Discovery Institute, and individuals working to put creationism alongside evolution by natural selection in the biology science classroom.

McAndless-Davis: [Laughing] yes.

Jacobsen: Like circumnavigating the research area of it, where it trickles down through the professors, the graduate students, the undergraduate textbooks, and then into the high school textbooks, and just going straight to the school boards to put it directly into the high school textbooks, so having no reliable vetting of experts in the field, that's typically what comes up, to what you're saying.

In the Christian community, what are some misunderstandings or misinformation they might have about the secular community?

**McAndless-Davis:** That's a good question. I think that's a bit of a harder question in a sense because I think people inside the church and outside the church have misperceptions about their own communities and society in general.

Secular society isn't an identifiable group of people. That we might have certain ideas about necessarily. I think there can be some real misunderstandings throughout society about the position that people who identify atheists have, for example, because in the little bit of dialogue that I have had with folks who identify as atheists.

It might go from a very passive position of just not believing in any religious doctrine to fairly militant anti-religious stand. Those have tended to get more airplay in recent years. I think the word atheist, itself, can get some misunderstanding.

It's interesting. In The United Church, we have one minister who has identified herself as an atheist. She takes that word quite literally in saying, "A-theist." I think she uses it in a way that is not popularly understood as atheist.

That, certainly, created all kind of misunderstanding, conflict, and consternation in our denomination. That someone is still a minister and still describes themselves as an atheist. I am speaking of Gretta Vosper, of course.

When you dig a little deeper, and examine what she means by the word "atheist," the god that she doesn't believe in is a god that most of us wouldn't believe in other. I think [Laughing] there is abundant room there for misunderstanding and misinformation.

That we need to dig a little deeper and understand a little more. It is around those issues with some Christians. It is hard for them to listen to the nuances because they have a reaction. People are quick to take positions for or against rather than engage in dialogue.

Jacobsen: How long do you take to organize a service and a sermon on average?

**McAndless-Davis:** In a good week, I would say that I spend about 3 hours pulling together the basic service itself: the plan, the order of service, the hymns, the other elements of worship. The sermon, I can spend anywhere from 4 or 5 hours, if I am pretty tight for time, to more like 10 or 12, if I have a bit more time.

Some things require a bit more research. Sometimes, I throw out blocks of material [Laughing].

### Jacobsen: [Laughing].

**McAndless-Davis:** I just start again. It depends on a lot of factors. I remember back when we went to school. You were supposed to spend an hour per minute sermon. I don't know a minister who has the luxury to spend that time.

That's unrealistic. Certainly, it is between 5 and 10 hours. It would be common.

## Jacobsen: What has been the most emotionally difficult text in the Bible to teach and preach?

**McAndless-Davis:** "The most," I don't know. There's a few. Texts that are difficult. There are several passages in the Psalms. For example, that express violence. There is a famous passage that speaks about wishing destruction on my enemies and on imagining bashing their children's heads against rocks.

That sort of thing, I have barely, actually, preached on those passages. But I have, occasionally, dealt with them. I think people understand the difference between instructive scripture and poetic expressions that are tied to a particular time and place.

So, in terms of what is emotionally more difficult, I think I labour more over the implications of Jesus's radical teachings. If we look honestly and seriously at many of the things that Jesus taught, the demands of what he is pointing to – the kind of radical love and self-giving that is part of his teaching – is, actually, a pretty hard sell in comfortable, middle class congregations.

In my own life, never mind [Laughing], I think that's where I do some heavy wrestling. The trick as a preacher is to balance an honest expression of what I believe the teaching is and not coming off as judgmental and self-righteous, either.

There, certainly, are some times when I feel like the inactivity of the Christian community around important issues like poverty and environment stewardship. Those kinds of things. Those run up against the call of our faith.

We have to wrestle hard with that. I find that hard work to try and create dialogue and, hopefully, inspire people to examine themselves and seek some transformation. Both within ourselves and within our worlds.

I am flawed person, myself. I struggle with that stuff, just like anybody would. I have to keep working at what this means in my life and what is might mean in others' lives, and what can I say that would be helpful for people to hear.

### Jacobsen: What is the fundamental nature of God to you?

**McAndless-Davis:** For me, the fundamental nature of God is loving community. Part of my understanding within my Christian tradition of the Trinity, expressing God as both one and three. That the source of life is not homogenous and singular entirely.

There is a oneness. There is a unity in how I understand God. But also, a sense of community and diversity within that. There is a sense of relationship too. I can probably be pretty comfortable with a statement like "God is loving relationship, writ on a cosmic scale."

So, that, for me, is a deeply relational faith. It is founded on a sense of a Creator. I think there are a lot of different words that we can and should use in reference to the ineffable, indescribable source of all being [Laughing].

The character of that being is loving and relational. It is loving in a deep sense, not superficially.

Jacobsen: Have you ever had a religious experience?

**McAndless-Davis:** Yes! I have [Laughing] had lots of religious experiences.

Jacobsen: What would you consider the sense in that experience? What would be the words that come to mind?

**McAndless-Davis:** Yes. There are different kinds. I have had religious experiences, where I am just overwhelmed with a deep sense of warmth, acceptance, of love for myself and for the human race and, indeed, the whole world.

There are times when I think I have had religious experiences when I feel like I have been called out. I feel really convicted of something that I realize I need to change in my life, and how I am. So, I have had that kind too.

Most of the religious experiences that I have found really powerful have been about presence. This sense of the presence of One who is beyond my material existence.

Jacobsen: How would you characterize a soul? How would you characterize an afterlife?

**McAndless-Davis:** I guess, for me, our soul is whatever part or center of us, the core of our being. I don't really believe in a Greek dualistic sense of body and soul, as being separate. That our soul is simply the core of who we are and, therefore, transcends simply the physical.

But it is deeply embedded and connected to it. So, it is not something that can simply be separate from our physical selves. The second question was around the afterlife.

Jacobsen: That's correct.

**McAndless-Davis:** It is a mystery [Laughing]. We don't know. I think there is a lot of tradition around what we might expect. We don't know. So, what I assert, if I am at a memorial service or in conversation with somebody, I speak of trust in the One to whom we have always been connected and with whom we will always be connected.

God, and one another, our relationship with one another is not done. What form that will take? I think there are lots of narrative and poetic expressions of that. That are or might be interesting and helpful at times, and comforting.

But, essentially, it is trusting ourselves to an unknown mystery. But my own experience of connection with the source of life has helped me to trust that that connection is not severed or come to an end when I die, when my body dies.

So, there is some way in which we continue to exist. What that looks and feels like, I really don't know. I like to imagine a lot of things. But it is all rooted in a trust in that first source.

Jacobsen: What is your most common prayer?

McAndless-Davis: Help! [Laughing]

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

**McAndless-Davis:** That's true, whether it is help for people who are suffering, for me to be more faithful, in something I find difficult, or people I am worried about like my kids or others I love, or the Earth and the amount of loss and help for us to wake up and make more fundamental changes in how we live. So, we can treasure this Earth and take better care of it.

Those are the most common ones. I'd say.

Jacobsen: Most Islamic and Christian theology, not only comes with a divine creator of some form but, comes with what is commonly termed an enemy or a source or locus of evil. How would you be defining within your own theology? What would be manifestations of this?

**McAndless-Davis:** I think the Old Testament term "Satan" translated well to "Adversary." I think the tendency of some parts of my tradition to personify that in a person is less prevalent in our scriptures than even more Christians [Laughing] realize.

I think there is something helpful in ours and other traditions. If we are able to identify sources and powers of evil, and destruction, in our lives and in the world, I think it is dangerous if we project that onto someone who is completely other like a figure, a person, or a being named Satan, as a way to avoid responsibility for things wrong within ourselves.

Sometimes, that can happen. But appealing to some Eastern faith traditions, the presence even within Jungian and Christian thinking. The sense of a shadow within ourselves is important to acknowledge and be aware of. That there are impulses, as if we can understand them psychologically as well, as we evolved – as human beings afraid of something hunting us. That could hurt us.

It led to certain fearful impulses and reactions that are still deeply embedded in our DNA. But sometimes, when we act in fear or a part of our brain is activated fearfully or with anxiety, we are capable of doing terrible and destructive things.

It is a helpful notion to acknowledge that there is evil within ourselves. That there is social evil. It gets created with neglect, willful ignorance, or other motivations. Where we hurt one another, where we destroy the Earth, I think it is a tendency among some in the Christian tradition, which we sort of [Laughing] ignore or try to minimize the existence of evil.

It is not very comforting or true to my way of life. There are all kinds of forces in our societies and in our lives that are evil. It doesn't mean that the people that are part of those are entirely evil. We need to be careful about demonizing other people.

That, in itself [Laughing], is an evil. We come to a point of giving ourselves permission for what happened in Nazi Germany and many other cases of killing others, persecuting others, and committing injustice. A lot of that still ongoing in the world now.

It is a dangerous thing to think that we are in a position to decide who is good and evil. I think it is also helpful to build a name within ourselves, within our own communities, and within our own societies. It has to be done with humility and an awareness that "I do not understand it all. I am not the arbiter of all truth. I am not in a position to unequivocally judge anyone."

Jacobsen: You pastor or shepherd a community and a group of modern Christians in an advanced industrial economy in a very cozy part of even that country.

McAndless-Davis: [Laughing] yes.

Jacobsen: However, individuals around the world will experience what have been termed crises of faith or a crisis of faith. When you're pastoring the community, what common crises of faith come forward? What runs through your mind in discussion with them? What have been some of the outcomes of those crises of faith?

**McAndless-Davis:** Yes. The two types of crises that I have encountered the most. I would say this is within myself as much as people I serve. There is an intellectual crisis of faith when there is a dissonance between things that I understand about historical or scientific things, and some teaching.

That creates an intellectual dissonance, which makes me question the faith tradition. I have certainly seen that. That is a bit different. Probably, in my own practice and work, the crisis of faith that I have seen as much or more is one that is a deeply personal and emotional crisis of faith that comes from having a major tragedy strike our lives, e.g., a loss of a child, a loved one.

That really upsets our world in all kinds of ways. I think people who up to that point have a sense that somehow God controlled or directed all the events of their lives, mostly for good [Laughing] or mostly in ways that were positive. It can create a real crisis for them.

I think for the vast majority of people. There is a sense of the benevolence and the omnipotence of God and a belief in a God who is active, an interventionist God. That is going to mess with their experience when they hit a major crisis, a death, an injustice – lots of things.

I think in both of those types of crises. My first response is to simply be present with people and not try to talk people out of how they're feeling or what they're experiencing, or the loss, but to try and reassure people that if you feel angry with God then it is okay.

If you're upset and if you feel betrayed, that is okay. It is okay to express that. It can be instructive. So really, it is to listen, first of all. That is my goal and to do that in a way that gives people permission to express an experience that they're going through, and to create space for dialogue and reflection and, hopefully, some understanding of themselves and their faith.

One that is deeper than the one that they might have had before. I need to respect where people are. Sometimes, they have come to a different perspective than they have had before. If that means that they feel the need to detach from the faith community, I would be sad about that.

I would tell them so and respect that. I would try to keep the door open for a continuing relationship and, at least, an openness to dialogue in the future.

Jacobsen: Many denominations of Christian faith harbour a literal or a metaphorical, or both, conceptualization of a broken world. A world where children die early horrible deaths, poverty is rampant in many parts of the world, male and female partners abuse one another physically, verbally, sexually, drug abuse can be rampant, unjust wars can happen, unfairness can even happen at school and job level.

People can be left indebted. Their homes can be foreclosed. They can feel a sense of despair that to those in more comfortable countries or situations simply may not be able to fathom immediately, given the immediacy of that despair and dislocation. It can destroy lives, if not senses of self, and entire communities.

How does this conceptualization of a broken world in a Christian context help you live out your faith in some of the contexts where you want to live in community while also providing for the surrounding community in terms of helping those, whether by choice or by their chances in life, are less fortunate in life?

**McAndless-Davis:** It is interesting the way you talked about having a better metaphorical or literal idea. I think the world is both literally and metaphorically [Laughing] broken. I think that's just true of our experience. People know that.

We experience this in a whole variety of ways. Even in relatively comfortable communities like the one I serve, there are many people living with very real illness or mental illness, chronic pain, and, in some cases, struggles with their housing and that sort of thing. Relatively speaking, it is the experience of people. I think the understanding of the world as broken I as a two-edged thing. First of all, I think it is true to our experience. I think it is a way of naming people's experience.

We are told that we have a generation of children and young people fearing environmental destruction in the same way that I did or my generation did with nuclear destruction in the 80s. It is easy for that to create despair and depression.

Sometimes, it is hard to find hope when faced with that. You want to help each other out. The metaphor of a broken world invites the question, "How can the world be mended?" How can it be restored? How can our lives be restored?

The teaching of my faith, at least, needs to happen at a personal, social, and collective level. We need to respond in ways that we are able, out of who we are and what our gifts & abilities are. One of my favourite quotes is by an old preacher named Howard Thurman.

He said, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

I believe the things that give us joy, the things that we're most passionate about, are the things that we are called to do in the world. So, part of my rule as a pastor is to encourage people not just to do something that they think is important out of a sense of duty of obligation, but something that gives them joy and reflects on their own gifts, talents, and passions.

Because I think that is the healthiest way for us to live in hope in a broken world. That we, or I, have a contribution to make or some contributions to make to my community and to the wider world. Those are ways to respond to the brokenness of the world, but also not to create more brokenness in myself.

That I can respond to the need for wholeness in the world by creating wholeness in myself as well. There needs to be a harmony and a connection there. Certainly, I have affinities with Buddhist teaching around that. I think that is really consistent with the teachings of Jesus as well.

Jacobsen: When you're done preparing a sermon or a service for the week, what is a regular playing out of that sermon or that service for that Sunday?

**McAndless-Davis:** For us, we have two places that we do services on a Sunday morning. One is the church building. The other is a café. It is a community café out of a storefront space. We do a service there. In some ways, it has some basic elements that are the same as what happens in the church building.

It has a pretty different feel to it. It is more casual and interactive, and more intimate. In terms of the more traditional service, it is about an hour and ten minutes or so with a fair bit of music. That would probably include or might include a hymn that was written before the 20th century anyway – 17th, 18th, 19th centuries.

It might also include one or two more contemporary hymns written in the last 20 years. We have a piano and an organ. We have a pianist and an organist. We follow a liturgy that is fairly classical of prayers, songs, and readings, a sermon.

We celebrate the sacraments, communion, once a month. It has a basic structure that they know what to expect and are used to it. Folks in the church, those who haven't grown up with it or experienced that would think it is pretty unusual.

Particularly, the format of one minister doing all the talking in terms of the prayers in the sermon. I think the appeal is weakening in a postmodern society, to say the least [Laughing]. People are more interested and interactive and engaged in other things. That is something that we are trying to do, where there is no sermon.

There is a story that is shared for children and the adults there. We find different ways to reflect on that story in groups. It could be discussing questions around the café tables in a small group or a separate group working on a craft and talking about the story, and what it means to us.

It is trying to share some of those key things with us. So, I'd say we are experimenting with some different ways of doing that with traditional forms of worship.

Jacobsen: What would you consider the best means or a set of really good means by which to bridge the gap between the secular and the religious communities in Canada?

**McAndless-Davis:** I think one of the best ways that I've experienced that is to work and to play together. I consider it really important. I have lots of friends that are not connected to the church at all. I play hockey recreationally.

I am involved in singing in a community choir. I do other things recreationally that connect me outside of my own faith tradition. I think those are really, by living in community, meaningful and worthwhile.

It means stepping outside of our comfort zones for some people. Their normal circles of connection and influence. I think one of the really important aspects of that is creating or finding and forming alliances with people that care about the same things.

I think there's lots of people in our community who don't subscribe to any faith that care about many of the same things that I do, whether environmental destruction or making safer communities, being inclusive of LGBT folks, and any number of issues, for making connections and working together, whether political, social, or organizational.

I think those are all good ways for us to get to know one another and build real, meaningful relationships that transcend stereotypes and misconceptions to share and learn with each other rather than have a set of beliefs and assumptions [Laughing]...

Jacobsen: ...[Laughing]...

McAndless-Davis: ...about each other. That may not be accurate.

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

**McAndless-Davis:** I think there are a lot of motivations that play in our world. I think lots of folks from different religious or no religious traditions are motivated by a desire for good, healthy meaningful communities.

I think it's on the basis on all of us desiring that and, hopefully, opening ourselves to work together, learn from one another, and to appreciate differences, not just trying to minimize them – and appreciate the unique gifts that others bring. That's a good thing for all of us.

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

**McAndless-Davis:** Sure, glad to talk with you.

## Interview with Marquita Tucker, M.B.A. – Co-Organizer, Black Nonbelievers of Detroit

# Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 17, 2019

Marquita Tucker, M.B.A. is the Co-Organizer of the Black Nonbelievers of Detroit.

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What personal accomplishments make you most proud, as true achievements?

**Marquita Tucker:** The personal accomplishment that I am most proud of so far is being true to myself. It has taken a long time to respect and love myself. I am a single mother of four amazing children, I survived and left an abusive marriage. I am an awesome friend to those around me. I am working on my PhD, something that I never dreamed that I would be able to do. I am helping in my community through volunteering and fundraising. I am just so happy to be where I am now in life.

Jacobsen: Who have been the most outstanding and outspoken secular women in the last decade?

**Tucker:** For sure the person who comes to the top of my mind is one of my mentors Mandisa Thomas founder of Black Nonbelievers. I am so proud of her and in such admiration of her strength and perseverance. Also, Bridgett Crutchfield. She has helped me through so much and taught me how to not be afraid of anything especially not speaking my mind.

Jacobsen: What initiatives have worked to include secular women more in the public and institutional spaces of the secular communities and organizations? What ones have been abject failures?

**Tucker:** Women have had to take the charge of putting themselves out there in the forefront of secular organizations. There are no freebies and there are no handouts. I'm not that familiar with any initiatives that have failed but women, especially women of color, are nowhere near in the background of humanist or secular communities anymore.

Jacobsen: For secular women in the 2010s, what seems like the most significant achievement as a cohort or sub-demographic of the secular community?

**Tucker:** Just never backing down. Not allowing ourselves to be pushed back into the margins of the secular community. We have started our own organizations or taken leadership roles in existing organizations.

Jacobsen: Any recommended annual events, authors, speakers, or organizations?

**Tucker:** Well, this October, Women of Color Beyond Belief will be holding an event in Chicago, IL. This will be October 4, 5, 6. We will have talks on a variety of topics. Please come out and support. This is the website: <a href="https://wocbeyondbelief.com/">https://wocbeyondbelief.com/</a>.

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

# Ask Herb 11 – Thucydides's Maxim: History of, More Than, the Peloponnesian War

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 18, 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 peace, war, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: History remains wrought with wars of human beings – mostly men – murdering and slaughtering one another through bludgeoning of skulls with blunt instruments of combat, crushing of limbs, slashing of flesh, maiming and mutilation of bodies, trampling of soldiers by horseback, and piercing, puncturing, and mangling of internal vital organs with projectiles, and so on.

Thucydides wrote a history of the war between Sparta and Athens in the 5th century BC. Also, some claim a maxim for him, where Thucydides said, "Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." Active involvement in the struggle for a more fair and just society involves similar sentiments, even acts with bloody labour wars and violence.

In American history, how true is this maxim from the struggles for labour rights with the factory girls of Lowell, universal suffrage rather than particular suffrage for land-owning white aristocratic men, rights to equal access to education and the world of work, and modern ongoing battles for reproductive rights and procurement of a decent life? What is the silver lining here, too, though?

Herb Silverman: True, the history of humankind must include the history of warfare. Even our prehistory, through archeological findings, shows that there have always been wars. From our hunter-gatherer past, through the Middle Ages and approaching fairly modern times, the norm across many societies included mutilation of the enemy, murder of enemy infants, routine rape, routine torture of prisoners, and other hideous, cruel and unusual punishments. Public executions for the amusement and instruction of the populace were also common. There is a long list in both time and practice of man's inhumanity to man.

Today, more than ever, humans have the capacity to use weapons of mass destruction to do away with just about all other humans, as well as the ability to affect climate change that could devastate human life on our planet.

So why am I cautiously optimistic about our future? Because the world has actually become more peaceful than ever before, despite the violence we see repeatedly on the evening news.

About ten thousand years ago, approximately one person in four died of violence. Today, worldwide, it is more like one person in 10,000.

I suggest reading Steven Pinker's book, The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined. Pinker presents a large amount of data (and statistical analysis) to demonstrate that violence has been in decline over millennia and that the present is probably the most peaceful time in the history of the human species. By the way, the book's title was taken from the ending of Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address. Pinker uses "better angels" as a metaphor for four

human motivations — empathy, self-control, the moral sense, and reason that can orient us away from violence and toward cooperation and altruism.

In my own lifetime, there have been tremendous advances in human rights. As we become more civilized, our world is getting more peaceful in nearly every way that can be measured, including instances of war, murder, child abuse, spousal abuse, racism, hatred of gays, animal cruelty, and other inflictions. A lot of these changes occurred in the 1960s when authoritarian and conservative religions lost some of their influence on society, and more individual rights emerged. Perhaps we have also become more peaceful because of the increased participation of women in the public domain. After all, violence is primarily (though certainly not exclusively) a male phenomenon.

And then there's the influence of religion. Whatever you believe about the accuracy of the Bible, its authors, who were a product of their times, condoned the kind of violence that would sicken most of us today. The Bible promotes stoning people to death for heresy, blasphemy, adultery, homosexuality, working on the Sabbath, worshipping graven images, practicing sorcery, and other imaginary crimes. Genocides are required by God. Child sacrifice and slavery are permitted. The punishment for rape is for the rapist to marry his victim and pay her father 50 sheckles because his daughter has become spoiled goods (Deut. 22:28). The 10th Commandment orders us not covet a neighbour's wife, slaves, oxen, or other property of the neighbour.

The Christian Bible does have some nice words, like loving your neighbour and doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. However, Christianity was a bizarre cult of sacrifice and crucifixion that led to the killing of millions in the name of Christianity, most notably by the Crusades, the Inquisition and the European Religious Wars of the 17th century. Adolph Hitler picked up on the anti-Semitism of Martin Luther as inspiration to promote a Holocaust, committed mostly by Christians.

The invention of the printing press enabled the spread of ideas about the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, with their sense of the basic equality for all human beings. This led to more widespread education and an ability for people to free themselves from parochial, prejudicial values. Different groups have successfully fought for their rights, nonviolently. Knowledge and education are primary to becoming a world where we can all be safe from violence. That's just one of the reasons I promote secular humanism.

There are obvious advantages of modern existence, with its lower rates of death in childbirth, modern medicine, longer human lifespan, and modern agriculture. Violence is much less socially acceptable than it used to be, and that unacceptability has come about as humans have developed civilization and sought ways to live together more peacefully. I'm hopeful that we can continue to rise above violence and find nonviolent solutions.

We live in a world more peaceful than at any previous time in human history, and the trend continues to point in an optimistic direction. That doesn't mean there won't be downward blips. There is no inevitability about peace. The Middle East is problematic and our current administration is not promoting world peace. But if we understand the mechanisms that tend to promote peaceful coexistence, then we can consciously choose courses of action that are more peace-promoting than peace-harming.

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

# Interview with Omer Tzuk – Founder and Editor, Humanist Magazine

# Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 19, 2019

<u>Omer Tzuk</u> is the Founder and Editor of Humanist Magazine and is a Ph.D. Student in the Physics Department at Ben Gurion University.

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

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

Omer Tzuk: I grew up in a suburb of Haifa, the third biggest city in Israel. My family is secular Jewish, but in Israel being secular is a very broad definition. So one can define himself a secular, or "hiloni" in Hebrew, but still believe in God and follow some religious traditions. My parents were not great believers, but they have never talked with us about their beliefs. So since I had few friends from religious families I since childhood, I was also a believer, and I was quite fascinated from religious rituals. I remember myself praying to God from quite a young age. It was only in my twenties that I've started to ponder about my beliefs and developed a more skeptical worldview. By the time I've started my first degree, which was in Astronomy, I started to introduce myself as an atheist or agnostic.

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

**Tzuk:** After I have finished the obligatory military service in Israel, I have started my studies in astronomy and astrophysics. As a child, I have watched the TV series Cosmos by Carl Sagan, and became fascinated by cosmology. I think that my first encounter with the ideas of the New Atheists was a video lecture of Richard Dawkins on TED. Since then I've read books by Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens.

# Jacobsen: What is the interest in physics for you? What is the doctoral research question? What are the preliminary findings or derivations?

**Tzuk:** For me studying cosmology was the first objective in enrolling to astrophysics studies for my first and second degree. I really wanted to understand better the theories over the structure and the dynamics of the Universe. But after the second degree, I have realized that there is this interdisciplinary field of study called complex systems, and I became very interested in following this direction. For my Ph.D. I have collaborated with ecologists on issues related to ecological systems in semiarid environments, asking questions related to their responses to climatic changes. So you can say that for my Ph.D. I haven't pursued a classical topic in physics, but rather a mixture between applied mathematics and theoretical ecology.

## Jacobsen: What is the origin story of Humanist Magazine?

**Tzuk:** Four years ago I started to discuss with several persons that I've met during the annual conference of the Israeli Atheists Association on creating a new website that will serve as an online magazine. At first, we thought that the name of the magazine would be Epicurus, since in Judaism Epicurus is taken as a synonym for atheist. But we have found out that there was already

a journal with the same name, addressing the secular humanists and atheists in Israel. Another consideration was that secular humanism is less known in Israel, and we thought it may draw more attention than another page on atheism (there are several big facebook groups for atheists in Israel). So we organized a founding team in which we discussed the scopes and guidelines of the magazine, and started to contact with people that we thought may be interested in contributing articles for the magazine. Since its beginning, our magazine was based on voluntary work. Along with sustaining the online magazine, we have also organized several gatherings in pubs in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, where we invited speakers to lecture on topics that are of interests for atheists, humanists, and freethinkers. The last addition to our activity was establishing an Instagram account where we publish quotes from various secular thinkers around the world.

## Jacobsen: Who have been important contributors and editors? What have been the most controversial, most read, and most interesting articles or submissions to it?

**Tzuk:** Our main support came from our voluntary editors: Sarit Hatuka, and Ron Gueta, Daniel, Ronit Nikolsky, and Geula Sheena. And we also have a marvelous translator, Shlomo Adam, who brings many interesting articles from around the world and translate them into Hebrew for our magazine.

The most controversial article on our site was one that I've written, titled "Religion and Other Brain Pathologies". I've compared between the case of Charles Whitman, a mass murderer that carried the University of Texas tower shooting, and the case of Baruch Goldstein, who carried the Cave of the Patriarchs massacre. Charles Whitman was diagnosed with a brain tumor postmortem. Baruch Goldstein wasn't diagnosed with any abnormal behaviour prior to the massacre, and we can safely assume that his behaviour was entirely supported by his religious beliefs. He was venerated by Meir Kahane, the ultra-nationalist, religious politician, which founded a park for his memory where he is buried. Thinking on religion as a brain pathology is very controversial idea in Israel. The percentage of religious people in Israel is very high, and none likes to think of himself as a carrier of some brain disease.

## Jacobsen: What is the editorial process for submissions to Humanist Magazine?

**Tzuk:** I receive the articles from our contributing writers, and check that they follow our guidelines. We try to be as apolitical as we can, something which is extremely challenging in Israel, and we strive that our articles would not include ad hominem arguments. Afterwards, I send the articles for professional editing and proofreading to our editorial team, and when they come back I publish them on our website. Other avenues would be that I, or someone else, would spot an interesting article in English, ask for permission to republish the article in Hebrew, and that translating the article to Hebrew by our translator.

## Jacobsen: As the Founder and the Editor of Humanist Magazine, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

**Tzuk:** Well... almost all of them. Since we have not succeeded yet in establishing some financial resources for our activity, the maintenance of the website and the other activity is solely based on my limited free time and the free time of the other members. We have tried to think of ways to create some income that can be used to hire a professional chief editor. We also dream to establish a non-profit non-governmental organization for supporting educational activity in

schools, where volunteers will come to schools to present the secular humanistic worldview, and the ideas of the enlightenment.

Jacobsen: If you could have one message for aspiring humanist writers, young and old, what would it be, for them?

**Tzuk:** My main message is to strive to create a local community, finding like-minded people is a very good start for establishing any kind of activity that aims for social change.

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?

**Tzuk:** The best aid that we could receive now is finding a team that can assist us in creating some sort of financial resources. We would also love to receive articles for our website, and if they fit our guidelines we will send them to translation and publish them on our website and Facebook page.

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

**Tzuk:** I think that creating such bridges between atheists and humanistic organizations and activists throughout the world is a very important pursuit.

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

Tzuk: Thank you Scott for the opportunity, and I wish you great success in your mission.

# Ask SASS 7 – Praise Be in Public Spaces, Please: OGOD, My God, No God, Please

# Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 20, 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. The whole SASS-y gang join us.

Here we talk about, well, variations on a theme.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's talk a little bit about the Secularist of the Year project. What was the cue for making one through SASS?

Jani Schoeman: Do you guys remember whose idea it was? I can't remember.

**Rick Raubenheimer:** *I don't. If memory serves, I think it was Jani's, but I stand to be corrected.* 

**Schoeman:** I think it was but I don't want to say it was me if it wasn't me. I thought that would be nice. I remember the first one we awarded was to Hans Pietersen. Scott, I'm not sure if you're familiar with Hans Pietersen and the OGOD organization?

Hans Pietersen is probably the head of the organization. It was a court case that was quite famous in South Africa that took place. I think it was two years ago. I don't want to lie.

Wynand Meijer: It was June 2017.

**Schoeman:** Yes. His organization took I think it was five or six public schools to court.

Raubenheimer: *It was six.*Schoeman: Was it six?

Raubenheimer: Yes.

**Schoeman:** I don't want to phrase this incorrectly. I don't know if one of you know exactly what the right term is of why they took those schools to court?

**Raubenheimer:** Essentially, they were contravening the Schools Act and regulations in terms of promoting a given religious view at their particular schools.

**Schoeman:** Yes, exactly.

**Raubenheimer:** For example, some of them would have religious symbols in their coat of arms or on their premises. They would say things like, "We promote the Christian ethos." That sort of thing.

**Schoeman:** Maybe have a Christian slogan or something like that.

**Raubenheimer:** And things like sectarian religious services at assembly and so on.

Schoeman: Yes.

Jacobsen: How prevalent was this, the intrusion of that?

**Schoeman:** It's still very prevalent, I think. The problem is that it was in what we call a "government school", which is like what you guys call a "public school". Because we have a secular constitution, that is technically not allowed. I don't know if the schools over there, if you have "assembly". That's something that some schools have every morning, where everybody gathers in a big hall. They do an opening for the day.

Jacobsen: Yes.

**Schoeman:** Sometimes they have it once a week. Some schools do it every day. For example, a lot of the schools will have a Bible reading and a prayer during assembly. There was this thing called "opt out" but then what are those other kids supposed to do that are not part of their religion and also, how fair is that on them if they are being told, "You must just stand outside if you don't want to take part."? What's that going to do in terms of the dynamic of bullying and all of that?

The court case was very interesting, and everything that it tied into. They ended up having mostly a win on that. That was the first person we gave the Secularist of the Year award to, when that court case was won.

I thought that it would be an excellent opportunity for someone to thank this person for what he did. I'm sure hundreds and thousands of kids were affected by it. I wanted to show appreciation for that and I thought an organization such as ours would be the kind of organization that should be awarding this person.

It was also, obviously, a good opportunity for us to get noticed and also cross-pollinate with other groups. This guy is based in the Western Cape Province. A lot of good things came from that.

Jacobsen: How are you going about deliberating who is worth an award for a year?

**Schoeman:** The first award we gave, I think I suggested this person and then we had a vote on it or something. This year we went about it differently. We had a whole nominations process. People submitted names and reasons why they nominated people for Secularist of the Year. Then we had a vote. The first time around, I don't remember exactly. Do one of you remember? Rick, do you remember?

**Raubenheimer:** A bit vaguely. This time we called for nominations. We had two, which were Jani and Dr. Patrick Pillay. Then we debated it at the annual general meeting and put it to the vote. It was then proposed that we split this and do an appreciation award for Jani and give the Secularist to the Year to Dr. Pillay.

**Schoeman:** Yes. I also nominated Dr. Pillay, along with one other person.

**Jacobsen: Why Doctor Pillay?** 

**Schoeman:** He stood out for me in terms of what he has done in the space of secularism in South Africa. We don't have a lot of people in this country who are known for secularism or doing something for secularism. When somebody like that comes up and stands out, you immediately notice them, I think.

Jacobsen: What kind of press can you get for giving out awards for Secularist of the Year in South Africa?

**Schoeman:** Not huge. [Laughing] I think everybody from our organization and from their organization – I'm talking about the first time around – did know about the award. It went all over Facebook. We did a blog about it, if I'm not mistaken. I don't think the press was interested; I don't know if they would have been interested in it. Did we make an attempt to try and get it more out there? I'm not sure.

Raubenheimer: Oh, yes.

Meijer: Yes, we did.

**Schoeman:** I think I remember now. We did actually try. It's not a huge amount of press that we

got from that.

Jacobsen: Are there other countries in Africa that actually will have a Secularist of the Year or a Humanist of the Year award?

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**Schoeman:** Not that I can think of, specifically. No, not that I'm aware of.

Jacobsen: In other words, this is one of the few, if not the only, Secularist of the Year

Award in Africa?

**Schoeman:** Could be. [Laughing] Yes, could be.

Jacobsen: For those who are in a context who want to found an award for a Secularist or Humanist, et cetera, of the Year, in their particular nation in Africa, what would be a recommendation for them? How should they go about doing it?

**Schoeman:** Wow. That's a good question. I don't know if someone else wants to have a go at that?

**Raubenheimer:** Considering that our attempt at it has been rather amateurish, it probably is not a good thing for people to try to learn from us.

Schoeman: [Laughing].

**Raubenheimer:** I think maybe come back to us in a few years' time, once we've got it going and the press is all raving about it; and we get front page news on the newspapers and first slot on the radio and TV news when we announce the Secularist of the Year. Then we'll have done it right.

Jacobsen: I think that'll be a good closing line for the session.

**Raubenheimer:** [Laughing].

Meijer: [Laughing].
Schoeman: [Laughing].

## Interview with Kirstine Kærn – Host, Babelfish; Member, Humanistisk Samfund

# Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 21, 2019

Kirstine Kærn is the Host of Babelfish, and a Member of Humanistisk Samfund.

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

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

**Kirstine Kærn:** After following the beaten path pursuing a career in the IT-business the last 20+ years I decided to turn my life around. I sold everything I owed last year, decided to travel the world and experience our planet. So I travel the world interviewing non-believers and share their life stories in my podcast Babelfish.

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

**Kærn:** 11 years ago I heard about the founding of Humanistisk Samfund and decided to join. I've never been religious nor a member of the Danish state church (75% of Danes are members of the protestant state church). Human rights and humanism have always been important to me, but besides sponsoring Amnesty I'd never considered being part of a humanist organization. I was a member for several years before I became active.

### Jacobsen: How did the Humanistisk Samfund start?

**Kærn:** Some members from the Danish Atheist Association wanted to establish ceremonies for non-believers. Since the atheist organization didn't want to support ceremonies they formed their own organization. We conduct humanist confirmations, weddings, name givings and funerals.

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

**Kærn:** We have approximately 1,800 members in Denmark where we are just below 6 million citizens. Most members are located in the big cities. The average age of members is high. I'm 48 and might be one of the young ones.

Two years ago an independent youth organization was formed (Unge Humanister).

## Jacobsen: What are your tasks and responsibilities in the Humanistisk Samfund?

**Kærn:** I'm member of the board and Vice President. My primary responsibilities is political activities, managing events and international relations.

## Jacobsen: What have been important social and political activities of the Humanistisk Samfund?

**Kærn:** Our ceremonies are very important. They are getting more and more popular, especially our confirmations. This means we have a huge task to secure enough celebrants and instructors receive training to cover the demand.

Politically we are fighting to get acknowledged by the government and getting our weddings legalized. This entails new legislation or changing the existing laws. Only faith communities can be acknowledges in the current legislation. We hope to achieve this within the next 1 or 2 years.

Every year we participate in a political rally for politicians, NGOs and other on one of the Danish islands Bornholm. Almost 100.000 people visit and it is the best opportunity to meet many politicians and other organizations in very few days. We usually plan a lot of debates with politicians and experts.

Last year we established a secular ceremony for the opening of the Danish parliament in October. Normally the politicians are invited to join a sermon in the state church before the opening celebrations. The ceremony was a success and we have decided to do it every year.

Our local groups plan a lot of different debates and other activities such a celebrating summer solstice.

### Jacobsen: What are some new projects for the Humanistisk Samfund?

**Kærn:** We have just hired a new halftime employee. She will be responsible for the volunteers, a new training program and looking into fundraising. We get more and more members and we must secure the organization can grow accordingly, while securing the best quality of our services and the support of the political activities.

We continue the work for acknowledgment. We already have a couple who wants to be the first legal humanist wedding.

Another project is our educational system. The state church has a lot of privileges in our schools which we want to remove. Our children are taught the subject Christianity, where the primary focus is Protestantism even though the curriculum also requires knowledge of other religions. We want to change the subject to be about Philosophy and Ethics instead.

And then we off course will start planning the Humanist World Congress in Copenhagen in 2023 together we the other Nordic humanist organization. We look forward to see everybody in wonderful Copenhagen.

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

**Kærn:** Our President Lone Ree Milkaer.

Jacobsen: What are other important organizations in the area?

**Kærn:** The Danish Atheist Association. We also corporate with faith communities regarding the secular agenda. Due to our state church several faith communities are also pushing a secular agenda.

### Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the Humanistisk Samfund?

**Kærn:** Besides being a member there are many options. You can become a celebrant, an instructor on our humanist confirmation weekend camps, local activist arranging debates and much more.

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

**Kærn:** I've been so lucky to be part of an organization which is growing stronger every day. We have had many success stories the last 11 years. It shows that it is possible to change the world even though it requires a lot of work to change peoples minds.

I look forward to meet a lot of humanists in different countries over the next year. I look forward to welcome everybody in Copenhagen in 2023.

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

# Interview with Esa Ylikoski – Secretary, The Union of Freethinkers of Finland

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 22, 2019

Esa Ylikoski is the Secretary of The Union of Freethinkers of Finland.

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

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

**Esa Ylikoski:** I was born early 1950's in Pori, west coast of Finland. My mother was a member of Evangelical Lutheran Church, but not religious, and my father, carpenter, was an atheist. We did not take part in church services. However, I participate in religious teaching in school.

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

**Ylikoski:** After high school and army service I started to study in Turku university history, sociology, education and communication. After BA and pedagogical qualification, I worked as a teacher in secondary school. Later, after MA, I worked in high school and adult education college. In the 2000s, I worked in Humak University of Applied Sciences as a senior lecturer and manager of research, development and innovation. Updating training has been part of work life.

All the time, started high school time, I have taken part in voluntary activities of many social and political organizations. It means numerous seminars, courses and discussions. And self-studies. Between study years I worked also as a professional organizational secretary in two periods. During the pedagogical era, I have been voluntary work activist also, for example, in community broadcasting and citizens radio station.

Jacobsen: As the Secretary of The Union of Freethinkers of Finland, you have a unique view of the daily operation of the union. What are the internal operations of the union? How is the professional rapport amongst staff and the board? What tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

**Ylikoski:** Unfortunately, we have not professional, salaried secretary t this time. General Secretary and Chairman are volunteering tasks. In any way, we do much and have much to do.

First, we are human right, interest and advocacy organization.

Second, we promote secular culture and ceremonies for naming of babies, funerals and wedding. Third, we promote in our communication for science based world view, critical and rational thinking and humanist ethic and life stance.

We have some working groups in our organization. The role of Secretary is coordinate and also prepare and carry out decisions of the board. We try to lobby and have impact and influence on the political level. And our local – or county wide – associations try to have influence in local levels.

Jacobsen: For who do not know, the educational system in Finland is admirable and high-performing. How does this benefit the secular and freethinker culture & community?

**Ylikoski:** Yes, it is important, that preschools, schools, high schools, vocational schools and also universities of applied sciences and universities of sciences are free of charge. Also, teachers are in high quality and motivation, and salaries are neither low and high. However, religion has too big of a role at schools as a subject and by traditional manners connected to the Church.

## Jacobsen: What are the demographics of The Union of Freethinkers of Finland?

**Ylikoski:** We have 20 local/areal/county associations, and they have about 1400 personal members. Biggest of them is in the capital area.

## Jacobsen: What are some social and communal activities of The Union of Freethinkers of Finland?

**Ylikoski:** First, we are human right, interest and advocacy organization. We work for equality and freedom of religion and thought in political level and basic level. We work against unfair privileges of the state church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland. The situation in school is not ok, because the preference of religion teaching and confessional church services and morning assembly during school days. We promote life stance ethics as a subject.

Second, we promote secular culture and ceremonies for the naming of babies, funerals and wedding. We have together with some other secular organizations a Service center "Pro-Seremoniat" serving speakers and music for different civil ceremonies. Additional, many local associations of The Union of Freethinkers all over Finland have speakers and other services. And 10 local associations have also a graveyard of their own.

Third, we promote in our communication for science-based world view, critical and rational thinking and humanist ethic and life stance. We have the magazine "Vapaa Ajattelija", the main internet page and some others, Facebook site and groups and e-mail lists etc.

We are a member of Humanists International and the European Humanist Federation. We have also special co-operation with Nordic member organizations of them.

## Jacobsen: Any recommended authors, speakers, or organizations doing similar work to The Union of Freethinkers of Finland?

**Ylikoski:** We work together with Humanist Union of Finland, Prometheus Camp Association (https://www.protu.fi/english) and Pro-Seremoniat.

## Jacobsen: What have been important developments in 2019 for The Union of Freethinkers of Finland?

**Ylikoski:** We continue political lobbying work, although the government programme of new government 2019 don't promise much as to our agenda. We continue promoting the Service to Leave Church membership (<a href="https://www.eroakirkosta.fi">https://www.eroakirkosta.fi</a>), which has been used by about 700 000 persons for leave State Church membership. Church membership rate is now 69,7 %.

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?

**Ylikoski:** Membership fee is only 25 EUR/year. It's possible to join us by internet site of the Union (<a href="http://vapaa-ajattelijat.fi/liity-jaseneksi/">http://vapaa-ajattelijat.fi/liity-jaseneksi/</a>). Donations are welcome and can give by Bank account: FI14 5542 2320 3638 64, BIC OKOYFIHH. We have also special web-page Freedom

of Religion (unfortunately only in Finnish <a href="https://uskonnonvapaus.fi/">https://uskonnonvapaus.fi/</a>), but we are interested to make it also in English.

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

**Ylikoski:** It's nice, fruitful and important to work for secularism, human rights and democracy connected internationally. I am sorry that my English is too poor to express it all.

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

Ylikoski: Thank you, Scott, and I hope all the best for readers.

# Ask Herb 12 – 'Secular' Atrocities: Atrocious Views of the Secular

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 23, 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 religious and secular debates, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: If we look into the contexts of the presentation of religious and secular debates, something akin to Godwin's Law or reductio ad Hitlerum – perhaps, a reductio ad paganus (reduction to heathen) – tends to emerge, where the secular or non-religious debater's arguments cannot be defeated, or will not be engaged, and then the religious debater shifts from the logical, philosophical, and scientific into the personal, the emotional, and the historical with an emphasis on assertions about secular, even atheist, totalitarian regimes or autocrats committing atrocities. Those take the place of the previous points of the argument. This happens in sophisticated, educated, and intelligent circles, and in spheres in which none of those three traits exist in unison or alone. Any shorthand retort for this rhetorical flourish or alteration of frame for winning over the crowd rather than the argument in a formal debate? Any recommendation for those who do not spend most of their time thinking about these topics? A shorthand retort and a recommendation, or set of them, designed to bring the debate or the casual conversation into the realm of reasonable discourse of logical argumentation, philosophical dialogue, and scientific analysis rather than personal attacks, emotional appeals, and historical misrepresentation.

**Herb Silverman:** I've debated many fundamentalist Christian ministers, and it's often the first time that members of a mostly Christian audience get to hear an atheist point of view from an atheist, rather than from their Christian minister.

Many atheists, myself included, have been overly optimistic that rational arguments will change minds. I've since learned that you can't reason someone out of a belief that he or she didn't find unreasonable through reason. I now think the best we can do is make good points in a reasonable and pleasant manner. I emphasize "pleasant" because many in the audience are affected more by the debater's personality than by arguments. This was difficult for me to understand at first, since it's so different from my world of mathematics, where smiling and a sense of humor are useless. I look for opportunities to change atheist stereotypes and to raise questions some Christians may never have considered.

It helps in debates or discussions to treat your opponent and audience with kindness and respect. Assume they believe what they say, even if it sounds like nonsense. If my opponent makes personal attacks, I just ignore them. I acknowledge that there have been bad atheistic regimes, and also point out that most wars have been over religion. While atheists usually want me to bash religion, I try not to do too much of that because I want to reach open-minded Christians. Most conservative Christians are skeptical of whatever I say in a debate. The best I usually hear from them afterward is, "The atheist seemed like a nice person, even though he's going to hell."

I also like to praise the Bible, mentioning that every educated person should read the Bible (the only time I get cheers from conservative Christians) because it's an important part of our culture.

I also provide a list of other books for audience members to read, which includes A Demon Haunted World by Carl Sagan, Who Wrote the Bible by Richard Friedman, Why I Am Not a Christian by Bertrand Russel, and books by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, among others.

Now here are some of my responses to questions I hear from my debate opponent or the audience.

Why do you hate God? I don't hate God any more than I hate the Tooth Fairy, and most of us didn't become atheists because something bad happened to us. We became atheists because we find no evidence for any gods.

Don't you know that you'll become a believer when you have a big problem? This is an offshoot of the "no atheists in foxholes" cliché. Check out the organization Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers. Atheists tend to address problems by looking for practical solutions to resolve them, and through supportive friends, family, and medical doctors. Many believers "talk" to God only when they have a problem, so such a comment is more applicable to theists than to atheists.

Do you see that I feel sorry for you because you don't believe there is a purpose to life? Atheists don't feel sorry for themselves, nor do they feel deprived of something real. We don't need to believe in God to find joy in our lives. There may not be a purpose of life, but we find many purposes in life. And by the way, how would you feel if an atheist said he feels sorry for you because he thinks you are basing your life on nonsense? And would a Christian tell a Jew that he feels sorry for him?

If there is no God, what responsibility do we have to be moral? Personal responsibility is a good conservative principle. We should not give credit to a deity for our accomplishments or blame satanic forces when we behave badly. We should take personal responsibility for our actions. I try to live my life to its fullest — it's the only life I have, and I hope to make a positive difference because it's the right thing to do, not because of future rewards or punishment.

How can you be moral without God? You must feel like you can rape and murder and do whatever you think you can get away with. With an attitude like that, I hope that you continue to believe in God. (Alternatively, I sometimes say that I do rape and murder as many people as I want to. Zero.) I often ask the questioner how he or she would behave differently if they stopped believing in God. One minister thought for a minute, and said: "I'm sometimes tempted by other women, but I don't cheat on my wife because of my love of Jesus, knowing how much it would hurt Jesus." I responded that I don't cheat because of my love for my wife Sharon. (I think even the minister's wife preferred my answer.)

Why are atheists so arrogant? Which of these worldviews sounds more arrogant? Worldview 1: I know God created the entire universe just for the benefit of humans. He watches me constantly and cares about everything I say and do. I know how He wants me and everyone else to behave and believe. He is perfect and just, which is why we face an eternity of either bliss or torture, depending on whether or not we believe in Him.

Worldview 2: We're the product of millions of years of evolution. Most species are extinct, as humans will eventually be. I hope to make a positive difference because it's the right thing to do, not because of future rewards or punishments in an afterlife. When I don't know something, which is often, I say, "I don't know.

Why do you think science is more reliable than religion? Because we know how to distinguish good scientific ideas from bad ones. Scientists start out not knowing the answer and go wherever the evidence leads them. Science relies on experimenting, testing, and questioning assumptions critically until a consensus is reached, and even that is always open to revision in light of later evidence. This is why scientific truths are the same in Pakistan, the United States, Israel, and India — countries with very different religious beliefs.

I became a Christian because I know it's true. How do you think we should distinguish good religious beliefs from bad ones? As it turns out, there's a remarkable coincidence to how people choose their religion. The overwhelming majority chooses the religion of their parents. Most Asians are Buddhists, people from India are generally Hindu, Saudi Arabians are Muslims, and Americans are mainly Christians. Religious belief is based more on geography than on theology. With all the conflicting religious beliefs in the world, they can't all be right. But they can all be wrong.

Wouldn't it be safer to become a believer in case there is a heaven and hell? This is a form of Pascal's Wager. You assume that the only existing god would be your Christian version—one who rewards believers with eternal bliss and punishes nonbelievers with eternal damnation. Moreover, it would either be a god who could not distinguish between genuine and feigned belief, or one who rewards hypocrites for pretending a faith that they lack. Suppose I posit the existence of a creator who cares about human beings and elects to spend an eternity with a chosen few. What selection criteria would such a supreme being adopt? I expect this divine scientist would prefer a "personal relationship" with intelligent, honest, rational people who require evidence before holding a belief. Such a superior intellect would presumably be bored by and want little contact with humans who so confidently draw unwarranted conclusions about his unproved existence, and believe only on blind faith.

Don't you at least worry that heaven and hell are real and that you will be going to hell? Here are some questions I have for you about heaven and hell. Why is faith not only important, but perhaps the deciding factor about who winds up in heaven or hell? What moral purpose does eternal torture serve? If we have free will on earth, will we have free will in heaven? If so, might we sin and go from heaven to hell? If not, will we be heavenly robots? If God can make us sinless in heaven, why didn't he create us sinless on earth? Can you be blissfully happy in heaven knowing that some of your loved ones are being tortured in hell? And what do you do for an eternity in heaven without getting bored? Wouldn't a loving God who wants us all to go to heaven make it unambiguously clear how to get there?

Christians, let alone those of other faiths and none, disagree about what to believe or do. My wish is for believers and nonbelievers to focus on helping their fellow human beings and treating them with respect and compassion. I believe that my afterlife will consist of the repercussions of any good works I have done that survive after my death. I expect my body parts will go neither to heaven nor hell, but to medical school, just where my Jewish mother wanted me to go. I will then feel much like I did before I was born, which was not the least unpleasant.

I understand that few will change their worldviews because of a debate. Those who "feel" the presence of Jesus in their lives and see his miracles on a regular basis will not be swayed by scientific evidence or biblical contradictions. However, some Christians might become less inclined to stereotype atheists, and some Christians and atheists might get to know one another

and find wave to a	congrate on issues of importance to both their community	ties Whenever that	
and find ways to cooperate on issues of importance to both their communities. Whenever that happens, I consider it to have been a win-win debate.			
Jacobsen: Thank	you for the opportunity and your time, Herb.		

#### Interview with Paul Kaufman – Chair, East London Humanists

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 24, 2019

Paul Kaufman is the Chair of East London Humanists.

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

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

**Paul Kaufman:** My grandparents, who I barely knew, were strictly orthodox Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. My parents rejected religious belief at an early age, although my Dad was bar mitzvahed and was exceptionally well-versed in Hebrew and religious texts. My parents left school at 14. My two sisters and I were brought up in East London without any religious faith. We all absorbed our parents' strong ethical values, including belief in the importance of social justice, and the importance of actively campaigning for it, and the importance of learning and critical questioning.

In short, my parents were Humanists, although it was not a term they would have used. I only came to adopt the term Humanist for myself in middle age when it first appeared on my radar. I often refer to my upbringing and my family when giving school talks to illustrate the simple truth that you do not have to be religious to be good, or to lead a good and meaningful life.

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

**Kaufman:** My sisters and I were the first generation in the family to have the benefit of a university education. We have all enjoyed professional careers. I qualified as a lawyer, and still practice as a criminal trial advocate in the higher courts in and around London. We all strongly believe in the importance of self-education and life-long learning, and have wide-ranging and eclectic interests.

Following in my dad's footsteps, I think it's important to be familiar with religious texts from all the principal religions in order to have insight into the beliefs of others and to be able to engage in dialogue from a position of knowledge.

Self-education for me takes many forms – reading books and journals, watching TV, attending talks and lectures, visiting museums and galleries, etc. etc. I have become increasingly aware of the importance of stepping outside my 'bubble.' I, therefore, spend time exploring the internet and the views of conspiracy theorists, racists, anti-scientists etc. to gain insight into the extraordinary range of alternative, and often abhorrent, world views. Similarly, I try to read news and commentary from across the political spectrum. I also strongly believe in the value of face to face dialogue. Much can be learnt through talking to as wide a range of people as possible, and not just one's own social cohort.

Jacobsen: As the Chair of East London Humanists, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

**Kaufman:** Our group was founded in 2012 and now has over 750 supporters. The intention from the outset was to keep arrangements as informal as possible. There is a small committee which meets quarterly, but admin is kept to a minimum and we simply aim to do what we can do without 'beating ourselves up' if we don\t manage to do everything we would like. My responsibilities include keeping our website up to date, assisting the organisation of our regular meetings, and posting them on the group's Meetup website, and co-ordinating the work of the group generally.

Having a locally-based group creates a 'go to' focal point for a range of local interests. These include local media, local government, schools etc. My responsibilities include fielding a wide range of enquiries and requests. For example, I write a regular opinion column on behalf of the group for newspapers in three East London Boroughs (each Borough has a population of approx 1/4 million plus). I speak regularly to schools around East London, participate in various multifaith' forums, and have spoken at armistice day commemorations as the non-religious representative.

I do of course chair meetings if required from time to time, but it is important as an egalitarian organisation that other committee members take turns at this, so it is perhaps the least important of my roles.

### Jacobsen: Who has been opposition to the secular and human rights interests of the East London Humanists?

**Kaufman:** I would say that the biggest challenges are around education. There has been a proliferation of what are usually referred to here as faith schools, or religious schools as some of us prefer to call them. These are divisive and discriminatory. The Government recently announced plans for two new such schools (one Hindu, one Muslim) in the London Borough or Redbridge, which is where our group meets. Our group is spearheading a campaign against these proposals. There are also issues around the teaching of sex education and equality in some schools where religious views hold sway.

There has been much controversy in other parts of the UK, particularly Birmingham, over the teaching of a new curriculum called 'No outsiders in our school.' Conservative religious groups object to the content on homosexuality and transgender issues, notwithstanding it is age-appropriate. East London has a high concentration of religious conservatives, and our group has taken steps to address the likelihood of similar problems arising here.

There is generally resistance in many schools to teaching about non-religious belief. There have been important breakthroughs in this area, particularly in the last year. I have led several school assemblies each with several hundred children in the last few months. However, this represents a small minority of schools and has depended upon invitations from enlightened staff. There is a very long way to go before the teaching of non-religious beliefs becomes part of every school's normal curriculum.

Jacobsen: In the public, social and political, arena, what have been real successes and honest failures of the East London Humanists? How can other groups learn from the failures and build on the successes?

**Kaufman:** Our group 'punches above its weight' and has definitely raised the profile of Humanism and the importance of secularism and the values of the non-religious in this area of London. A lot of activity has been undertaken over a wide range of areas in the seven years since

we were founded. But we are under no illusions about how much further there is to go. The catchment area consists of several million people, and we are but a drop in the ocean.

There have been no spectacular failures. Of course, there have been disappointments, for example lack of turn-out for certain events or requests for support. But this should not be viewed negatively. A meeting with a small turn-out can be seen as an opportunity for a more in-depth discussion with greater participation. The 'virtual' footprint is at least as important, so details of any event and the outcome should be published through social media.

Perhaps the two biggest failings so far, which are perhaps linked, has been attracting, and then retaining, younger supporters, and raising the group's profile on certain social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. This remains work in progress.

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

**Kaufman:** The group holds meetings on a very wide range of subjects. Different topics attract different audiences. Some of the most interesting and popular we have held in the recent past include: Helen Pankhurst, a member of the famous Pankhurst dynasty (her grandmother Sylvia lived in East London), and a prominent activist in today's struggle for female equality, talking about her book 'Deeds not words;' Dr Anthony Lempert, from the Medical Secular Forum, talking about ritual (ie religious non-therapeutic) genital cutting; Dr Giovanni Gaetani, Growth and Development Officer for Humanists International, reporting back from the Humanists International Congress in Reykavik in June.

### Jacobsen: What are some important developments of the East London Humanists into the rest of 2019 and 2020?

**Kaufman:** The group has a fascinating and diverse programme of events for the rest of this year. Topics include: A meeting to celebrate London Pride, and to support a local Pride event; A talk and discussion on the definition of Anti-Semitism and the risk of conflation with Anti-Zionism; A lecture 'How to be an atheist in Medieval Europe' which looks at the long and often overlooked history of 'non-believers.'

The group will continue with campaigning work in several areas, including faith schools and inclusive education and against anti-science and human-caused climate change denial. In the longer run, the group aspires to do more to contribute towards the development of pastoral care for the non-religious in local hospitals and other institutions.

### Jacobsen: What have been the single most important pivotal moments in the history of the growth of the East London Humanists?

Kaufman: Perhaps to state the obvious, the most important moment was acting on the decision to start a group where none had existed before. A small handful of us decided to grasp the nettle. I regard the very fact of our existence a major win, and the fact we have continued to grow an added bonus. We are in competition with a huge number of different groups which are attractive to the socially aware, from choirs to book clubs, political parties to campaigning groups of all types. Landmarks have included developing our website, then a Facebook page and Twitter, building a presence on Meetup, being invited to write for the local press, and winning participation in all the SACRES (Standing Advisory Committees for Religious Education) in East London, the local authority groups responsible for the religious curriculum in state schools.

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?

**Kaufman:** As I've said, the group strives to be as informal and as welcoming as possible. Anyone who wishes to join us is welcome to do so, provided they live locally and share our ethos. There are many ways any individual can contribute. This includes writing articles, supporting our campaigns, joining us on marches and social events, supporting our stalls at local fairs, and helping with our meetings. We are self-funding (we describe ourselves as a non-prophet organisation!) and any financial contribution is always welcome.

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

**Kaufman:** I am a child of the fifties and sixties, and grew up in a time of optimism and belief the world was moving slowly but surely towards a more rational and a fairer society. I no longer regard that as a given. I decided a few years to 'nail my colours to the mast' and joined the growing movement of organised Humanists and freethinkers. I am reminded each day just how important it is to be proactive and just how easily our long fought-for values and freedoms can be reversed.

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

# Interview with Don Wharton – Head, Washington, D.C. Atheist MeetUp; Member, Washington Area Secular Humanists

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 25, 2019

**Don Wharton** is the Head of the Washington, D.C. Atheist MeetUp & a Member of the Washington Area Secular Humanists.

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did the organization [Washington DC Area Coalition of Reason] start?

**Don Wharton:** There was a need to create a community within the more secular organizations in the DC region. I cannot say that on the whole, it has been hugely successful, but we're now organized as a subset of the Secular Coalition for America. They lobby Congress a lot. They want to have secular lobbying groups in every state. There is a nationwide coalition of secular organizations that fund it. It is extremely effective at mobilizing secular organizations and people. So, I am proud that they were advancing in that area.

Jacobsen: In terms of your own personal background, how did you become involved with this, the formal secular community and activism?

**Wharton:** To some extent, because I wanted to have a social community of people for myself. I first got associated with the Washington Ethical Society of all things, which is a religious liberal group. It was founded by Felix Adler, an ex-Jewish atheist in New York.

It got to the point where I decided I couldn't stay with WES. There would be people that would say, "Atheism is just another form of fundamentalism." I moved over to our side once I found the Washington Area Secular Humanists. It is a much more secular organization where most of the people were explicitly and not ambiguously atheistic. Although, they had a strong preference for secular humanism in their name. I made friends with people there. It turns out that one of my friends happened to be on the board of directors. I got sucked into the board of directors of the Washington Area Secular Humanists. I never explicitly sought to be a leader, but it was hanging around people and the fact of the matter is if you care about the people that you are friends with; this is a type of thing that can happen.

In terms of the DC Secular Coalition of Reason, I was a techie. Shelly Mountjoy got selected to lead it and she wanted to have a webmaster. So, I became the webmaster for her. She was an extremely effective leader. She put a huge amount of time in the networking with people and adding organizations to the structure. I was pleased to update our web pages as she did all of these tasks. Mary Bellamy took over as Organizer after Shelly left. It was an accident that I became the leader of the overall thing when Mary left. Mary did not have anyone else that had any vision or leadership qualities to do anything with it. Frankly, I was more of a techie and I did little more than add some organizations to the web page as I got them to agree to be added.

Samantha McGuire is the current president of the Washington Area Secular Humanists. She engaged with the DC CoR organizations to create a regional conference of our organizations.

Now, I am pleased with this effort to have a deeper feeling of connectedness with the people who are member organizations in this region.

Jacobsen: If you are looking at important allies working on your relatively coordinated goals in 2019, two things follow from that for me. One, what goals do you deem most important in the current administration for 2019? What allies are most salient for that?

**Wharton:** Oh, that is a big, big, big question. Now with secular lobbying, one of the major things is separation of church and state. There were so many efforts in place to take away the rights of nonbelievers, and to try to impose a theocratic spin on the nature of what governance should be. The God segment of the population and their organizing groups are the nasty edge of religion seeking to control sexuality.

Of course, feminist activists fight for choice. It is a major area where the bureaucrats wanted to take away the rights of people. We have major allies among feminist leaders that are trying to maintain the rights and respect for women.

The attempt to take away those rights is something almost all of us passionately disagree with. You certainly do not allocate reproductive rights to men who then approve or disapproved of reproductive choices for women irrespective of their desires.

Jacobsen: If you are looking at the cabinet appointments, if you are looking at Roe V Wade from 1973 in the United States, what are threats to those, given what you said?

Wharton: The methodology of the right wing has been largely to regulate centres that provide choice, especially for the impoverished women. That is where the issue becomes paramount. The relatively rich are always going to have choice. Others will have the choice pushed off the shelf if they get rid of Roe V Wade in this country and outlaw abortion. The rich will fly overseas and find a place where they can exercise choices as they wish. It is always going to be those who do not have that travel option, who do not have the resources. Planned Parenthood, one of our past presidents for the Washington Area Secular Humanists was the leader of Maryland Planned Parenthood. They decided secular groups were their ally in maintaining the reproductive choices for women. They were correct.

Of course, that is an alliance we care about. A major part of the battle entails dealing with absurd regulations such mandating the width of the hallways. Planned Parenthood provides abortion services. In terms of the actual number of medical services delivered it is an extremely tiny part of it. Things like cancer screenings and contraception services are the routine but necessary services provided. Things other than abortion are the vast majority of what they do. If you want to prevent abortions, one of the major things that you do is give people contraceptives. So, they can keep from having to abort undesired foetuses under inappropriate circumstances. There have been incredibly nasty fights in so many areas where the right-wing achieves a majority of the power.

Fortunately for Canada, you do not have anywhere near this social contention, visceral fight about who supports choice then being deemed to be a murderer. They see it as the murder of little babies, which is what they call it. It was one of the most appalling misstatements of facts. If you do not have cognition, you are not a participant in the society. There is no person there to have a preference one way or another about outcomes. It is only after you are born that you interact. There is social engagement. Only then is citizenship relevant and its rights validly considered at all. Is my passion of opinion on that point clear?

Jacobsen: Are there any other topic areas that you would like to cover that we haven't so far?

Wharton: I presume there are probably tons of them. Religion saturates so much of society. One of the things I do in my discussion group is make time to support group members with their personal conflicts over religion. Many family networks have extreme bigotry against anyone who does not believe in the ghostly spirits described in some 'holy book.' If you do not have this belief it is deemed to be moral negligence. I have a friend who had to say to his mother, "I divorce you. I want nothing to do with you. I can't see you. You are abusive to me." It was required because she did not approve of who he was; because in large part, he became an atheist, and she remained religious.

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

Wharton: Yes! A real pleasure.

# Interview for Kiketha Tadeo – Director, Kyangende Secular Services

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 26, 2019

**Kiketha Tadeo** is the Director of the Kyangende Secular Services.

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

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

**Kiketha Tadeo:** I was born and brought up in Kibalya village, Nyamisule parish, Mahango subcounty, Kasese, Uganda. I am Mukonzo by tribe. I speak Lukonzo, English, and some Kiswahili languages.

My father is Kimasu Andrea and my mother is Balhubasa yeresi all stay on the hills of kasese town where they perform their peasantry activities. My elders believed in differently for example my grandfather died before the coming of missionaries and used his own way either in African tradition gods, my father is one of those who welcomed and promoted roman catholic church in our village ad encouraged us a lot join Christianity which has not been true and fair to him that some of us don't follow, however he also failed to fulfill the laws of the church since he found himself with three wives my mother being the third. Being in polygamous family with my children there has been a lot of struggle and many challenges as poverty was the order of the day leading us have low levels of education in the family as the determined child and hardworking would look for his or her part tuition and then the parent would add if possible, I moved long distance to school, stayed hungry at school and all in all I did not give up, I realized that my father had no job and join poor institutions which were the churches that failed to improve his life.

#### Jacobsen: What level of formal education have been part of life for you?

**Tadeo:** I finish primary at kibalya primary school, joined o'level at St. Kizito Secondary School and Kyrumba Islamic Center due to lack of tuition led change of schools, later went for certificate in purchasing and supply management at Liberty College Kasese, after a long time stay at home without job I joined diploma in accountancy which I finish recently.

#### Jacobsen: How you informally self-educated?

**Tadeo:** Through personal intelligence, reason that help me to find solutions to my problems. I was too much determined and used to seeing things in their real sense and suggest the right measures available with me.

Jacobsen: What organizations are important for the health and wellness and communal activities and activism, of the secular and humanistic communities in Uganda?

**Tadeo:** Abrimac Secular Services, Kasese Humanist Schools and Pearls Vocational Institute are the institutions that talk about secularism and working for humanistic life.

Jacobsen: What is the state of secularism in Uganda?

**Tadeo:** Secularism is still being defined and introduced as it facing a lot of religious barriers and much indoctrinations and high levels of superstition and they turn and miss inform the public by announcing us evil people in order to create fear however the due to the efforts evidenced by doing in communities in looked as good pavement and bring good change.

Jacobsen: What are some important parts of secular activism there? Some old news and some new activisms with import to an international audience.

**Tadeo:** Secular activism is done in areas of education ,promoting culture, supporting good politics, improving health of the people, supporting good economic systems that can transform people's lives including capacity building like I form the Kyangende secular community and I started helping people with food, mosquito nets and drugs, give clothes to children, Activism was previously done by recognized professionals like lawyer who would take the cases in court against certain issues, human right activists organizations in Uganda and many of which operated in big towns, currently activism all about reaching the grass root and identify the real situation faced by the locals in their communities explaining the reason and giving strategies having turning local communities better homes for all people to live joyfully.

Jacobsen: Who are some interesting public intellectuals speaking for free thought and secular community in Uganda?

**Tadeo:** We have Kato Mukasa who is a lawyer, Bwambale Robert, and Masereka Solomon, Director Abrimac Secular Services.

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 interview or writing articles and so on with the Uganda free thought communities and organizations?

**Tadeo:** People can participate in our activities by volunteering in our community activities, coordinating us to international partners and organizations that work toward promoting goo humanity through our Kyangende secular services Facebook pages, groups and Abrimac page or website.

Communicating to friends and organizing fundraiser for items that can help to keep our activities moving.

Writing good and publishing articles about our secular activities on Facebook and other sites that can help people identify our motives.

Mobilizing for international reorganization and respect and security of individual's organizations that work toward promoting secularism.

Lobbying for stable.

Individual or organizations that are assured of for the provision facilities and support secular programs in order to capture trust in the public and build a strong bases.

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

**Tadeo:** I am glad to share with you and have my aids about my activities as I am the Director Kyangende Secular Services. I wish that all organizations and individuals doing secularism work in Uganda be trustworthy and be good examples to the public so that we shouldn't be regard as evil people and this will enable all communities understand our vision.

Jacobsen: Thank you for t	the opportunity and vo	our time, Kiketha.		
Tadeo: Thank you for your			aluku Tadeo.	
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### Interview with Kamugasha Louis – Executive Director, Freedom Center-Uganda

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 27, 2019

Kamugasha Louis is the Executive Director of the Freedom Center-Uganda.

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

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

**Kamugasha Louis:** I'm Kamugasha Louis, am born in Uganda (East Africa), am currently the Executive Director of Freedom Center-Uganda a Humanist/Atheist charity organization in Mbarara District. My culture is shaped by African beliefs and practices. I was born in a catholic family with my grandparents being among the early catechist and supporter of the Catholic religion. I have studied up to the university level. I am informally married to a Humanist woman with 2 kids.

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

**Louis:** I have studied up to university with a degree in human resource. I have always loved research and my interest has been in psychology (human programming), the African mind, evolution, and universal consciousness.

Jacobsen: How did you become involved in the Freedom Centre-Uganda?

Louis: In 2004 while a student, I questioned the relevance of religion and power relations among people in a given society. These questions were amplified by watching a movie called The Matrix which enlightened me to deeply question and started coming up with some answers that led self-awareness. In 2013 I started an organization called Youth Fraternity for Change to empower the youth to critically question different issues in the community and find logical solutions. In 2017 the need for Humanist and Atheist organization was very wanting after many people become aware of the right to freedom of worship, conscious and Humanism and Atheism concepts, its from that background that Freedom Centre-Uganda was born in Mbarara District as a Humanist and Atheist charity organization to give a platform to free thinkers to advance their life stance and contribute to society's development through charity works eg human rights promotion and promotion and support education of vulnerable children

Jacobsen: Why, and how, did the Freedom Centre-Uganda start? What have been important stages in its general development?

**Louis:** Freedom Centre-Uganda started formally in January 2018 with 20 members as founder members, we registered FC in March 2018 with Mbarara District, we have mobilized all free thinkers in the sub-region and trained them in Humanism and Atheism and human rights. In October 2018 we officially became a full member of Humanist International in the UK this was an important stage in the development of FC-Uganda, and also FC became a member of Uganda Humanist Association. In Feb 2019 FC held the first Humanist café in Mbarara supported by Humanist International and 45 non-religious people attended the café. The theme of the café

was Advancing critical thinking to break blind beliefs. This was also an important stage in FC-Uganda's development.

Jacobsen: When we look at the ways in which the world of secularism and freethought have developed in Ugandan society, in general, what have been important stages? What are the important next steps?

**Louis:** The constitution of Uganda adopted a non-state religion and this has been an important stage in developing a secular environment. The formation of Uganda Humanist Association has brought together all freethinkers together to advance their rights. the media has become instrumental in exposing fake and exploitative religious leader (pastors), this has made many people question religion thus opening up for secularism.

Jacobsen: Who are important and outspoken voices for secularism and freethought in Uganda? How can international community members learn more about them?

Louis: Uganda has leaders of different Humanist and Atheist organizations who have been instrumental in voicing secularism these include Kato Mukasa, professor Macho, professor Kaihurankuba and others. There is a need to organize experience and learning events were international community member can learn more about secularism in Uganda. We need to have a platform where our work can be shared for all people all over the world to see and learn. Also, international conferences can be organized to give Ugandan Humanist to share their experiences.

Jacobsen: When we look at the landscape of literature and online media, what have been, or could be, important outlets for Ugandan freethinkers?

**Louis:** We need a free thinker's community library where literature can be found and accessed by the free thinkers and members of the community. We also need a general website where all information on freethinkers can be found with downloadable content.

Jacobsen: Any recommended speakers, authors, or organizations aside from those mentioned and, of course, Freedom Centre-Uganda

**Louis:** Yes, Mr. Bwegye Deusdedit is outspoken free thinkers, human rights defender and a lawyer by profession. He is underground and can be very instrumental in secularism movement

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?

Louis: Freedom Centre-Uganda is welcoming any support be in the donation of time, we need additional membership, links to professional and personal networks. We have a website and fundraising presence with the global giving platform. We also implement a project of supporting vulnerable children in education through Reason Foundation School which still needs support both monetary and professional. We are open to any inquiry concerning partnership and this is important to the freedom centre's growth.

Please, your assistance in this question is very important and FC-Uganda has been in need of support and networks to succeed in our work.

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

**Louis:** I was really impressed with the interview; this is an indicator that someone out there is interested in our work of secularism.

How can we keep the conversation and have our work marketed out there?

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time.

**Louis:** You are welcome, please Freedom Centre-Uganda is open for more interviews and we wish to partners with you and other secular individuals and organizations especially outside Uganda.

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

### Interview with Robert Magara – Executive Director, Kanunga Humanist Association

## Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 28, 2019

Robert Magara is the Executive Director of Kanunga Humanist Association.

Here we talk about his current work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's talk about some of the new activities of Kanungu. What is new with the humanist schools?

Robert Magara: We are constructing the girls' hostel at our secondary school.

Jacobsen: What have been important developments for the Kanungu Humanists Association?

**Magara:** We have two schools. One, a primary school, and two, a secondary school, that we recently started: Brighter Brains Humanist Secondary School."

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in the association directly or indirectly?

**Magara:** Every adult male or adult female is allowed to become a member of our association directly free of charge

Jacobsen: If we look at some of the issues in Uganda for humanists, what are the issues now?

**Magara:** We are verbally attacked and vandalised but no one has been physically harmed yet. I started the Kanungu humanist schools to bring humanism and atheism to the attention of Kanungu people to generate a bread of like minded individuals who can think for themselves, make decisions, and embrace reason.

Most of the schools in Uganda have an attachment to a religious sect and I thought that our children should instead study religion on comparative terms and encourage science and critical thinking instead. Uganda needs more secularism nota religion.

Ugandans are facing various challenges. Major dilemmas are defining the relationship between religion and politics. Uganda inherited multiple faiths, political religions that seek to control state formation and structure. The religious folks think that a campaign for secularism is a campaign that is not in the interest of their faiths.

These prevailing notions have constrained the secular space and hampered our efforts to adopt and adapt models that protect human rights. The religious nuts in places like Kanungu want to talk about witchcraft and all its supposed evils, murdering people, corruption, those evil of African traditionalists, they must be destroyed.

The hypocrisy sickens me in Uganda.

Jacobsen: Looking at the developments for the next generations who have become adults in Uganda, who are up and coming humanist or freethought voices? Why them?

Magara: Those who have reached the age when they are legally responsible for their actions.

Jacobsen: Who are the upcoming humanist or freethought voices?

**Magara:** They are the voices of those Ugandans who take a critical view on religion and indeed are resisting its influence on the very ways that they conceptualize themselves and live their lives with the ten humanist principles:

DIGNITY...Proclaim the natural dignity and inherent worth of all human beings.

RESPECT...Respect the life and property of others.

TOLERANCE...Be tolerant of others belief and life styles.

SHARING...Share with those who are less fortunate and assist those in need of help.

NO DOMINATION...Do not dominate through lies or otherwise.

NO SUPERSTITION...Rely on reason, logic and science to understand the universe and to solve life's problems.

CONSERVATION...Conserve and improve the earth's natural environment.

NO WAR...Resolve differences and conflicts without resorting to war or violence.

DEMOCRACY...Rely on political and economic democracy to organize human affairs.

EDUCATION...Develop one's intelligence and talents through education and efforts.

Jacobsen: Why them?

**Robert:** The reality is that vast majority of atheists, secularists are moral kind people who love life, work hard, care for our friends and family, and seek to do good.

Jacobsen: What has become worse in the law for secularism in Uganda?

**Robert:** We are verbally attacked and face harassment.

What has become better in the law for secularism in Uganda? Not yet well.

Jacobsen: What organisations have been important in supporting the activities of humanists in Kanungu?

**Robert:** The Brighter Brains Institute, The Ontario Humanists, and the Atheist Alliance.

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

**Robert:** David Thompson, Phil Zukerman, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Barbara Smoker, and Leo Igwe.

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

**Robert:** We are looking to work with the volunteers who want to teach in our humanist schools, care for the orphans, and administer health procedures in our <u>clinic.it</u> will be amazingly good for

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

Robert Magara: Thank you too, my friend, Jacobsen.

# Interview with Sikivu Hutchinson – Creator, Women's Leadership Project

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
July 29, 2019

Sikivu Hutchinson is an American Feminist, Atheist, Author/Novelist and Playwright. Twitter: @sikivuhutch; Website: www.sikivuhutchinson.com; Author: Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars White Nights, Black Paradise.

Here we talk about her achievements and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What personal accomplishments make you most proud, as true achievements?

Sikivu Hutchinson: I'm proud of having created the Women's Leadership Project Black feminist humanist civic engagement and mentoring program for South L.A. girls of color. The initiative started in South L.A. middle schools in 2002 and we branched out to high schools in 2006. Many of our "first in the family" alum have gone on to higher education, careers and activism. My first love has always been fiction writing, and, while I'm proud of all of my books, I'm the most passionate about having written the novel, play and short film White Nights, Black Paradise. WNBP is the first literary portrayal of the African American diasporic experience in Jonestown and Black women's role in the Peoples Temple movement that preceded it. The WNBP film was my debut as a director and gave me the platform to direct two new plays, Grinning Skull and Narcolepsy, Inc (which I spun off into a web-series).

Jacobsen: Who have been the most outstanding and outspoken secular women in the last decade?

**Hutchinson:** Maryam Namazie, Mandisa Thomas, Bridgett Crutchfield, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Loretta Ross, Rebecca Watson to name a few.

Jacobsen: What initiatives have worked to include secular women more in the public and institutional spaces of the secular communities and organizations? What ones have been abject failures?

**Hutchinson:** Over the past decade initiatives spearheaded by Black Skeptics, Black Nonbelievers, the Council of Ex-Muslims, Secular Women, Skepchick's publication and the Secular Social Justice conferences have all contributed to raising the profile of secular women. BSLA's annual First in the Family Humanist scholarship and support of the Women's Leadership Project have also amplified college and high-school aged secular women of color. With respect to "abject failures": one-off events that aren't connected to ongoing, sustainable organizations or initiatives are problematic. The secular "movement" is notorious for tokenizing and fetishizing women of color, and even some white women, as flavors of the month then not following through on long terms agendas for anti-racist gender justice.

Jacobsen: For secular women in the 2010s, what seems like the most significant achievement as a cohort or sub-demographic of the secular community?

**Hutchinson:** Becoming more politically active, visible and outspoken in local and national public policy issues around reproductive justice, educational justice, voting rights.

Jacobsen: Any recommended annual events, authors, speakers, or organizations?

**Hutchinson:** BSLA, Black Nonbelievers and WLP have partnered to launch the first Women of Color Beyond Belief conference in October of this year. Black Nonbelievers also has its annual cruise in November of this year. I will be appearing at the Freeflow Humanist conference in Florida in November. I will also be launching a public education tour of the White Nights, Black Paradise play in San Francisco in spring 2020 at SF's Museum of the African Diaspora.

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

# Ask Mandisa 33 – Interfaith and Interbelief Panels, and (Non-)Religious Literacy

### Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 29, 2019

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

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

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

Here, we talk about interfaith and interbelief panels, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You attended an event recently. It was entitled Disrupt the Narrative: Centering African American Perspectives on Religious Freedom. What was the event? Why were you invited?

**Mandisa Thomas:** Yes, I participated in this event on the Community Practitioners panel. The event was to center African American perspectives on religious freedom. It's a three-year project that is presented by the Freedom Forum Institute in partnership with the Henry Luce Foundation, that focuses on religious freedom in the black community, and as it pertains to racial justice, and the perspective of underrepresented communities and underrepresented voices.

I was invited because I specifically represent a voice that has been marginalized and seldom heard from within this discussion, which was the atheist perspective. I also have the pleasure of serving on the advisory board for the Religious Freedom Center's Georgia 3Rs Project, which focuses on comprehensive religious literacy among Georgia educators.

At a previous event, I met other directors at the Religious Freedom Center. They asked me be a part of the discussion, especially as it pertains to the black community and religious freedom – how it is understood, and how it should be understood within a context of not just the United States, but also the world.

Jacobsen: How many other secular individuals attended the event? How many other secular individuals spoke at the event, either as an individual or on a panel?

**Thomas:** There were about five of us, total, that were in attendance. There were more scheduled, but time and life got in the way. I was the lone participant that represented the secular perspective, or rather, the nonreligious perspective, altogether.

Jacobsen: What would be one of the main takeaways about the culture of interfaith panels? What would be the main takeaway about the expansion of the discussion to more secular people in the African American community, or the black community, in America?

**Thomas:** I think the takeaway was that the black community still has a very high representation of the religious perspective, which is due to historical and institutional reasons. That is to be expected, especially within our community.

But what is happening now is that there is a shift, and there are efforts being put forth into exploring the voices of the nonreligious perspective, and incorporating us into interfaith discussions. This is also leading to better dialogue about issues that affect our community, and that affect us almost equally but that we can perhaps work on together while putting our varied religious perspectives aside. There was one point that I was sure to make during the discussion – that if someone from the atheist or humanist perspective is sitting at the table, there is usually a tendency for the other side to either shut down or push their religious identity even more. It's good for them to know and respect our existence, and to actually see us and hear us participate in the discussions. To know that we are doing this work is probably a reality check for them, which is okay.

If it's going to do anything, it's going to broaden the scope of the African American voice, show how diverse we are, and what we're willing to bring to the table in order to help our community as a whole.

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

# Interview with Michael Bauer – CEO, Humanistische Vereinigung (Humanist Association)

## Scott Douglas Jacobsen July 30, 2019

**Michael Bauer** is the CEO of the Humanistische Vereinigung (Humanist Association). Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

**Michael Bauer:** I grew up in the area of Nuernberg, in the northern part of the federal state of Bavaria. Religion never played a prominent role in my family, if any at all. I became baptized, but more because it was a social thing in the village my parents and I lived than by spiritual reasons or something like that. I took part in the protestant religion subject which in Bavaria like in most parts of Germany is given at the schools until I was 14 or so, then I discovered that this religion thing was nothing I can share so I changed to visited the school subject ethics. Indeed, I read most of the bible in that time, and I found it quite strange. So I refused to take part in the protestant ritual of confirmation and had to forego a lot of presents (laughs). At the age of 18, I left the church also formally.

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

**Bauer:** I studied musicology, political science and sociology and hold a master's degree in musicology and a similar one in political science. Additionally, I am a certified counsel on medical ethics. Since working for HV, I visited a lot of conferences and seminars on humanist topics of all kind from brain science to political issues, many of them had been organized by our team. This year we have organized conferences on music, how music can make our lives better, on Karl R. Popper and his legacy, on transhumanism, and we for next year are preparing a three-day-conference on the political ruptures and social and ecological crises we face. This a very inspiring part of my work.

### Jacobsen: As the CEO of the Humanistische Vereinigung (Humanist Association), what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

**Bauer:** Quite different ones. The most important is the responsibility for the finances, the real estates and the staff, together with my colleagues in other leading and responsible positions, like the COO for educational affairs Ulrike von Chossy. In total, we employ 330 persons and have an annual budget of some 15 million euros. But the economic tasks are only one part of the job, there is also the service to our members, the development of new projects, the advancement of the humanist life stance in the public, political representation, publications and other things.

#### Jacobsen: For the young, what are the youth celebration and the Juhu Towers?

**Bauer:** The "jugendfeier" is to celebrate the end of childhood and the beginning of getting a grown-up person. This kind of celebration exists since the late 19th century. Our youth organization, the Young Humanists, use some of the ancient towers in the medieval city walls of Nuremberg for their meetings, what are really exceptional locations, as you perhaps can imagine.

Jacobsen: What is the Namensfeier? What is the wedding party and the funeral speeches? If we look at these alternatives, secular alternatives, to the religious rites of passage from birth to death, what makes them more similar than different and more different than similar than the traditional religious rites of passage?

**Bauer:** Our celebrations mark the important turning points of a family or the personal life: the birth, leaving childhood, finding a partner, and the death. These are important events in the life of everybody, religious or not. As humanist we organize the celebrations in a very individual way, we don't have a fixes ritual you have to obey or something like that. Every celebration is different und individual, just as the persons who celebrate are also individuals.

Jacobsen: As Humanistische Vereinigung was founded in 1848, at present, it runs 19 childcare centers, 1 private primary school, several social and educational humanist activities (apart from those mentioned), a hands-on museum for science education through the senses, advises on medical ethics, and more, including hiring 330 staff with 2,200 members in general. For other humanist organizations, by comparison, these may blush. Indeed, few matches this size and this length of existence. What has been the history of humanism in Europe since 1848? What have been the major stages of development – even setback and regrowth – of Humanistische Vereinigung?

**Bauer:** Oh, this is a very long story. Let me sketch it very shortly. In the beginning, in 1848, we were part of the democratic revolution in Germany of this time, which besides others wanted to end the unity of the feudal regimes and the churches. This led to a religious reform-communities which promoted a "free religion", which was sometimes more atheist than religious. These communities were very progressive, they enclosed voting for women, scientific thinking and an educational reform. In this time, our predecessors, mainly the women, founded the first kindergartens in our region, which were based on these ideas educational reform and democracy. But the revolution failed, and in the 1850s, these new communities were forbidden, at least in the then kingdom of Bavaria. Most of the frontrunners emigrated, many of them to the USA and Canada. The "48ers". It took some years, until the could be refounded, and the they mingled with the upcoming worker's movement and the social democracy and became more and more a part of the socialist milieu. During the NS-dictatorship the organization was forbidden, and many of the leading persons were imprisoned, some were deported to concentration camps. After the war, the churches opposed the refounding and said, the humanist and freethinkers were responsible for the "godless" Hitler-Regime. But the American Military Government didn't believe this outrageous bullshit, and allowed the restitution. In the following years, the critique on religion was a major focus of the organization, and the membership was declining. Only very few people joint, and many old members died. In these times, there was only a more political secretary and a part-time employee for the administration to assist the voluntary board. In the 1990s, a new generation of volunteers came into office, and they changed the organization's strategy to what we call "practical humanism". In 1994 the first newly built humanist kindergarten was opened, 2002 the second, 17 more in the following years, and today we expand to many more fields of humanist social and educational activities, like science education, youth care, student housing, and also hospices.

Jacobsen: As you're focusing out of the state of Bavaria, what is the religious-secular divide like there, e.g., community differences, demographic differences, and so on? Also, what are the general demographics for humanists?

**Bauer:** Bavaria has 15 Mio. inhabitants, the narrow majority are Catholics. The catholic church has strong roots in the rural areas of southern Bavaria, but in all the larger cities, like Munich or Nuremberg and others, the majority is non-religious. So we have a difference between the situation in the cities and the countryside. Additionally, the younger people are very less religious than the elders. The dominating party, CSU, is conservative and says it represents "Christian" values. The conservative state government is a problem for the non-discrimination of the non-religious. That's why we regularly sue the government, at the moment we are at court because of the discriminatory situation concerning value subjects at schools, there is only value-based religious teaching, but not a humanist equivalent. We want the government to establish a humanist subject, too. We will see how the outcome will be.

Jacobsen: If we look at prominent German humanists, who would those individuals be? Why them? Who are non-German humanists that German humanists love?

**Bauer:** There are some humanist writers, actors and comedians, but in politics only very few people commit themselves to be humanists. The religions still are very influential in Germany. In general, humanism is not in the amount part of the public discourse than it should be.

Jacobsen: What are some exciting developments and upcoming projects for the community of Humanistische Vereinigung in 2020/2021?

**Bauer:** Our major public event in 2020 will be the "HumanistenTag" in June, the three-days-conference I mentioned already. We will open two new kindergartens and housing facilities for some 40 students, and we plan some other things, which yet are in a too early stage to report.

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?

**Bauer:** There are many ways, as volunteers in projects, of course as donators to our international relief organization Humanistische Hilfe, or our organization for the promotion of talented humanist students Humanistisches Studienwerk. Networks, publications and every other help is also welcome.

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

Bauer: You're welcome!

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