

Canadian Atheist: Set XIX

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In-Sight Publishing

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IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

Publisher since 2014

Published and distributed by In-Sight Publishing

Fort Langley, British Columbia, Canada

www.in-sightjournal.com

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Not a member or members of In-Sight Publishing, 2021

This first edition published in 2021

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Independent Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

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

Names: Jacobsen, Scott Douglas, author

Title: Canadian Atheist: Set XIX / Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Description: British Columbia: In-Sight Publishing, 2021.

Identifiers: None (epub).

Subjects: | BISAC: PHILOSOPHY / General (PHI000000)

Classification: LCC (None) | DDC (None)

p. cm.

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

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Designed and implemented by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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Acknowledgements

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

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Scott

Canadian Atheist

Interview with Hugh Taft-Morales—Leader, Philadelphia Ethical Society & Baltimore Ethical Society

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

July 31, 2019

Hugh Taft-Morales is the Leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society & the Baltimore Ethical Society.

Here we talk about some new stuff with the community, Hugh, and more.

On the 400 Years Project: “Beginning January 1, 2019, marking the 400th year since the first people were brought against their will to the North American mainland from Africa, I will: write and distribute 400 weekly words, offer 400 lessons, create an annotated bibliography of 400 writing, and get 400 commitments from 400 people who pledge to confront systemic racism more directly through concrete action.” – Hugh Taft-Morales

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is new with you? What is new with blog writing? How much is recommended for blog writing for you?

Hugh Taft-Morales: I told myself that at the beginning, that every week of this sad 400 year anniversary I intended to write a blog. I said a 400-word blog. I have been told that is too long, which stuns me.

I’ve been told by somebody. I’ve got a coach who does blog coaching. They said 250. Lots of photographs, lots of links. You can link to other work that you have that you provide more words, but to get people to read them, she said 250.

Obviously, if people are interested, they’re going to read the 2000-word blog that sometimes people write, but she is recommending me to do this differently. I’m writing a blog every week. I’m collecting suggestions for and then annotating very brief annotations for a bibliography of books, articles, and films. I am trying to gather commitments.

Let me back up. The entire project is based on history and the fact that 400 years of history is an incredibly weighty amount to take in, to understand how the history of racism in America has sunk into every crevice, into the air we breathe, and how we have to be much more intentional to deconstruct white supremacy.

Everybody can be a part of it, and everybody can read the blog, and make suggestions, and take the commitment, the pledge that I’m asking people to take, but it’s aimed mainly at people who identify as white and believe that systemic racism has privileged them, and want to do more anti-racism work.

I’m looking for people who want to make more of a difference in this and are looking for hints on how to do that. History can help motivate us, and give us an understanding about contemporary issues, and language, debates, like the governor of Virginia right now, people not understanding why everybody’s so upset. Most people can get the KKK costume as being offensive, but many people don’t understand the history of blackface.

I want to use history simply because it affected me and affected my students. I had over 25 years of conversations about race with high school students. You must look hard at these issues and look inside yourself. How do I translate them in ways that people who don't have experience of being racially marginalized understand, and don't get defensive, and so forth?

The commitment I'm asking people to make is that they be more actively and concretely engaged in anti-racism work. Then I'm going to ask them to tell me what they're doing, what are the specific things they're doing.

I hope to collect a list of what specific things, in particular, whites who want to be allies or want to up the level of commitment, accomplices but what they would like to do, what are they actually doing to make a difference.

It's more using the history to motivate online, getting a community, letting people ask questions, getting over white fragility, white guilt, and be a little more proactive about changing the system.

The link to humanism to that I think is important. That is only going to be a tiny part of this but I think it is important. That there's a lot of humanists that assume that if you declare the inherent worth of every individual, if you embrace enlightenment, and liberty, that that is the basis for all social reform.

I think we may have even touched on this, but it overlooks the social constructions to a degree. It overlooks how identity is often culturally contextual, and that you're born into a context where who you are is greatly determined by where you are in the society, what history you're born into, what cultural stereotypes you will be subject to that others won't.

I think there's a lot of friction within the humanist community because that aspect of traditional humanism, of somehow that enlightenment individualism is all you need to push. This misses a lot of issues that have to do with identity as defined by culture – a different way of understanding what authenticity is, that quite often it's culturally bound. I don't know how deep down that rabbit hole you want to go, but that's one connection to the issue of race that I could suggest.

Underlying all of it is the assumption that we, "we" primarily being whites who identify as having privilege and want to work against it, have to be more willing to listen, to hand over the agenda more to people who have been marginalized due to racism, to take our cues from that, to develop relationships, and then come up with what we're going to do. We must learn, must listen, must open to people, rather than being white saviours who come in and say, "I know how I'm— going to fix racism in our society."

It is also about reallocation of resources, which makes a lot of people uncomfortable. Obviously, there's a political connection to that.

Jacobsen: Does the one aspect of that come into play with American sociocultural perspectives of economics, where someone's coming in saying, "We're going to require some form of redistribution," even redistributive justices, as some have called it?

This might get seen as Marxist, Communist, outright socialism, in American society. Among some of the seculars who have typically more of a free market-oriented perspective on economic policy and economic life in America. Would there be a backlash from that, or is there one?

Taft-Morales: I think that's an appropriate read of a lot of what our culture is in America now. I think you can deal with that backlash in different ways.

Take the expression, “It takes a village to raise a child.” This has been said by progressive voices, from Jane Addams onward. It implies that there is greater interdependence among the various units in the community than many believed. That requires a greater sharing of resources and a greater equity in distribution of resources.

So yes, the people are going to blame progressives for being “socialist,” but nobody can deny that some of Marx’s analysis was correct. When you say that people are being turned into machines, when you say that their labour is being alienated from them because they put in certain value added into materials and they get back a pittance of that value added, and so on, – you’re going to get pushback.

I do think, though, that you can also go to places like the Republican platforms of the 50s in the United States, which indicated the importance of government-subsidized housing, which indicated the importance of guaranteeing employment for people, so job training for folk, which emphasized the importance of public education, and loans that the government gave to people.

There was a much greater appreciation from mainstream Republican conservatives. Let me say conservatives rather than Republicans, but it is in the Republican platform. Conservative and mainstream people realized that if individuals are going to “carry their own weight,” if there are going to be examples of individuals, they need government support.

Lincoln had a very “white working man approach,” He believed that what was important is that white men, primarily, were able to make their own living. It’s the old homestead vision, that you give people land, free. The government was handing out land, constantly, to people to move, immigrate out West, to grow crops for the cities, etcetera. There was a lot of subsidisation. The government virtually handed over an area the size of Texas to the railroads, so that they would develop.

So, the idea that somehow government support and government “handouts” are going only to the poor at the expense of the economy is historically false.

Jacobsen: I’m going through several human rights documents oriented around women’s rights, some of them dealing with some of the more severe aspects of the violations of women’s rights, to do with violence against women. Continually, in the context of the recommendations, of the data, of the stipulations, of the conventions, the declarations, and the documents, I continually find statements about acknowledgment, about recognition of it.

In other words, there is the first step, which is what you were noting about the historical context, becoming informed, which is about actually learning something about the real history of what is going on, in the case documents I’m going through, violence against women, the reality of it.

Also, when it comes to some of this anti-racism work, you’re doing, with regards to the historical context of people not wanting to redistribute wealth in some way, but in fact, in the United States, it’s not giving. There was an obvious enfranchisement of specific populations. The very founding, as I understand it, was white land-owning aristocrats, males.

By putting one sector of people, a minute sector of people, on the platform, it, of course, puts the rest of the people not in those categories, on a decline, comparatively. If you play

that over several generations, you're going to have obvious effects. I think this is all very relevant commentary.

Taft-Morales: I agree with you. I saw that on your website, you're doing a lot of work around feminist issues.

One of the things that recently got me thinking about this more is Ta-Nehisi Coates and Michael Eric Dyson's work on reparations. They focused on the fact that African Americans never received the promised 40 acres and a mule after the Civil War, as promised by the government. If they had received that, and they invested their earnings, the descendants of slaves would have had tremendous economic power.

It doesn't take much. If you have a little bit of money in 1870, and you invest it, even with the stock market crash, you'd be middle-class today. It's not that they were robbed every year, but the compounding of interest that was racially funnelled into different races is astonishing.

Jacobsen: Ironically, the white supremacists may be the largest anti-humanist organization.

Taft-Morales: Yes. Absolutely.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for your time today, Hugh.

Taft-Morales: That's good. All right. Keep watching after yourself.

Jacobsen: Take care.

Taft-Morales: You too. Bye-bye.

—

More on the 400 Years Project from Taft-Morales:

Since 1619, when the first Africans were brought against their will to the North American mainland, systems of race-based oppression have evolved from indentured servitude through chattel slavery, post-Civil War wage-slave sharecropping, Jim Crow segregation, lynching, housing and loan discrimination, the prison-industrial system, and more. As a history teacher for a quarter century, I am continually challenged to acknowledge and seek ways to heal the devastating wounds caused by systemic racism and white supremacy in the United States.

Given the 400th anniversary of the arrival in Jamestown of approximately 20 African men and women, I am undertaking a personal project that I invite you to join. While there are many others working to commemorate this anniversary, like "The Angela Project," I felt compelled to take action myself. Beginning on January 1st, 2019, I will make a part of my daily work as an Ethical Humanist Leader the following:

- 1) Collect and distribute an annotated list of 400 history books and articles, primarily by people of color, on various aspects of systemic racism and the efforts to repair the harm done;
- 2) Write and post 52 weekly blogs of approximately 400 words in length about the 400 years of oppression in the North American colonies and the United States (I have created a subscription link for all those who would like to subscribe to "400Years" and automatically receive my blog postings. Go to this link to subscribe: <http://eepurl.com/gdeHJb>)
- 3) Gather pledges from 400 people, especially those of us who consider ourselves "white," to make the following pledge: "To mark 400 years of racial oppression in colonial America and the

United States, I pledge to confront systemic racism more directly and take concrete steps to repair the harm done;”

4) Share 400 ways, big and small, to help repair the harm done by slavery and racism. They can include individual acts and public policies that address racism, and empower and provide resources to descendants of slaves and people of color.

Here are some important caveats about “400 Years.” I undertake this project:

- 1) With gratitude for numerous mentors, teachers, and friends of color who continue to advise me;
- 2) Aware that my privileged position in our society affects my perspective on this issue, both theoretically and practically, and aware that I must continually educate myself by reading works of people of color who address this issue;
- 3) Aware that I must avoid the bad habit of assuming that the people of color I know personally want to help me solve the oppression which victimizes them;
- 4) Acknowledging that “race” is a social construction that affects many people who are not descendants of slaves, and that racism is clearly not simply a question of black and white;
- 5) Acknowledging that there are many other forms of oppression and injustice – such as sexism, classism, and hetero-normativity – that effect many groups, which we must address as well. In this regard, we must educate ourselves about “intersectionality;”
- 6) Admitting that this project is modest – particularly in comparison to the depth and breadth of systemic racism in our nation today. This project is meant as part of the larger, more challenging paradigm shift towards a more radical reallocation of public and private resources to help repair the damage already done to countless people and communities of color; and,
- 7) Acknowledging that reparations to descendants of slaves is complicated – that it is difficult to identify precisely who has been most harmed by race-based oppression and to decide how to repair most effectively. I hope this project contributes to a national discussion with African American cultural leaders to determine the form that reparations will take.

Will you join me in this project? You can read and recommend books, share my blog posts, take the pledge, and take deliberate concrete action.

After 400 years, let’s bend the arc of the moral universe towards justice.

Interview with Dr. Chris Norris – Member, Membership Committee, Pittsburgh Freethought Community

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 1, 2019

Dr. Chris Norris is a Member of the Membership Committee in the Pittsburgh Freethought Community.

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?

Dr. Chris Norris: I grew up in a family of academics. My mother has a Ph.D. in Psychology and my father has two Master's degrees. I remember my mom's grad students being at our house a lot. I being in the sort of environment encouraged my curiosity and love of learning. My father is a Buddhist convert and I would call my mother agonistic, so religion was never something that was forced on me. When I started expressing explicitly atheist views as a teenager, however, I did get some resistance. My father gives me the typical atheist label of "closed-minded" but never anything more serious than that.

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

Norris: I earned a BA in psychology, an M.Sc. in Behavioural Neuroscience and a Ph.D. in Neuroscience. I've always loved to learn. I used to read books of facts as a kid and repeat them to anyone who would listen. The reason why I am in research now is because learning new things is still my favourite activity.

Jacobsen: What is the new news on membership for Pittsburgh Freethought Community?

Norris: Pittsburgh used to have numerous and fractured secular groups, such as a local CFI chapter, the Humanist Community of Pittsburgh and Steel City Skeptics, so in 2017 the PFC was incorporated as a charity and combined all these groups to focus our efforts.

Jacobsen: Why earn the Ph.D. in Neuroscience at the University of Western Ontario?

Norris: I met the researcher who would be my Ph.D. advisor at a conference. I was looking for another lab that studied cannabinoid neuropharmacology and Dr. Steven Laviolette had a lot of interesting projects going. I moved to Western because I wanted to work with him.

Jacobsen: What is the majority view of the neuroscientific community on the mind and the brain? What theoretical framework or paradigm for them? Any minority views still not entirely disproven?

Norris: I would say the majority of neuroscientists accept that mind and brain are the same and many take the stance of hard determinism. As an emergent phenomenon, consciousness still has to be studied separately, however, because we don't currently have anywhere close to adequate understanding of the basic mechanisms of the brain to understand what we mean by "mind".

Some— mostly religious— neuroscientists attempt to use this current inability to build basic neurological mechanisms into consciousness as proof of some supernatural quality to the mind, but I see that simply as an argument from ignorance.

Jacobsen: What are some important activities of the Pittsburgh Freethought Community now?

Norris: The PFC is a 501(c)3 registered charity, and the local affiliate of American Atheists, the Freedom from Religion Foundation and the American Humanist Association. We recently had a booth at Pride here in Pittsburgh and continue our lobbying of local and state government, advocating for women's rights, addressing injustices against people of marginalized/underrepresented races and ethnicities, and the LGBTQIA+ community.

Jacobsen: How has the Pittsburgh Freethought Community maintained its numbers and remained active over the years?

Norris: We do multiple events a month, including social gatherings at pubs, participating in the Pittsburgh Sunday Assembly, discussion groups, and interesting monthly speakers, including Dan Barker from the FFRF and Alison Gill from American Atheists.

Jacobsen: Any recommended authors, organizations, or speakers?

Norris: I always highly recommend the work of Sean Carroll, especially The Big Picture. I don't think there's a book that explains complex subjects like cosmology and entropic time so well, while simultaneously expressing tremendous wonder and compassion. It's a very humanist view of the universe.

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?

Norris: We offer yearly memberships for \$20, or \$10 for students. We also except donations, and as an official charity they are tax-deductible. We are also always looking for volunteers, there are a number of committees run by volunteers and the board consists of people donating their time and expertise to help the PFC.

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

Norris: If anyone finds themselves in Pittsburgh we would be glad to have them.

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

Norris: Thank you for the discussion.

Interview with Judy Saint – President, Greater Sacramento Chapter of Freedom From Religion Foundation

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 2, 2019

Judy Saint is the President of the Greater Sacramento Chapter of Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Here we talk about her views on secular progress, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What have been the major progressions and regressions for women in secular communities? As the Founder and President of the Sacramento Chapter of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, what were the difficulties and dynamics for the construction of a chapter and a community in the Sacramento area? Following the previous question, have those difficulties and dynamics changed over time? Or are they the same? Does treatment as a woman leader differ than if a man leader in secular communities? If so, and if from experience, how, and why? There is more discussion about the inclusion of more women within the secular communities. Whether leadership or membership, what seem like positive ways to include more women in secular communities? What seem like negative ways in which to have more women in secular communities.

Judy Saint: The notion that women are underrepresented in the secular community and leadership is not entirely correct. It's a question of roles and visibility, not absence.

While too few women speak at secular events, or write hard hitting nonfiction about atheism, or appear in media, debates or other visible venues, if you examine all minorities or subjugated groups you will find it's not just women, and not just the secular movement. The problem is that this culture honors and respects primarily "old, white men", as has been noted for some time. Look at any counter-culture venue, whether a live stage, on TV or anywhere, and you will see the same problem with all of them. Women and minorities are simply not nearly as visible. So, looking for answers to why women are underrepresented could lead you down blind alleys until you ask why they and other groups are underrepresented in all visible, influential positions as defined by old, white men.

I have something to say about that.

Let's examine first how women differ from men in regards to social participation and leadership. I learned long ago when earning my teaching credential that boys compete and girls cooperate. I was told this hoping I could adjust my teaching (mathematics, but don't hold that against me), so that boys and girls could be given different learning, testing and classroom opportunities, best to suit their natural inclinations. That lesson has explained so much more in life than just the classroom. Boys compete, girls cooperate. Keep that in mind, or as Rachel says, put a pin in that. We'll come back to it, but first two flashback scenes.

Here we are at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Our administration requires a massive education and outcry before it will begin addressing why so many gay men and others are dying. This is an

emergency. We know in retrospect that this required bloody activism in the streets. It was dire. ... What did women do? (Many of you are old enough and woke enough KNOW the answer.) Women were present in this cause in more than equal numbers, but they weren't giving speeches, leading audiences to shout, or throwing cream pies in Anita Bryant's deserving face. They, and I mean thousands of them, were in it up to their elbows doing work more befitting a person skilled at cooperative support rather than competitive bluster. Women were handling office phones, calling senators, asking for donations, getting permits, opening clinics, nursing until the last breaths, providing game-changing logistical and basic support for the dying men and the cause. Women know how to cooperate to get things done, taking support as well as leadership roles. I hesitate to call it "women's work", though that in itself is fine, but the associated stigma of those positions, mainly by males who deem their face-smashing as more important, have convinced our culture that such positions are "lesser". They're not. They're just not as visible or competitive.

A second example, if you will. How did women ever break into the male dominated television news anchor positions? I remember it well. Every night we watched male news journalists. All male. Then one woman somehow earned her chops, rose to serious anchor and journalistic stardom with all the serious respect men held. How did she do it? By not smiling. Look back to the 60s, for example, at any panel on TV as the panelists are introduced. All the women smiled, the men did not. Same on any serious show. It turns out that Barbara Walters has an inability to form her mouth certain ways (like pronouncing R, for example) and could not smile. She didn't know it would propel her, and it was not intentional, but she shot straight up to a man's seat at the table, with all attendant respect. It gave her stature, and allowed her to enter the competitive dominant male position. The women were there, just not allowed at the table if they smiled like women.

Thankfully, women, and men, are waking up that the floor is for women, too. Awareness of female ability is on the rise. Laws, too, are trending toward mandated equality as the public demands it. Women are entering male dominated arenas and, more important, finding new arenas. Let me explain.

Opportunity for more ways to be involved is expanding. It's no longer a dichotomy between a man promoting a book on TV or a woman having a bake sale. The whole world of possibilities between these two is opening up. For example, the importance of local reporting of separation of church and state violations, creating new popular social media sites, testing political waters by running for office, creating newsletters or publishing opinion pieces in local papers are examples along the spectrum between winning competitive TV foothold and bake sales. Women are broadening (no pun intended) their understanding of what they are "allowed" to consider. Allowed by social norm, I mean. Doors are opening, or being pushed open, and diversity is marching through them, testing a new culture developing before our eyes. When someone says women are not participating or leading, they might not be aware of where the women actually are.

As for my experience as a woman in leadership – we're talking over six decades of leadership here – my record is unusual. I have been called kickass and other words implying not all women are like this. I have published engineering textbooks with McGraw Hill, ridden solo across the country on my motorcycle, flown across the country in a light airplane, taught black belt martial arts, produced a community-wide secular newsletter for our seventeen local freethought groups, founded our Chapter of FFRF, established a speaker series pulling together our California secular

organizations, became Visibility Coordinator for AHA's Day of Reason, wrote a private postsecondary course establishing 13 locations in California, helped establish the first freethought class in our local juvenile hall, and more. I'll accept kickass, but why is it unusual?

Growing up with four brothers, I have enough aggressive edge in me to just go get things done. I do not wear makeup and I dress comfortably. I worry about how I will solve the roadblocks, not where I am expected to sit. Sure, men at times were cruel, but I'm not one to care. I will add, people receive less guff when they know where they're going and have a striking professionalism. (Men can get away with one or the other, but women need both.) As my nephew said once when he heard someone challenge me, "Uh oh, you don't mess with Aunt Judy". I know where I'm going. As women see more role models like this more will know they can be both capable and a woman at the same time, too. More will find their take-no-guff vision for getting things done. More will learn to ignore the irrelevant comments.

Bill Gates, addressing a male audience in a foreign land, said keeping women down eliminates half the solutions and progress possible for their country. As for women participating in the secular movement, look for a wider change coming, as more role models accept the opportunities and challenges of finding a new way of getting the job done. Look, too, for new awareness of all roles, not just the roles old, white men count as visible. Women are here. Women have always been hard at work. Maybe it's men who just don't see them. That will change as more women step forward and our definition of participation and leadership change to include what women do.

I suggest we change the question from "Where are the women and minorities" to "How are we defining effective leadership".

Ask Takudzwa 3 – Ally-Ally Toxin-Free

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 2, 2019

Takudzwa Mazwienduna is the informal leader of Zimbabwean Secular Alliance. This educational series will explore secularism in Zimbabwe from an organizational perspective. Here we talk about support in Zimbabwe, building secular community, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How can allies provide appropriate levels of support given the context of Zimbabwe?

Takudzwa Mazwienduna: Attempts to register the Humanist Society of Zimbabwe have been sabotaged by the country's economy. Members had contributed money to raise the required amount on a mobile money service called Ecocash only for it to lose value with the government's announcement of an improvised pseudo currency, robbing many Zimbabweans of any real money they had in banks or Ecocash. \$900 lost its value to \$100 overnight following the cash crisis. The Humanist Society of Zimbabwe could use a great deal of help in registering the organization and establishing it as a legitimate member of the country's civil society.

Jacobsen: What are the ways in which allies can help too much or simply help in ways that are detrimental to the health and wellness of the secular community in Zimbabwe?

Mazwienduna: I doubt that any assistance from allies would be detrimental to the Zimbabwean secular society. We are the least nationalist people in our country and relate more to the global community. If anything, associating with international allies will unfold numerous opportunities for cooperation and a wider base to advance humanist and secular causes. It will help us to get Zimbabwe on the same page with the progressive discourse.

Jacobsen: What is the most important tactic and strategy for building secular community?

Mazwienduna: Human interaction has proven to be the best strategy for establishing a secular community. Our social groups have been growing non stop since 2015 and the more we get to know people, the better we relate to them. We have grown into a huge family with a lot of potential and talent.

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

Mazwienduna: It has been a pleasure Scott, thank you.

Ask Kim 2 – Off to Camp: Beyond Belief in the Woods

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 3, 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 successes of Camp Quest, and kids' outings outside of a faith framework, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: As Camp Quest was founded in 1996, its profile has existed long enough and succeeded sufficiently enough to garner some international notoriety. I heard from a South African secular group the possibility of working to found a Camp Quest in South Africa. What have been the important points of success for Camp Quest?

Kim Newton: We are so fortunate that through our camps and wider network of supporters that Camp Quest has inspired new camps in other countries including the UK, Switzerland, and Norway. The South African Secular Society is doing amazing work of organizing secular people in various provinces there, raising awareness about non-religious identities. We're very supportive of their effort to offer secular family programs. They'd like to be able to offer a camp, and we're working to provide some guidance for them in that process. One of the greatest things we can do is to continue to support secular education opportunities across the globe, and to be a resource for groups that could learn from our experience of starting and running camps. Important points of success for us have been times when our leaders have come together to decide that we are going to be a community based in values of respect, camaraderie, and generosity, particularly when supporting new camps and programs. We're at our best when we help others; this is what kids learn at camp, and what we practice as an organization, too.

Jacobsen: How has Camp Quest developed into an international alternative to some of the faith-based youth activities?

Newton: What's great about Camp Quest is that we offer more than just an alternative to religious programs. Campers engage in a positive, nurturing camp that blends humanist values and ethics with traditional outdoor activities and fun — that's something all kids can enjoy.

I think the tradition of summer camp that has developed in our US culture over the last century is particularly special. Though children in other countries will participate in extracurricular activities on school holidays, other countries don't necessarily share the same camp tradition that has become so prevalent in the US. For example, my husband is from the United Kingdom, and he did not go to camp as a child; he shared it was somewhat unusual for children to attend sleep-away camp when he was growing up.

People across the globe have found us, thanks in part to the internet and to the outreach we've done with the wider secular community. Increase in international travel and the availability of summer jobs in the US for international students has helped those in other countries to experience American-style summer camp programs and to take those experiences home. I think we're going to start seeing a rise in secular camps in other countries, and I'm proud that Camp Quest has helped to inspire that growth.

Jacobsen: How can organizations get in contact with and begin to found their own Camp Quest in their locale?

Newton: Organizations that would like to learn more about Camp Quest can contact us by email at camp@campquest.org or call our National Support Center at 540-324-9088. We're always happy to talk to groups that would like to support both existing camps and new programs. Right now we're working to complete a feasibility study for new program expansion. We're excited about what the future holds as more groups, both domestic and international, begin to build secular youth programs.

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

Interview with Eric Thomas – Former President, Humanist Canada

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 4, 2019

Eric Thomas is the Former President of Humanist Canada.

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

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, let's start from the top, superhero origin story. What was your early life like? How did religion or non-religion play into this, if at all?

Eric Thomas: For me, Scott, it was the more non-religious mom who was English and getting off the boat in the '30s. She was a strong woman. Religion was never a part of our life together in the family. In early life, my older brother passed away. We were both young. It soured her on religion as "he's better off in heaven" was the explanation she got from the religious authorities. It soured her completely against religion. It was not meant in a strident way, like a strong person making their way in the world. She had no more use for it. We did discuss it. I know that part, of her part in my life at that time in our family legacy. So, she never talked about it so much. She did not want to be overpowered with religious dogma and doctrine, etc.

So, that was the early days. As an adult, I am proud to follow her strength and purpose. Her strength of logic, and her strength and reading and education. So, that was part of my early origin to read and as much about humanism or non-religion as a young person. However, once I got a bit older, flew more miles on me, through life's travails, I realized that as a humanist and joined a small group here at Quinte.

It is still the present guy after more than a decade. Humanist Canada, five years ago, I was the president until last summer (2018). I served two terms. I found it an enjoyable, rewarding effort to try and help lead for it. That is my origin story, being able to chat with you about things, atheist, et cetera.

Here I am.

Jacobsen: On this note of atheism, religion in humanism, humanists assumed as atheists, or most are atheists.

Thomas: That is correct.

Jacobsen: And there is a sense in which religion is almost an adjacent, but not necessarily overlapping. Some of the concerns of those would identify as humanists, even though most identify as atheist.

Thomas: Yes, those are still very, valid points. One of the cornerstones of my tenure as president of Humanist Canada was to try and resolve that early on, like literally within months of becoming president. I realized that the outreach of Humanist Canada was more divisive. It had atheists. They were not actively avoiding atheists, but they certainly had no dialogue, no interaction with the atheist groups around the country. So, that dynamic was a similar thing with other human rights groups. It was something that I successfully resolved. So, we started to talk to people in Ontario and elsewhere, hoping to have an active ongoing dialogue. The challenge, I

have had many conversations about this, Scott, over the years. Of course, I am hoping to be more person to person than philosophical.

What about the strident nature of rebellion, which is the atheist community, it sometimes leads and follows up with their perspective and their ideology. So, I have made an effort to include those folks who would describe themselves as atheists, period. Atheism, and atheists, have been branded by religion for 2,000 years. Atheists are philosophically in the crosshairs because of their strident appearance. Because they do not tend to use more humanist values or expand their atheism to include humanism. You are right, if you are a humanist, do not prescribe. You are an atheist; absolutely, you are. Even, I have spoken to the pulpits here in Ontario, Scarborough.

The first question was, “Are you an atheist?” My answer unequivocally was “Absolutely, I am.” Granted, I took a bit of an exception to it. Their different flavours, different ideologies, and different perspectives. However, I am afraid. I draw the line in the sand. The pure humanist, whether you are secular humanist, atheist skeptic, and nontheistic, and so on. You are an atheist. There is no need to duck the issue. You might want to duck it only because religion’s marketing program for the last 2,000 years that the brand is of the atheists as dirty, rotten dogs. The longer we respond in that way, like dirty, rotten, hard to get along with, strident. The longer it will stick around. There is no need to stick around the question as we all know. The religions are dying their own deaths. We should leave them alone and let them do it. They are quite capable of doing it all themselves. However, that is my perspective on atheists per se. I am only too happy to chat, get along with and learn from the atheist, the pure atheist strident perspective.

Jacobsen: Within the humanist frame of mind, what scientific questions and ethical questions hold the most import to humanists?

Thomas: I almost hesitate to react with the first word that comes to mind, but I won’t hesitate. That word is “kindness” when we have interactions. I have spoken at Ahmadiyya Muslim events and Jewish events, etc. The common ground is kindness and wanting to do better for your managing of religious dogma centred on that. Gosh, I do not have any problem with that. It is a good idea. But it did not come from upstairs. This came from you and I. So, the “god directed” is you and I directed. So, that is what my hopes for the future comes, where the commonality is kindness and a Golden Rule. It is wanting to be better in a positive way as opposed to a controlled way. That’s the first thing that comes to mind.

And I hesitate, Scott, because the kindness can be a little bit less than positive or less than ecstatic. It is where we get, some times, labelled by the religious because some of us can be discharged here. Some of us are almost evangelical in our fervour in our position. I am guilty of that sometimes. I go on, ad nauseam, to promote the beauty of the positive nature of humanism. It sounds like it is religion sometimes. Often, I thought that of every evangelical humanist as a good idea. Maybe, it will be one day.

Jacobsen: Speaking of, any thoughts on the notions or sincere firm beliefs of the creation of Christian humanism, where other religious ideologies become tied to a humanist one?

Thomas: Yes! I have read some on that, like secular Judaism. Sounds like a nice idea, there is a guy upstairs. Obviously, I am not buying it, Christian humanism. Sorry, if you believe in the big guy upstairs, we are done. There is no such thing. If you are going to have those two things, it is an oxymoron, whether it is secular evangelicalism over Israel or otherwise. These two words do not go together, so it starts with a belief in a direction from a power. Then I think that we are

toast. I am sorry, but we can chat and have a wonderful conversation as to human beings. But we are not going to agree. I will not agree with the secular Christian or a secular Jew. There is that little problem of upstairs.

So, do you? Yes! You are not a humanist per se. You could be a litany of humanist ideologies. So, yes, we could find some common ground. It is an easy break here. So, that is where I draw the line as an atheist. There are a lot of shades of grey in the middle, but I am sorry. I draw the line.

Jacobsen: Humanists in history made mistakes in their approach to the general culture and in terms of building community with one another.

Thomas: They have an excuse. There is a reason for the mistakes. Look at somebody like Charles Darwin who was less than a pulpit pounding humanist in his lifetime, he waited on his books for 20 years until somebody else was going to publish it. So, he rushed around and it is done. I am respectful of his society. Also, for his family, because his family is like in particular was religious, he never gave up on it, but he understood the environment that he lived in and that was probably a better approach than jumping up and down. There is no origin of life story that we have developed that fits with evolution and natural selection. So, mistakes, yes, I am sure there is been a lot. But honestly, when I see them and Darwin, in particular, I gave them the benefit of the doubt.

It was only as successful as it could've been at the time. So, we live in a time, a place. I have been in dialogue with the interfaith councils. With all the ideas, they love me. I am a great guy. They keep inviting me to make speeches and participate without ambiguity.

So, we get to participate now, where we did with Doug Thomas – no relationship by the way – from western Ontario secular life. It is a good example. He goes to many interfaith events, as he should. He's got an open-minded and critical thinking based approach. In this day and age, people are accepting it, not sure why. If they are trying to defend their way of life, of Islam in particular, but under the guise of transparency and openness, they are willing to talk about it. It wasn't the case 5 or 10 years ago. I know of people who made mistakes; mistakes could have been under the guise of protecting their life or protecting them thinking from what was obviously a religious governing perspective.

Jacobsen: In an earlier response, you made a note of the Christian God being a male god. In standard interpretations, especially based on the imagery, the phrasings – “He,” “Him,” “Lord,” how does humanism provide more equitable foundation philosophically, ethically, and otherwise, for women within a worldview compared to standard religious ones?

Thomas: That is a wonderful question. It is one of the keys to our future. My strong mother and strong older sisters said, “No,” to sexism in my life. It was her big age because they were taller and stronger, but it never occurred to me that there should be such a thing as male-dominated hierarchy in my family. It was never there. So, the women's movement, I was a little bit young for that. But one of the by-products of that is the Abrahamic religions are the first ones to die. The United Church of Canada, these are some of the first ones that will disappear.

They've allowed a fulfilment in a part of the society in that which we live, which is a good thing. One of the by-products was women became ministers, et cetera. We are drinking the Kool-Aid now. Many times, they tend to come to the realization with logic and the future of humanity in

the mix. One is the need for women to become educated. Another is for them to become empowered.

So, having said that about the Abrahamic religions, when I have discussions about the demise of Islam, this was the one attribute that I bring to the fore because the religion is famous for a male-dominated ideology.

So, there are logical things that have developed in the last hundred years under the auspices of Roman Catholicism and The United Church of Canada, and so on. So, Islam when the other half of their society gets equality or something smelling like quality, it is going to be difficult. I have my doubts; I wrote in my notes this morning, Scott. When I see extremists, jihadists, et cetera, doing terrible things around the world, it is the most positive thing that they could do for the demise of their religion.

It is much like waking up and when I hear Christmas music or Christmas commercials in my rural Ontario town about Christmas. I turned them up because, how can anybody believe this stuff? The reality is approaching 75 to 85 percent of us do not believe this stuff. So, every time I hear a commercial about the birth of the baby Jesus. I think that somebody's going to be thinking about this in a logical way. Or, Christmas was the 25th of December because Jesus was born. No, it is not. If you started to do a pragmatic empirical homework on the 25th of December, or the Christ child or the origin stories, oh geez! Not exactly new is it? No, it is not. So, when I hear those things, "Yes, sent his only son. Virgin birth! Walked on water." [Laughing] okay. Tell me some more and the same with Islam. Some of the tenets that take a near and dear part in the origin story are totally unsupportable.

Jacobsen: Who are three Canadian humanists who stand out, living or dead to you?

Thomas: The first is one whom I considered to be a mentor. I have only known him for at least 7/8 years. He was at the last Imagine No Religion conference in Toronto. In my existence and Henry is an 80 odd-year-old poet, a professor, from Concordia, et cetera, he's been doing this. He had been doing history long before. He grew up in Germany and escaped slavery. Young enough not to have to serve. His parents hid him from the young Nazi association. He is an absolutely brilliant public speaker and an absolutely wonderful man. He was the editor of Humanist Perspectives for many, many years. I still have an ongoing relationship with Henry.

So, he would be, for me, at number one. Number two would be Christopher DiCarlo. He is the father of critical thinking, as I like to describe him. Again, Christopher was a Humanist of the Year. This was for Humanist Canada several years ago. I have worked with Chris on a couple of things and continue to stay in touch. Even though, I am not the president of Humanist Canada anymore. I stay in touch and follow up. So, he would be up there. Lastly, I would have to say the founder of Humanist Canada.

Our first president Henry Morgentaler was remember-able because of his initiative to start the organization. It was from the humanists' fellowship with the Fellowship of Montreal in 1968. He took it from there to a national platform, national presence. I hear that is his motivation, but he started Humanist Canada. Immediately before, he was president of the Fellowship of Montreal. By the way, the wonderful anecdotal stories before Henry started Humanist Canada. He took over from none other than Pierre Elliot Trudeau. So, one step removed from Henry Morgentaler started here in Canada, Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

Jacobsen: If you look at the literary canon of either humanistic material or outright texts, which ones stand out? We can go with the same number of three, as before.

Thomas: Dawkins first and foremost: again, through the conferences, we had a fortune. We had one with Mr. Dawkins a few times. It was having read his work. He's an absolute hero, wonderful, wonderful, humanist. The second would be his loyal authority, of course. This would be Lawrence Krauss. Lawrence is often above my feeble brain, but I read gracefully whatever he writes. So, they would be two. The other, I am going to say, Bertrand Russell. Of course, he is from the 50s, 60s. The stuff that he put pen to paper and then it goes on and on from there. He created much of my library here. So, those would be my heroes: Dawkins, Krauss, and Russell.

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

Thomas: You've asked wonderful questions. I have gone on a little bit because I have thought about them in the last number of years with a couple of points that I did want to make sure I recounted. I think that education is the cornerstone of our teacher Mr. DiCarlo. I made the point about Islam, how that is good for us going forward. One of the things we get to chat about, Scott, was the sense of community that you did not see them humanist groups around the country and how they are morphing into a church, bake sales. Minister kids trying to evangelize in the teenage years and serving to a blood donor clinic regularly. The one other thing that I have done this morning was the officiant programs here in Ontario, which has expanded significantly, by the way, in the last few years. What I failed to tell you were the former president, Kevin, was not able to get to the same stage in other provinces, that is something strong and its humanist officiant program is going places. They can help us lead the charge. Those are a couple of things that come from my notes from this morning, Scott.

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

Thomas: You are welcome. I appreciate it. Thank you for the time to rant. It has been wonderful, thank you, Scott.

Jacobsen: And you too, take care.

Thomas: Okay, bye now.

Ask Mubarak 3 – Better Than a Candle: Humanism as a Light in the Ethical Night

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 5, 2019

Mubarak Bala *is the President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. We will be conducting this educational series to learn more about humanism and secularism within Nigeria. Here we talk about Nigerian freethought and freedom of expression.*

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Humanism seems to wring the supernaturalism out of the ethical systems of the world's religions and then systematize the important parts in a naturalistic framework linked to a scientific comprehension of the world. How is this view of ethics, of the foundation of ethics and morals, at odds with much of the wider Nigerian cultural framework and worldviews for understanding the nature and basis of ethics and morality?

Mubarak Bala: Well, historically, Nigeria, and the region, used to be culturally indigenous, where each section of spread tribes had their deities, cultural identity and perception of morality.

So much of these norms, before tinkering with external religions, were derived from the natural world, fearing what harms, and imbibing what's good, over the generations.

Save those cultures that feared the birth of twins, and murdered them, or thought thunder was the voice of the gods demanding for sacrifice, blood sacrifice, we sure could say that the norms were not alarming, albeit non-homogenous, not out to conquer and absorb others.

Then came the Arabs from the north, and Europeans from the south, mass conversions, conquest, cultural elimination, redefined what is supposed to be moral, and skewed the pristine beliefs that allowed for others to thrive, soon after, our comprehension of the world skewed. Where women used to be goddesses, became ribs.

Naturally, everyone starts out as a humanist, empathetic to others, and inquiring to nature, then society either guides that to good, or deludes into indoctrination.

Nigeria specifically today, is a contraption of Arab-wannabes from the north, mostly Hausa-Fulani Muslims, Jewish wannabes to the southeast, the Igbos, and White-Caucasian wannabes, the Yoruba. The other 360 minority tribes, just wanna be one of these big three.

Smaller northern tribes hope to be seen as Hausa, those in other regions would prefer being seen as part of the other bigger tribes of Igbo or Yoruba, which essentially all reduces our ancient diversity to alien cultures – which in all sincerity, should have been better. But skewed by the Abrahamic religions, it is just worse, thus, as the religions hate the other, so do the people that adopted it, which disallows an actual Nigerian cohesion, each side with where they hope to be, in life, and in death, in harmony, and in destruction.

The south is at a better place, discarding superstition, and re-aligning with pseudo-humanism, such as a fair rational thought, education, freedom and awareness about how the world works, via exposure to cultures, media, global languages, proximity to the shores/ports, and frequent air travel.

However, the north, landlocked as Afghanistan, encroached by the Sahara as Arabia, deserted by deforestation as Somalia, swamped by illiteracy as dark-ages Europe, becomes a gradual sinking ship that threatens to swallow the country and region.

If not tamed, it will give the world a never-before witnessed humanitarian disaster of 100 million refugees with no country, and nowhere to go, trapped by the Sahara and rivers, as the other regions reject illiterate economic dead-weight.

There is hope, I hope. Humanism may show the north the way, the region with the most number of out of school children, called almajiri. The highest poverty globally, and the deadliest terror group in modern times, Boko Haram. Sad thing is, the people mostly see education, rational thought, exposure, liberalism, secularism, and humanism, as the enemy. They are convinced, that remaining conservative absolutists to centuries-old dogma, would make a better country and people.

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

Interview with Kevin Feng Chin Wen – Taiwanese Youth Humanist Activist and Writer

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 6, 2019

Kevin Feng Chin Wen is a Taiwanese Youth Humanist Activist and Writer. Here we talk about the secular movement in Southeast Asia/East Asia.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have been actively involved in the secular movement in Southeast Asia/East Asia for several years. There have been social and political changes. What are ongoing issues in secular and scientific education in Taiwan?

Kevin Chin Wen Feng: Luckily, we have proper content in our textbook for education, no matter in the scientific or social field. The most serious issue is the unfair educational bureaucracy and the joint enrollment exam. Due to authoritarianism, our best college is always public, so that the rich people who can usually get better academic performance can enjoy better education at a cheaper price.

For entering the public schools, students struggle in the preparation for the joint enrollment exam, sacrificing their curiosity and personal development to practice the exam routinely. There are some jokes: “If the government wants to promulgate anything, just put it in the exam.” “I have returned my knowledge to my teachers after the exam.” This pathetic and inhumane education kills real science, seeking the truth about the world, and results in copying and pasting from the textbook onto the examination paper.

Jacobsen: Where are ongoing social issues for freethinkers in Taiwan?

Feng: We are the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage. It shows our determination to have a deeper relationship with the West through humanistic values. However, the anti-gay religions mobilize in both political and educational fields. Rainbow mothers are the volunteers giving moral and ethical education from the Christian church. Their activities are against Education Basic Law and Gender Equity Education Act but not many politicians or officers dare to accuse them.

Another issue is the incense incinerator; the government wants to improve the air quality by limiting the locations to burn religious incense. However, the Daoist temples recognize burning the incense in that garbage incinerator as blasphemy and refuse to fund the specific incinerator on their own. The government compromises funding for religious incinerators to accomplish their environmental policy. We do accept this policy due to the political reality, but also ask for the specific noodle waste recycling for equality of religions. Putting the holy noodle into others’ kitchen waste recycling is insulation for FSM, hoping the government can accept our policy.

Jacobsen: What are ongoing political issues in Taiwan now?

Feng: Polarizing populism also happens here and even worse, which is manipulated by communist China. Our president Tsai Ing-wen tried to appease the political conflict between the mainlander and the locals by transitional justice. However, KMT refuses the deal and cooperate with CCP against the localization and demarcation of Taiwan. Conflict is inevitable. Her competitor in the 2020 election, Han Kuo-yu, manipulates populism and have the single highest

support rate via the communist's resources and media (Want Want China Times Media Group). Unlike the West's populism, which won't have a sovereign impact, once China controls Taiwan, it will be irreversible. The freedom of speech, human rights, and democracy will die at last, and the process must fill with violence like Hong Kong.

Jacobsen: For Canadians who may not know, what are recent flare-ups in Taiwan?

Feng: As similar to Canadians suffered from being arrested by China, there is a Taiwanese named Lee Ming-che. He texted some democratic Chinese for establishing a company in China to promote liberalism in Taiwan in 2014, but was kidnapped in Hong Kong in 2017. China imposes its inhumane law to force the world to accept their totalitarianism and the liberal world should unite and stop them.

Jacobsen: Why are these developments significant?

Feng: The current Taiwanese situation is the legacy of the Yalta System; KMT, the Leninist party from China, as the Mercenary of USA to manage Taiwan. Two contradictory ideologies cooperate with each other in this island for defending from communism, so that Taiwan can't be a normal and independent country as other southeastern Asian countries after WWII. To normalize Taiwanese nationhood, our political strategy is embracing the West and leaving Asian influence. This strategy has a long history in Eastern Asia, starting from Japan, Fukuzawa Yukichi's Datsu-A Ron, which promulgates Westernization of Asia in 1885. The ex-president of Taiwan Lee Teng-hui also claims "leaving tradition, reforming new," supporting the democratization of Taiwan and normalizing the country from Chinese sectionalism. We hope to join the humanistic family, gaining support from it – against authoritarian and powerist legacy in Asia.

Jacobsen: How can the international humanist community help you?

Feng: Paying more attention to the most dangerous regime in Asia, China. Probably because the canon of the humanist community has a huge influence on multilateralism and socialism. Some of my liberal friends believe the world will be better when China competes for the world power with the USA, or just hate USA Imperialism too much. For example, the largest humanist international community, Humanists International, its FB only has 9 posts about China from 2009 to 2016. It is definitely less than their criticism to Pakistan or Russia. Most of the active humanist communities in Asia are in the Indo-Pacific region and the threat for us is definitely China. We already know how communists spread fake news, corrupts politicians, uses violence to export their totalitarianism into Indo-Pacific. Once we fail, Muslims will be arrested and placed into their concentration camps, Buddhists will march like the army and sing war songs as Shaolin monks, Daoists and Christians will force to worship Mao, and, of course, humanists will "accidentally" disappear, be kidnapped, or randomly jailed. These are threats to liberalism and human rights, which are definitely much more than Donald Trump's presidency, at least for Indo-Pacific people.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Chin Wen, be well, my friend.

Ask Mandisa 34 – Invitations, Platforms, Dialogues

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 7, 2019

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

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

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

Here, we talk about panels, speeches, tours, talks, and the like.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to panels and speeches and talks and tours, there are ones for the religious; there are ones for the secular. Often, especially given the dominance of the religious in the United States, there's the invitation from the religious to the secular. What about a proposal for invitations from the secular to the religious?

Mandisa Thomas: Actually, at our fifth anniversary, I invited one of my now good friends, Reverend Lorenzo Neal, to speak as an ally. I met him in 2013, when he contacted us at our website to have me on as a guest for his show. It was a very good talk, he discussed his work with his church, and he admitted that he doesn't have all the answers. He actually felt very comfortable in our space.

I think that due to the still very high religious scholarship and the religious presence, that we may be tempted to invite some religious leaders to have discussions with us as a way to challenge their perspectives. I'm hoping that in the future, we might be able to do this.

I know some organizations have hosted debates between the religious and nonreligious. How that plays out varies. We always try to be mindful of the goal if we're going to invite the religious into our spaces.

Many of us, having left religion behind, wonder if they're going to say anything different. We take that on a case-by-case basis as well as the subject matter, and what we hope to accomplish.

Jacobsen: What would make events or speaking engagements and invitations more appealing for the religious coming to a secular turf?

Thomas: That's a very good question. I am not sure. I think that if the subject matter centers around something that we do have in common. It could be some areas of social justice, like racial justice, reproductive rights, etc. Sometimes it could be in the form of a debate. The more progressive religious organizations and leaders might be willing to have discussions with us about our common ground, and how we can fight or work together against oppression that affects all of us.

I'm thinking subjects that don't necessarily pertain to atheism or secularism, even though I don't think that we should hide them. There could be better opportunities for collaborative events with religious organizations and leaders in the future.

Jacobsen: Any recommended speakers from the religious, in terms of invitations, for those who may be reading this?

Thomas: I would say the Reverend William Barber, who is extremely phenomenal. He is very much an ally and speaks on issues that pertain to the broader community. I can't say that he would automatically work with us but he has acknowledged our presence.

I think that he would make a good speaker in a more secular space because of the respect that he has for us and the work that we do, as well as the challenges. He understands what we face, so I think that he would be one that I would recommend strongly.

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

Thomas: Thank you.

Ask Takudzwa 4 – African State-Wide Alliances

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 8, 2019

Takudzwa Mazwienduna is the informal leader of Zimbabwean Secular Alliance. This educational series will explore secularism in Zimbabwe from an organizational perspective. Here we talk about African state-wide secular alliances.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Often, humanist and feminist organizations remain allies. Are they allies in Zimbabwe? If so, how so?

Takudzwa Mazwienduna: The Feminist organizations in Zimbabwe are mostly under Christian influence, they are not willing to associate with Humanist organizations which are viewed the same as Satanic cults, even by the general public. Zimbabwe is a seriously Christian country whose society is not welcoming to anything that does not subscribe to Christianity. Even LGBTQ organizations are not eager to associate with Humanists. It will automatically cost them any support they had with the public.

Jacobsen: How old is religion in Zimbabwe? How long back does discrimination against women go back? How does religion discriminate against men who tend to be poor?

Mazwienduna: Religion has been around in Zimbabwe since the Bantu settled there around 8000 CE. The kingdom of Great Zimbabwe as it was known back then still has shrines and granite buildings left from the Era which have been declared a UNESCO heritage site. Anthropologists are still uncovering a lot about the Great Zimbabwe civilization, but from the little we know so far, it was a center for trade with Arabs and different travellers. Their religion had a lot to do with ancestral worship and some rural communities still follow similar traditions today. When the British South Africa Company colonized the country 1000 years later in 1890, the London Missionary Society carried out a mass genocide persecuting anyone who didn't subscribe to Christianity. Most traditionalists went underground but Christianity overtook the mainstream and anything else was frowned upon. The Christian fundamentalism of the London Missionary Society days is still the same today and traditionalists are demonized and accused of witchcraft, especially women. Women had important roles in traditional society. They were religious leaders as spirit mediums through whom the ancestors spoke. The famous Mbuya Nehanda is a good example, she led the first resistance war against British settlers in 1893 until they caught her and hung her the same year. The rise of capitalism and Christianity has left women in a very disadvantaged position today. Religion in Zimbabwe actually profits off the poor because prosperity gospel pastors are rising, selling people false hope. The most famous of them all right now is Walter Magaya, a millionaire who has multitudes of rape allegations against him from young women in his congregation, but because he has the police and powerful politicians in his pocket, he walks free selling miracle cucumbers, fake HIV medicine etc... It's plain ridiculous.

Jacobsen: If we are looking at poor men, if we're looking at rural populations, if we're looking at women in general, and those with disabilities, what are the positives of religion? What are the negatives religion?

Mazwienduna: The Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Apostolic Faith Mission churches have done the most when it comes to poverty and helping the poor. My mother grew up in an

abandoned child-headed family and it was Catholic nuns who took them to school. They have continued to run orphanages and pay fees for disadvantaged children up to this day. The majority of churches coming up nowadays however are there to profit off the poor. Some of them even promise miracle money if you give them “seed money.” even buying a front seat close to the “anointed man of God” on Sundays costs a fortune, yet people desperate for financial miracles are always eager to buy these seats for more than they can afford.

Jacobsen: I ask this within a Zimbabwean context. How can alliances within African states and between statewide organizations begin to manifest in a more robust way? I know of some initiatives in Africa and what is happening. I know of some statewide organizations in various African nations.

Mazwienduna: The African Civil Society needs to develop reliable networks that are based on the need for progress alone, and not politics. It is also important that we have a lot more discussion concerning progressive issues between activists from different fields.

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

Mazwienduna: Thank you Scott, it’s always a pleasure.

Ask Shingai 1 – Zimbabwean Non-Theism

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 10, 2019

Shingai Rukwata Ndoro is the Interim Chairperson of the Humanist Society of Zimbabwe. We will explore the nature of theism and non-theism, and so on, in the context of Zimbabwe for this educational series. Here we talk about Zimbabwe and non-theism.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are the brands of non-theism encountered by you?

Shingai Rukwata Ndoro:

1. Gnostic non-theism.
2. Agnostic non-theism.

Jacobsen: What are the demographics of religion and non-religion there?

Ndoro: There are no credible statistics available except those by the Christians to project a majoritarian representation of themselves.

From an ordinary assessment, Christians are their majority.

Jacobsen: How tied to progressive politics are atheistic views?

Ndoro: We have tended to avoid politics among the community of non-theists because it has been one of the major divisive matters.

This is because we are split right in the middle between right and left ideas and between pro-government and anti-government sentiments.

Take note:

1. *Right*: more individual freedoms (steeped in European liberalism), pro-business and limited government involvement.
2. *Left*: less individual freedoms for collective rights (steeped in European conservatism), anti-business and expansive government involvement.

Jacobsen: How tied to conservative views are traditional religions and traditional Zimbabwean belief structures?

Ndoro: Very strongly tied. Conservative views are actually the default positions of most of those who are religious.

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

Ndoro: As an addition, there are many non-theists whom we know within our community who are closet due to social exclusion and economic vulnerability.

Microfinancing African Secularism

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 10, 2019

The Brighter Brains Institute or Humanists Global based out of the San Francisco Bay Area, California in the United States of America wants to assist with the development of the atheist community within various African nation-states. This is through microfinancing.

Microfinancing or the gifting of microfunds does not remain a new phenomenon, but one used for the assistance of entrepreneurs at various levels. One ex-Muslim and atheist, Mubarak Muhammed Bala, is the President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria.

Humanists Global is a non-profit entity and, therefore, or by implication, does not profit on the outcomes of these microfinancing endeavours. The vision of the organization is the improved status of the non-religious or the secular or the non-religious around the world.

In Nigeria, for Bala, religious law, in particular Sharia law, as interpreted there, is a significantly bad item in country for the secular. For speaking openly or using his constitutional right to freedom of expression, Bala has received numerous death threats because of the opinions have been deemed too heretical.

Bala, as many of non-theists have experienced, were either bullied into leaving a job or outright fired from a position due to a politically and socially motivated religious fundamentalist with an intense xenophobia, bigotry, and prejudice against the secular individual.

This raises questions about the survivability and long-term economic viability of the life for Bala. There is a project by Humanists Global or Brighter Brains Institute (BBI) to help those like Bala in supporting themselves as entrepreneurs in various African countries.

Humanists Global's Director, Hank Pellissier, is an activist who founded the "the world first atheist film festival" in 2009. Pellissier created the atheist calendar in 2010, then moved onto founding BBI in 2013. Then he founded the "world's first atheist orphanage" in 2015.

According to Humanists Global or BBI, "\$300 is enough to buy a sewing machine, fruit juicer, used motorcycle, ten milk goats, washing machine, kerosene tank, corn grinder, fifty chickens, popcorn machine, or dozens of other items for new business ventures in Africa. Humanist.Global / BBI has provided funds for 77 small projects. The majority go to women's collectives. "

The Buhanga Thuligahuma Women's Group in Uganda received \$300 to found Bio-Briquette Business. Bala founded Kaduna Fries, a street stall. Humanists Global intends to help atheists marginalized and persecuted for beliefs and wants to assist in the expansion of the membership of the organizations, too.

For U.S. citizens, there is a tax deductible receipt for donations, and for Canadians, there are a letter of appreciation, a photo, and then periodic updates on the progress of the initiative.

DONATE HERE

For more information, email BrighterBrainsInstitute@gmail.com

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Interview with Members of the Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 12, 2019

Here we talk with members of the Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum about their community.

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

Gonzales: I was born into a Catholic Hispanic family and baptized. When I was 10, my parents got divorced and my mother remarried; she was no longer welcome in the Catholic Church, so we became Presbyterians. I began to doubt the existence of god when I was in high school in the sixties; but did not discover Unitarianism until the 1990s..

Chapman: I come from a rabidly fundamentalist family, was isolated from other children to protect me from wickedness, and only allowed to read the Bible, Encyclopedia, and a few science books. Hell was the core of the belief system. My love of science helped me escape (I still say that Einstein saved me from hell.) For years I hated all religion. But travel introduced me to eastern thought; reading led me to humanism, and in 1990, I discovered UU.

Brumley: After years of questioning fundamental religious teachings, the lights finally came on during my sophomore year at Baylor University. For the next forty years I shunned religious gatherings. In the late 90's, a friend invited me to check out a Unitarian/Universalist Congregation with no creeds to adhere to and that is where I have remained

Austin: I was brought up in a conventionally (and not very actively) mainline Protestant family. My sister and I were sent to mainline Sunday schools, and in my high school years I became active in Presbyterian youth groups. I formed the notion of becoming a Presbyterian minister, and enrolled in divinity school. It became apparent before long that my "calling" was to academe, not parish ministry. I completed a Ph. D. in religious studies, with an emphasis on theology and philosophy of religion. I ended up teaching philosophy in nonsectarian universities for 43 years.

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

Gonzales: The longer I live and the more I see, less logical is the existence of an omnipotent, loving "god". And I began to wonder: how can I know what happens after death? What I know is that I have this Life, right here, right now; and I am part of a large system of humanity to which I have responsibilities and which I can see. I know this is a chance to make a difference, and I'm trying not to blow it. I also know that there is lots I don't know and understand.

Chapman: At 12, I realized that the link between time and motion precluded combustion without time, freeing me from the fear of a timeless burning Hell. Literature and philosophy encouraged me to think and reflect. Music, art, theatre and nature's beauty provide transcendent awe. I love reading the myths of various cultures, but the religions around them have done a lot of social harm. So I'm dedicated to learning, social justice, awe, and celebrating the joy of a secular life.

Austin: In the course of my academic life, I “evolved” toward secularity (no sudden break). One major impetus was a longstanding interest in science-and-religion issues, beginning with the time when I was about 13 and heard a church elder thunder “The trouble with evolution is that it takes away the credit from Almighty God.” Even then I thought something was askew there. A second impetus came in my early college years when I discovered utilitarian ethics, which immediately made much more sense to me than an oppressive morality of “thou shalt nots.”

Jacobsen: How did the Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum start?

Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum: Four members of the UU Congregation of Santa Fe – Mary Ellen Gonzales, Roger Brumley, Mim Chapman, and Bill Austin – met over coffee and shared our desires for a stronger humanist presence in our congregation. We decided to create a space and time devoted to discussing important topics and stimulating our thinking regarding political, philosophical, ethical and social issues. We knew many people in our UU community would be interested. The four of us also had connections in the wider community, and believed that, in addition to members of our congregation, others might be interested in a Humanist group. So Ms. Gonzales agreed to approach the administration of our UU Congregation to ask about meeting space and time. She also agreed to post notices of our meetings in local papers. The others personally invited their friends and connections to meetings. All of us discussed and researched topics, and we were off and running.

Jacobsen: What are the demographics of the community now?

Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum: The Freethinkers generally attract from 15 to 22 folks each third Sunday. Attendees are usually evenly divided by gender. Some members of the Unitarian/Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe (UUSF) attend. We meet on the third Sunday of each month from 8:30 – 10:00 am, ending shortly before the main service begins at 10:30A. Starting in Sept, we are going to experiment with extending the conversation over a brown bag lunch after the morning service,

Jacobsen: What are your tasks and responsibilities in the Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum?

Gonzales: I have two major jobs. One is interface with our local UU church, and the other is to get notices of our meetings and their topics in the local papers. Of course, I also help plan our activities and topics and sometimes lead our discussions.

Chapman: I maintain our Meetup site, posting each month’s topics, welcoming new members, sending email reminders. I also submitted our Freethinker Friendly Congregation application to UU Humanists and am our connection to AHA, of which we are an affiliate chapter.

Brumley: Generally, the task of managing the Freethinkers programs is shared among the four original organizers. This includes recruiting presenters, moderating the meeting, collecting donations, distributing Humanist/Freethinkers information, posting notices of meetings times and topics on local media, etc.

Austin: I participate in planning sessions of the “Gang of Four,” and sometimes lead Forum discussions.

Jacobsen: What have been important social and political activities of the Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum?

Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum: Important social and political activities are usually related to the subject matter being presented. During a recent restorative justice program, a local District judge

came and contributed his experiences in the judicial system. The Freethinkers developed a welcoming statement that appears on the UUSF website. Our congregation has met all the requirements to be officially designated as a Freethinker Friendly Congregation, and last spring the Sunday service was totally devoted to a description of humanism, followed by a congregation-wide celebration of our Freethinker Friendly status. Third Sunday meetings are advertised on several local media outlets.

Jacobsen: What are some new projects for the Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum?

Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum: We are considering applying for a Humanist Chapter grant to enable us to expand our visibility and influence and to reach out more effectively to other parts of our community, such as our colleges, local atheist and skeptic groups, and other liberal organizations

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

Gonzales: Marcela Diaz.

Brumley: The UUSF Minister, Gail Marriner is a public face for the Freethinkers, along the four organizers.

Jacobsen: What are other important organizations in the area?

Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum: Santa Fe, NM is the capitol for State government but has a long history of being a liberal, progressive community. There are numerous organizations that offer assistance for progressive causes. The City also offers many different healing organizations promoting holistic therapy.

There are a number of other non-theistic groups in New Mexico, including an atheist group and several non-theistic discussion groups.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum?

Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum: People from the UU congregation see the notices of our meetings on their email log, and the larger community finds us through our postings in the calendars of several newspapers. We also have a Meetup site, so people can find us online.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Santa Fe Freethinkers Forum: We'd love it if you shared with the Santa Fe Freethinkers information about how you are helping the atheist/Humanist/Freethinkers cause in Canada! Thanks.

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

Ask Herb 13 – This is a Torch, Carry It: These are My Wounds, Learn From Them

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 12, 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 passing on the torch and learning from pain.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Any activism comes with costs, as discussed in prior parts of the interview. Performing leading activism, these come with a significant level of costs to carve a path through the brush of uncharted territory. As you carried the torch of secular activism forward and made necessary sacrifices for progress seen in the current moment, what were the wounds from the conflicts?

Time with the potential for being spent on more emotionally or intellectually satisfying material, as a modestly gifted and talented mathematician with a significant position in the academic world. Relationships destroyed; professional work missed; chaos imbued into normal life; tensions in intimate relationships over the stress of controversies, and so on. What can the wounds teach the next few generations of secular activists?

What tricks, deceits, and immoralities will the egregiously fundamentalist, literalist, and so on, utilize in, from their view, an eternal battle between Good and Evil to annihilate the Satanic forces of secular humanism, secularism, modern science including evolution via natural selection, progressive and Enlightenment ideals, equality of women, and the improved status of LGBTI+ and other undesirables and reprobates, including “fornicators,” who do not know their place? The work, again from their view – usually, Dominionist or Reconstructionist – as stated rather bluntly ad nauseum (to everyone else as far as I can tell), to fight for the forces of Good, God, nation, the Holy Bible, and, even in some cases, the dominance of the race for their rightful place.

Herb Silverman: My engagement with secular activism turned out to be more of a “blessing” than a sacrifice. I first got engaged with the movement in 1990, by accident, when I learned that our South Carolina State Constitution prohibited atheists from holding public office. So I went to the ACLU to ask how this obviously unconstitutional provision could be changed. The legal director said an atheist plaintiff would need to run for governor in the current election year, and that I should become that Candidate Without A Prayer (later the title of one of my books). I ran and of course lost, so my case was ruled not ripe because I lost. However, in 1997 I won a similar case in the state Supreme Court because the state had not allowed me to become a notary public, and so atheists are now eligible to hold public office in South Carolina.

Through the publicity I received, I heard from many people who had thought they were the only atheist in South Carolina. That inspired me to start a secular humanist group in my hometown of Charleston, and that group still thrives. I also heard from national atheist and humanist groups that I had not previously known about, and I joined them all. This led me to help found the Secular Coalition for America, which currently represents 19 national, nontheistic organizations to lobby for secular rights in Congress.

Fortunately, the College of Charleston, where I was teaching, is a public institution that takes academic freedom seriously. It didn't try to prevent me from engaging in political activity as long as I didn't imply that the College endorsed my positions. Many of my colleagues told me that they were also atheists. I continued to teach and do mathematical research, though as I engaged increasingly in secular activism my research productivity began to decline. I retired from the College of Charleston in 2009 at age 67 to devote myself full time to secular activism.

As far as friendships go, I didn't lose friends because of my activism. Those who were upset by my activities were not true friends. If I lose a friendship because I am being myself, then I don't consider it much of a loss. I also made many new friends and long-lasting relationships in the secular movement. The best for me personally was that I met Sharon Fratepietro, who volunteered to help in my campaign for governor. We are now married and have been living happily together for 29 years.

I can't speak for others who might worry about losing friends if they become engaged in secular activism, other than to quote from Hamlet, "To thine own self be true." I think it's better to be comfortable in your own skin than to hide who you are in order to please those you might not respect. Of course, caution may well be necessary when dealing with religious family members or employers. I've heard from people who mentioned their atheism to friends, family members, or coworkers and were pleasantly surprised by a "Me, too" response, or about the doubts some have about religion. While it is still a stigma in some places to be an atheist, it is less stigmatic than it used to be. The fastest growing national demographic in surveys about religion are the "nones," people with no religion. They are not all atheists, but most are atheist-friendly.

Religious fundamentalists continue to be very active and politically influential, but I think they are beginning to lose some of their influence. Many young evangelicals and those in other religions are breaking away because they oppose the political influence their churches exert on issues like LGBT and women's rights, not to mention the negative effect of hypocritical scandals like pedophilia. And there's no doubt that the abundance of influential scientific findings even more marginalizes the outdated teachings in some religions.

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

Interview with Prosper Mutandadzi – Zimbabwean Author, Filmmaker, Freethinker, & Humanist

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 15, 2019

Prosper Mutandadzi is a Member of the freethought community and the budding humanist community in Zimbabwe, and an author and filmmaker. Here we talk about his life, work, and views.

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

Prosper Mutandadzi: I grew up in a Catholic Family and Catholic Environment. I am the second born in a family of five.

My father was a headmaster at a secondary school. But I started doubting religion when he was Deputy Headmaster at Assisi Secondary School around 1977. I was still young, having been born in 1971.

At the mission, a friendly white priest was replaced by a black one. This is when even at that tender age I started asking questions about religion.

The white priest had allowed us to eat the peaches and guavas at the trees inside the mission.

But the replacement, the black one, did not only stop us; he stoned us! Throwing stones at 5-or-6-year-olds made me question how a representative of god could be that cruel.

But being African, naturally, traditional religion has equal importance as much as the adopted Christian religions. So, at functions like marriage, death, etc., the two often come into conflict and, naturally, I witnessed the conflicts growing up.

Parenting became an issue at St. Alberts Catholic mission. My father headed the school. School kids were forced to attend. I, thus, was forced to because it would be contradictory for my father to force boarding kids without forcing me (a day scholar).

The incident I cited of stoning. Plus, at St. Albert's, I saw many priests and nuns getting into relationships (sexual) with each other or the community. Most of them were also very cruel and did not practice what they preached.

I had also started reading novels a lot, especially investigative novels like the Hitchcock ones, the Hardy Boys, and even the Sherlock Holmes books (despite the author being religious). This gave me a questioning mind at a tender age.

So around 11 years, I was no longer religious, but was still being forced to attend church. I did not know about atheism. I did not know of any grown-up who was, so it was like a lone battle. I had no one to confide with.

I speak Shona and am of the Chovanhu (Bantu culture).

In grade 5, I and a friend wanted to avoid a teacher who was very cruel who wanted to teach us. The head, a nun would have none of that and, in fact, gave us an even worse cruel teacher just to get us fixed.

I must, however, point out that not all nuns were very cruel.

In 1978, Assisi school was closed at night by freedom fighters who burnt it. We became refugees at the nearby city then called Enkeldorn, (now Chivhu). We were housed at a Catholic church.

There were mosquito's there biting us. My older brother tried to kill some in the presence of a nun.

The nun flatly refused. She remarked that the mosquitos were god's creation and, therefore, should not be killed.

I was surprised. So, god wanted mosquitoes to suck on us? The nun was great, but it also left me with many questions.

Let me take an hour break then address the rest. I must visit someone in the hospital.

Jacobsen: How were parenting style and early school for you?

Mutandadzi: To their credit, my parents only forced us to church so that other students would not complain. After we left the mission, they never forced us to church anymore. In fact, I realized that my father was somewhat agnostic after we left the mission. But they also did not want to follow the traditional religion which most people did.

This resulted in them conflicting with many relatives. Most people in our culture believe any illness and death is caused by someone and spirit mediums or traditional doctors should be consulted. But my parents would have none of that.

Jacobsen: What have been important educational attainments for you?

Mutandadzi: I am not very keen on education. I have, however, a BA in English and Communication, another degree in Adult Education, and an MBA.

I hoped to perdue a doctorate one day, but as I grew older, seeing the most educated people in our community lacking a questioning mind. I became disillusioned. I no longer valued school after that.

Jacobsen: As you've been in professional life, what have you noticed as barriers to interpersonal life while at work in a largely religious workplace in terms of coworkers' religiosity?

Mutandadzi: You are usually the easiest target if you are the only one without religion. A lot of people do not want to associate with you at your workplace. You are bullied. You are called names and the popular ones being Satanist and Illuminati. (Apparently, people here believe these groups are real and exist. If you are an atheist, you become an outcast and easily earn the password Satanist or Illuminati even at your workplace.)

You naturally get forced to join in prayer meetings (which most people believe in) or traditional things (mostly at family functions though. If say a relative is sick, a traditional healer may be consulted, and you are forced to know to at least you are accused of wanting that relative to die).

You are considered an unwanted pimple if nonreligious. In fact, some job adverts can be as segregatory with wordings like a Christian person wanted. Or it's a Christian environment.

Most religious co-workers will not be that friendly with you and you are regarded as an unthinking person who at the earliest opportunity can lose the job if there is a need to remove some employees.

Even relationships (love affairs), you have many people refusing to have an affair with you if you declare that you are not religious. You must pretend that you are.

Jacobsen: What are some of the social and political, and professional, benefits to being religious in Zimbabwe?

Mutandadzi: Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans are highly religious. You get more respect, friends, love, and trust if you are religious (this has made our political leaders highly religious as well just to get the vote); I, thus, doubt an atheist can be voted for if he or she is open about his or her affiliation (non-)religious wise.

As I am writing this, I am in a heated argument with my relatives whom I am telling I want to donate my body to science when I die, but they are refusing. They are saying it's against our culture (read: our religion), but this is what I want. Yet, all relatives, because of some religious affiliations, do not see that as something that should be allowed.

Jacobsen: If we examine different issues faced by men and women in Zimbabwe, in religious settings, how are the same? How are they different?

Mutandadzi: Most religions are anti-women in Zimbabwe. Yet, ironically the biggest followers are women. This is both in traditional religion, and in Christianity and Islam.

In fact, pointing out how unfair these religions treat women, ironically, gets one many enemies from the same women.

There are few women who can lead traditional ceremonies or Christian groupings, for starters, but most women in Zimbabwe do not find that amiss.

There are apostolic sects that make women get married as young as 11 years and also allow polygamous marriages and giving examples of biblical patriarchs who were also polygamists.

Jacobsen: Have there been particularly egregious scandals involving religious leaders and others?

Mutandadzi: There have been issues of rape, misappropriation of funds, corruption, and allegations of murder among Zimbabwe's religious leaders.

As we speak, one of the millionaire religious leaders has a case in the courts on raping several of his congregation members. Another was arrested around 2013 for a similar crime and is still in jail. Another in 2015.

Some congregations have also alleged some women were killed to be silenced. There are also cases of people who used their money after being lied to that it would multiply several times if they gave the pastors, but it did not. In fact, they got nothing in return.

Jacobsen: What did the secular learn from those public events?

Mutandadzi: The nonbelievers are very few and already knew of such possibilities. The religious, however, are quick to jump into the arms of the next pastor (choosing pastors is like a fashion show. There are a new trendy pastor people follow six months or so. And that keeps changing).

So instead of seeing that they are being fooled most are the 'see no evil hear no evil and talk no evil' type. If they don't defend their accused pastor with a passion, they will simply hop in with the next trendy pastor, and the mad circle continues, forever!

Jacobsen: What would be a major victory for the freethought community in Zimbabwe?

Mutandadzi: Getting a foothold in the media would be a great accomplishment.

Jacobsen: How could it get done?

Mutandadzi: I am a writer and completed a sayings book on atheism last year (“He Said, She Said”), which, unfortunately, did not do so well. I am also in the process of writing another one called The Bible. The main problem. Here it’s difficult to get our books on Amazon, for instance, so they hardly sell internationally.

I am, however, also a filmmaker. Because of a lack of filming equipment, I am concentrating on cartoons and starting this week will be releasing a cartoon series on YouTube entitled: “The Priests Dilemma.” This is to popularise atheism here and elsewhere.

It would have been easier, though, with our own TV station (that is difficult in Zim) or filming equipment, so that we give finished products to our national broadcaster like the religious do.

This would see us gaining ground from the religious. Around 1999, there was a programmer on our TV that pitted the Jews against the Christians, which was popular with many people because of the debates.

If such a programmer was revived but with atheists as some of the participants, I am sure we will get mileage. It would be a major step in the right direction.

Jacobsen: Any recommended authors or speakers?

Mutandadzi: I have not met an author who writes on atheism in Zimbabwe or Africa as yet. I am trying to be one myself pioneering that.

Jacobsen: Any recommended organizations?

Mutandadzi: In Zimbabwe, there are none that I know of.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion

Mutandadzi: The Humanist Community in Zimbabwe just needs a small opening, and they will be a force to reckon with. I know a lot of people who are willing to give humanists a chance, but do not have many details about it. So finding a way of highlighting our issues to the public will go a long way.

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

Ask Shingai 2 – Political Strife and Religious Consolation

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 15, 2019

Shingai Rukwata Ndoro is the Interim Chairperson of the Humanist Society of Zimbabwe. We will explore the nature of theism and non-theism, and so on, in the context of Zimbabwe for this educational series.

Here we talk about the positives of religion, the negatives of religion, and political influence of religion in Zimbabwe.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When we think of the ways in which religion provides community, how does religion provide community, as a positive, in Zimbabwe?

Shingai Rukwata Ndoro: I'm not sure if we remove socialisation about religion and if we go into the psychology of the religious texts and the principals figures therein, one can find positives about religion in this country or any country.

There are these aspects of the Dark Side of the Bible ordinarily ignored by scholars and apologists:

1. Bible Vice Verses www.vice-verses.com/the-bible,
2. Bible Dark Side www.nobeliefs.com/DarkBible/DarkBibleContents.htm
3. Skeptics view of the Bible www.skepticsannotatedbible.com
4. The evil nature of the Bible www.evilbible.com
5. The Character of the Biblical Abrahamic God <https://www.facebook.com/notes/shingai-rukwata-ndoro/the-character-of-the-biblical-abrahamic-god/1392135150800485/>

Jacobsen: What negatives co-exist alongside these positives, which makes any analysis of religion, at root, complicated and ambivalent (as this only exists as one example)?

Ndoro: Despite Zimbabwe being a secular republic and a constitutional democracy, there is too much influence of the religious in the political system. This arose from the colonial privileges and advantages for Christianity that have remained protected and defended. School assembly Christian prayers, public events prayers and preachings, default Christian public swearing in public institutions, coverage of Christian events and views in public media and a total disregard for other religions and the non-religious, open Christian declarations by public officials as if it protects them from scrutiny, non-existent public questioning or examination of Christian beliefs and claims, Christian figures given undue privileges and prominence in public gatherings and national events.

Jacobsen: How does religion influence the political situation in the history of Zimbabwe? How deep is religious indoctrination in government now?

Ndoro: Christianity was introduced in the 16th century and then after some few years died. It was then re-introduced by the colonizing Pioneer Column that arrived in 1890.

Before that locals had their own ceremonies, traditions and rituals that were then declared by Christian missionaries as evil and inspired by a devil.

The highest authority in the metaphysical “world” was the paternal ancestors who were then supplicated through appropriate music, traditional beer and ground tobacco.

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

Ask Herb 14 – Secular Malcontents

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 15, 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 secular issues in secular communities.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Secular communities, and community members and leaders and organizations, can make mistakes, as with any human institution. What mistakes have been glaring in the history of secularism in the 20th century? What errors continue to plague the secular communities into the 21st century? What are the taboos of the community needing more open, though respectful, logical, and evidence-based, conversation? Of course, some items are seen as taboo – left, center, and right – and simply aren't, while some simply remain missed – except by a few who become instantly marginalized. Can't rewrite the past, can rectify aspects of its effects now, even so, how can secular communities create positive progress on net and in all secular communities without creating new bigotries passing off as secular ideals, and so on?

Herb Silverman: Secularists often disagree about what we should be called. Many secularists are uncomfortable with the word "atheist" because it describes what we don't believe, rather than what we do believe. After all, we don't go around calling ourselves A-Easter Bunnyists or A-Tooth Fairyists. Other labels atheists use include humanist, secular humanist, freethinker, skeptic, rationalist, agnostic, ignostic, apatheist, and many more. If you don't know what each word means, don't worry. Even those who identify with such labels often disagree about their meanings. Parsing words might be a characteristic of folks engaged in the secular movement. Though there are fine distinctions, which many of us like to argue about, it often comes down more to a matter of taste or comfort level than deep theological or philosophical differences.

I pretty much view "atheist" and "humanist" as two sides of a coin. I'm the same person whether I talk about what I don't believe as an atheist or what I do believe as a humanist. Atheists and humanists try to be "good without any gods," though humanists might focus more on "good" and atheists more on "without gods." The word "atheist" gets more attention and "humanist" sounds more respectable to the general public. My "conversion" from agnostic to atheist was more definitional than theological. As a mathematician, I couldn't prove there was no god, so I took the agnostic position, "I don't know." But when I learned that an atheist is simply someone without a belief in any gods, I also became an atheist.

Here's an interesting distinction between Christians & secularists: Christians have the same unifying word but fight over theology; secularists have the same unifying theology, but fight over words. At least our wars are only verbal.

Despite the growing number of secularists, we haven't been nearly as influential politically as most other minority groups. That's in part because we pride ourselves on being so independent.

Whatever labels secularists prefer, it improves our culture by cooperating on the 95 percent we have in common rather than arguing about the 5 percent that sets us apart.

We need to establish our legitimacy as a demographic. That's why I helped form the Secular Coalition for America, currently with 19 national member organizations, covering the full spectrum of nontheists. Its mission is to increase the visibility of and respect for nontheistic viewpoints, and to promote and strengthen the secular character of our government. The Secular Coalition incorporated as a political advocacy group to allow unlimited lobbying on behalf of secular Americans, with lobbyists in Washington, DC. So please check the website www.secular.org and consider signing up for action alerts.

One problem some secular organizations have is mission creep. For instance, all members of the Secular Coalition care about starving children, but that issue falls outside its mission. The Secular Coalition does get involved with issues like evidence-based education and science denial. Most secular organizations don't have the resources to expand their mission.

While secularists certainly respect science, some also support scientism, which promotes science as the only objective means by which society should determine normative and epistemological values. Scientism claims that the scientific method must be used to answer all important questions, and that science is the only reliable source of knowledge. Some (but not I) would argue that all moral questions can be answered through science.

While fundamentalists in all religions seem to have an "Us vs. Them" mentality, so do many secularists who put all religious people in the same category. We turn off potential allies when we assume all religionists are fundamentalists, and ask them to justify passages in their holy books that they find every bit as absurd as we do. Some atheists make the same mistake as religious conservatives, treating the Bible as either all good or all bad. While it contains many boring, anachronistic, contradictory, misogynistic, and repetitive sections, it also has passages with rich and diverse meanings. The same can be said for Greek mythology—fictional tales that were once religious texts.

Progressive Christians are as appalled as we are by the merger of Christianity and government, embarrassed by Christians who use their religion for political gain, and annoyed that this brand of Christianity grabs media attention. I think we must look for opportunities to bring moderate religionists to our side. They are concerned that too many Christians are neglecting the Christianity promoted by the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr., who worked on behalf of the marginalized—the helpless, the sick, and the poor. Such Christians are more "us" than "them." On most political issues important to secularists (separation of religion and government, LGBTQ and women's rights, etc.), liberal religionists are usually our allies.

I try to find common ground with theists, even when it's difficult. I was once asked if I could find any common ground with Jerry Falwell, and I could. Here's how: Jerry Falwell once said, "God doesn't hear the prayers of a Jew." I agree with Jerry Falwell. But for very different reasons.

As far as taboos go for secularists, I think just about anything can be discussed and argued. Our local secular humanist group once had a meeting at which people could bring up views that other atheists would likely find objectionable. I spoke on "The joys of incest," (and mentioning that for me the topic was purely theoretical). I said I saw nothing wrong if adult siblings wanted to have sex, as long as they took proper precautions to avoid having children. As did many in the audience, you should feel free to disagree with me about that.

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

Interview with Secular Community Member at Baylor University

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 29, 2019

Here we talk with a secular community member of Baylor University.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Looking at the landscape of the secular university life at Baylor University, what is the secular/religious status of Baylor University – its foundation and founding culture as a university, and its development over time into the present?

Secular Community Member at Baylor University: I must admit that I am ill-equipped to speak about the religious development of student life at Baylor, as I am from a different part of the state and have no relatives who have attended the university. I have, however, spoken with a long-standing professor (who is himself a Baylor alum) about student life during the late 1960s and early 1970s. From what I could gather, the university was much more religiously and culturally conservative during that time, particularly in the treatment of women: female students were required to wear long skirts or dresses (even for physical education classes, and in the Texas heat), a strict curfew was enforced for women living on campus, and the role of women as homemakers was emphasized. My professor recalled how men's dorms were cleaned by maid services, whereas the women were expected to keep their own living quarters spotless – and experienced consequences for failing to do so. I vaguely recall him mentioning that the expected conduct for unmarried women was different than for married women, but I cannot remember if he went into specifics.

While the nightmarishly oppressive student life my professor detailed has since faded into comparative liberalism and equality, traces of those harshly conservative times still linger. For instance, the university code of conduct prohibits sexual intercourse between two unmarried people for both students and staff (although there did appear to be an unofficial exemption for football players prone to sexual violence), and included “homosexual acts” as misconduct until 2015. Additionally, there is a cultural pressure among the female students of Baylor to marry young. A negative but popular stereotype of female students is that most are “seeking an MRS degree” – additionally, the desires of many young women manifested in the “ring by spring” culture often leads to extra stress and turmoil. I will never forget speaking with my Catholic RA my freshman year as she vented to me about the stresses of finding a responsible man in college; while her studies and schoolwork were important to her, it didn't appear to weigh as heavily on her as watching her crush sleep around and fretting over whether God would present her with a soulmate soon. Later that year, some of the RAs held a slumber party-like get-together in the basement where they discussed marriage, the importance of finding a godly man, how to keep your eyes open for your soulmate, and the importance of not giving up.

It occurred to me then that something was not right with this picture. College is supposed to be a journey of discovery and character-building, where you learn to grapple with the responsibilities of adulthood and begin truly coming into your own. However, for an entire population of women on campus, self-betterment seems to involve the addition of a man.

Baylor may be more inclusive and tolerant than it once was, but the remnants of old religious conventions are far from gone, and it affects most facets of student life for those groups not

traditionally favored by religion – from every Title IX poster reminding women of the double standard for chastity from which the only escape is a lack of consent, to the continued rejection of the campus LGBT club (but casual approval from Student Activities for a poster from an alt-right group attempting – and failing – to insult the pride flag with the communist hammer and sickle), to the religious mantra engraved into the side of the campus science building (“By Him all things are made”), which claims the rights to entire fields of research – regardless of the faiths or lack thereof of those who breathe life into their disciplines – for a deity which has nothing at all to do with science.

As far as the university-endorsed stances are concerned, the college adopts a liberal, academic interpretation of the Bible – including a non-literal interpretation of Genesis, history-oriented explanations of Old Testament Law, and a facts-based approach toward the resurrection. The university does not endorse creationism nor intelligent design. However, many students and professors are either creationists or supporters of intelligent design, and they are left to their own as long as they do not claim to speak on behalf of the university. This leads to a bizarre dynamic wherein many students graduate from Baylor with a science degree and still reject common descent.

Jacobsen: Who are the major groups and figures of controversy over time regarding secular matters on the campuses?

Secular Community Member at Baylor University: While Baylor is a conservative Baptist university, students from all walks of life are in attendance. There are few conflicts between secular and religious matters, as the population of secular students is small and willing to play by the university’s rules. We knew what we were getting into when we came here, and, simply put, we do not want to be expelled. While Baylor can improve by allowing the voices of secular students to be heard (it’s difficult to have a place welcoming of open discourse regarding faith if we’re not allowed to discuss the lack of it), there are no battles between secular and Christian causes. However, Baylor does face a constant, albeit much different problem: fundamentalism.

Two men from Baylor’s engineering department stand out in particular to me: Walter L Bradley (now retired) and Robert J Marks II, who are both prominent figures in the intelligent design community. Because Baylor’s official stance is in support of the theory of evolution and common descent (in concordance with the university biology department), the administration is extremely careful about ensuring that they cannot be misconstrued as holding a contrary position. Their rigidity is necessary; Baylor is a research-oriented university and proud of it. I’ve noticed that some of their motivation seems to be in a “Baptists/Christians can do science, too” spirit, as most of the religious classmates I’ve experienced in STEM take their faith and identity rather seriously, and have expressed feeling uncomfortable or occasionally offended when working with secular students outside of Baylor (it is common procedure for students in STEM to visit other universities for summer internships, research experiences for undergraduates (REU), travel to conferences, etc.). Other religious students insist that they are discovering the beauty of how God works, etc. Whatever the motivation, I wholeheartedly support the university’s devotion to excelling in scientific research (with America lagging behind in STEM graduates, we need everyone we can get!). As a part of this devotion, the university understands the damage an endorsement of creationism or intelligent design will cause. The biology and medical programs in particular are Baylor’s bread and butter, so endorsing pseudoscience would destroy the university’s credibility and livelihood.

I encountered the perfect physical manifestation of Baylor's Christian mission and faith-positive environment mixing with its scientific literacy during my honors college freshman camp. We were all piled into Bennett Auditorium, listening as a key figure within the English department encouraged us on our journeys in spiritual growth. She asked that we produce examples of "distractions from God" we may encounter during our college experience. The first student to answer responded with a quick, confident proclamation of, "Evolution!"

I watched as the professor faltered. She clearly did not want to correct the student and risk a negative reaction, but she could not endorse the position, either. After thinking on her feet, she then gently responded, "Scientism and materialism are problems, yes..." before continuing on to the next person.

I believe that, in that moment, that woman had become Baylor University incarnate.

In that same gentle spirit, the university required that Marks alter the website he created to promote intelligent design using Baylor's servers as a host, and which insinuated university endorsement. They also revoked grant money after discovering that Marks was using it to fund his work with Discovery Institute fellow William A. Dembski, which appeared to support intelligent design. Many would consider a misuse of funds and jeopardizing the university's academic standing a serious offense, but Baylor only politely removed themselves from the equation by ceasing financial support and asking that Marks insert a disclaimer on his website.

In response, Dr. Marks was interviewed in the propaganda film "Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed" and was touted as an example of how academic freedom is under attack. He now runs the campus apologetics club, Oso Logos (which some SSA members attend regularly for the sake of debate and communication) and is a bit of a celebrity to both clubs, albeit with opposite connotations.

Walter Bradley, though now retired, was a colleague of Marks who co-authored "The Mystery of Life's Origin: Reassessing Current Theories." Bradley had his work cited and was interviewed by Lee Strobel in "The Case for Faith." In the interview, he is presented as an "origin of life expert," though, to my knowledge, Bradley only formally studied engineering and does not have a strong background in biochemistry. Like Marks, Bradley taught in the engineering department. He was such a strong advocate for the Discovery Institute that they named a center after him.

However, these men are not Baylor's closest brush with endorsing intelligent design. That would be William A. Dembski, a fellow at the Discovery Institute, who, in 1999, managed to become paid staff at Baylor thanks to his friendship with Robert B. Sloan, then-president of the university. Sloan hired him without departmental consultation, and without the knowledge of the vast majority of Baylor's staff. Dembski founded the Polanyi Center, which was intended for research in intelligent design. When the website for the center went live, controversy immediately followed. Baylor staff protested the center's existence, and boycotted Dembski's efforts to establish credibility. Baylor's faculty senate voted 27-2 to dissolve the center. President Sloan refused until an outside committee suggested repurposing the center and integrating it into the already-existing Institute for Faith and Learning, whereupon he conceded. Dembski remained on-staff until 2005.

Baylor university strikes a delicate balance between being just secular enough to cultivate a respectable research environment and just pious enough to encourage Christian faith. When key players such as those mentioned above attempt to disrupt that balance by pulling the university

into fundamentalism, the staff are forced to restore the balance without appearing to contradict their Christian message.

It is actually quite impressive.

Jacobsen: If we take into account the culture surrounding Baylor University, what is it?

Secular Community Member at Baylor University: The culture within the university and the culture around the university are two very different subjects.

Baylor is a large, research-oriented private school with an acceptance rate of roughly 39%. The tuition alone is nearly \$43,000 a year. The student population is primarily white, and the school is known for its law and medical programs. In contrast, Waco high school has a total minority enrollment of 90%, with 71% of the students being economically disadvantaged. Test scores are far below average. The school is underfunded, uncared for, and eclipsed by the shadow of Waco's pride and joy, Baylor University. The university is physically located in a slum just outside of Bellmead, which has one of the highest crime rates in America.

Baylor is a fantastic university for those who can afford it, or for those who are lucky enough to have credit worthy family members who can co-sign a loan, or for those who go to a school which prepares them enough to do well on standardized testing and earn a scholarship. More often than not, those in closest physical proximity to the university are those least able to attend. To the university's credit, they are encouraging of locals to apply, and they have great volunteer groups and missionary groups who assist Waco schools and the greater Waco area. However, the imbalance persists.

Largely, the culture within Baylor is centered around student activity groups, Christianity, mission groups, classes, and marriage, whereas the culture around the university seems to be based on scraping enough together to get by.

Aside from the poverty issue, Waco is best known for David Koresh and Chip and Joanna Gaines. Our town also features a museum where you may pay to look at corporate advertisements.

Jacobsen: What have been some noteworthy and controversial public statements, events, and groups in Baylor University and its surrounding community?

Secular Community Member at Baylor University: Baylor recently had a nationally-headlining rape scandal with its football program. The highest figure was 52 rapes by 31 players between 2011 and 2014, but I am not sure those numbers were ever confirmed. Baylor has apparently made steps to improve. But many students cannot help but question their safety — for instance, 3 rapes were reported at South Russell hall (an on-campus dorm) a semester ago, and neither students nor parents of hall residents were notified. Instead, everyone learned about it through the student newspaper.

While Baylor has denied a charter to the campus LGBT club, it has granted recently a charter to a chapter of the Young Americans for Freedom, who have already started mischief by insulting the LGBT community with asinine fliers which equate minority sexualities with communism, and by inviting Matt Walsh to slander the LGBT community on campus.

Jacobsen: What have been some notable successes for the secular movements and communities on the Baylor University campus and in the surrounding area? How can secular communities and individuals build on them?

Secular Community Member at Baylor University: Simply put, there are not really any secular communities in the Waco area. The nearest groups are in Austin and Dallas, which are both 100 miles away. As far as I know, we're it. Because of this, our group is open to (and has attracted) non-students who are looking for a sense of community, or to become more involved in secular activism. As for our successes, we have managed to attract curious religious students, and have had fruitful conversations with many students who disagree with us. The best way to build on our community is to humanize atheism with kindness and compassion in order to undo the stigma and stereotypes religion so often saddles us with.

Jacobsen: How should young people become more deeply involved in the secular movements around the United States on the campuses? What are some cautionary notes for them?

Secular Community Member at Baylor University: If you are a student looking to get involved with secular activism on campus, joining your campus chapter of the Secular Student Alliance (or an atheist/agnostic/nontheistic group) is a fantastic first step. Coming from the president of a chapter with less than 10 members, believe me when I say that you can still do fantastic things with a small group! Find nonreligious charities or organizations to volunteer with in your community to give positive, productive atheistic representation. Though the negative stereotypes hanging over us were not created by our own actions and shouldn't exist to begin with, they won't go away until we actively reach out and break them. If you live in an area with atheist groups outside of campus, I would highly suggest joining at least one additional group as well; you'll likely be met with a mixture of people from all walks of life, many of whom may be helpful in your journey as a secular activist.

If your campus does not have a nonreligious club, consider establishing your own chapter of the Secular Student Alliance — even if your university is religious. Starting a chapter is easy (just go to their website!), and you can be operating your own underground nonreligious club with the backing, resources, and support of a national organization within a few weeks. Speaking from experience, our campus organizers have been fantastic at helping us navigate the waters of recruitment and establishing a presence despite not being university chartered, and residing on a campus where our identity carries a heavy stigma. Even if you're in a situation where you have to meet off campus and be secretive (our chapter has been there and done that), doing so is better than holding in your thoughts, emotions, and desires, and hoping that things will eventually get better. Establishing a chapter will, at the very least, give you a sense of community as you meet others in your same situation, and provide you with the peace of mind knowing that you put forth effort to make your environment a better place.

Utilize caution when publicly identifying with your group. Only post names or pictures of members with the permission of everyone involved. This is especially important if some members in your group are not out to family as nonreligious, or if you're on a religious campus, where your standing with professors and friends is influenced by the tacit assumption that you are also religious. Do not do anything that would jeopardize your education.

Jacobsen: What can build bridges between secular and religious groups?

Secular Community Member at Baylor University: Reach out to religious groups on campus. Attend one of their meetings, introduce yourselves to their officers and members, and facilitate polite, casual conversation. If they ask questions about your lack of faith, try to answer in a way which is relatable and inspires critical thinking. Generally, we have found that asking

questions is more effective than asserting things — the difference between “do you believe faith is an effective way to find truth” and “faith is not rational” may, to us, obviously state the same message. But to someone with whom you are ideologically at odds, they are more open to your ideas if you allow them to walk through the logical process themselves. I would highly suggest practicing before attempting to hold a conversation with a theist, as they may grow confrontational and the discussion has the potential to become high stakes — you are, after all, representing atheists, whom this group likely already has a bad image of. They may be more inclined to reinforce that preconception, so you might have to be careful. The mobile app Atheos is an excellent resource for helping you learn what conversations are worth engaging in, how to keep the discourse from escalating, and how to present your ideas in the most effective manner. Additionally, inquire about your conversation partner’s life and take an interest in them as a person. It goes a long way to humanize atheism, and you just might make a good friend along the way.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, and take care of yourself.

Exclusive Interview with Dr. Christopher DiCarlo

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 30, 2019

Dr. Christopher DiCarlo is an Author, Educator, and Philosopher of Science and Ethics. Here we get an exclusive interview with him.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, we have done an extensive interview before. Let's start from the top in terms of some activities and the programs that you're rolling out. Since we last talked, which was a couple of years ago, what have been some developments of the critical thinking tools that you're putting out now?

Dr. Christopher DiCarlo: I am working on my next book on critical thinking. Hopefully, it will be the last one that I need to write because I am becoming worried about becoming Noam Chomsky. I keep writing the same book over and over again.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

DiCarlo: [Laughing] it has all the same stuff in it, the usual tools for critical thinking. It looks at more contemporary issues like what is going on with the abortion issue in the States, what is going on with anti-vaxxers worldwide. It looks at more of those types of issues.

This time around is a little different now. I have a New York City agent. He signed me with a fairly big-time publisher in the U.S. Hopefully, this will get a little more recognition, a little more notice in the mainstream, hopefully in the U.S.

Basically, it is trying to get the tools into the mind of the average citizen, so they can have more engaging and critical conversations. In the long run, the hope is that this saves time, money, and energy, so that a lot of time is wasted in not knowing how to communicate effectively.

There are different issues. There are different ways of saying what I think is important. In that respect, it is always a worthwhile endeavour doing. The title of the next, latest book is So You Think You Can Think?

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

DiCarlo: We will see if the publisher wants to go with that title by publication time. It is working with an editor and an agent to get this, hopefully, done in the next few months. That's what I am doing in terms of the publishing right now.

In terms of working, I am not teaching a whole lot. I was teaching at the University of Toronto a bit. There were some issues with some faculty members there. That is a whole story in and of itself. I don't know if it has to do if I am seen as a bit of a radical educator.

But a couple of the faculty members there got a little jealous and didn't like how many students were appreciating what I was teaching, how I was teaching. I don't know if it had anything to do with the fact that I have been on the same talk shows as Jordan Peterson, and if they were trying to lump me into that group.

I am basically on the outs with the University of Toronto. This is my fourth university in, basically, doing what Socrates was doing, which was trying to get people to think more

responsible. Teaching is pretty much non-existent at this point nor will I ever fathom having an academic professorship.

The only people who get hired now are out and out nepotists. You just have to know somebody and you're in. Or you're so politically correct that they almost have to give you the job. I don't think I am fitting those bills too much these days.

I feel a little uneasy just getting hired because I just knew somebody. Let's face it, Academia, meritocracy, it is dead. It is pretty much dead. It has been dying the death of a thousand nepotistic rationalizations for years now.

We can finally put the tombstone on the grave. People don't get hired in academia now; unless, they're friends very, very deep inside. Or they're very, very politically what that department wants in terms of diversity. I am talking of liberal arts and humanities. Sciences are a different story.

They play their game over there. In the arts and humanities, it has all pretty much gone to shit. I would really rather not have to do anything with academia for the rest of my life because it is such a mess at this point.

Even the department that I was working in, the University of Toronto didn't offer a course in critical thinking. It is absolutely amazing what is going on at that level. I am thoroughly disgusted with postsecondary education. It is a joke, in the liberal arts and humanities.

I very much fear for the future of student education. I have been trying to get critical thinking in high schools in Ontario for almost ten years now. I have had some headway with the last provincial governments now and the minister of education.

Now that Doug Ford has taken over in Ontario, once he won, tried to get in contact with his minister of education of time, Lisa Thompson. Now, he has a new minister of education, to which my assistant put out a request immediately to meet with him to try to get critical thinking in high schools.

We haven't heard back yet. We hope to get something done in terms of having a meeting with the new minister. But my hopes are not overly high because they are placing a lot of focus with various other facets of the ministry.

So, a lot of my work has been consulting, has been working with various clients on various levels, and, surprisingly, a lot of that has to do with mental health now. It has to do with critical thinking and how that applies to therapy, how it applies to ethics, how it applies to public speaking and communication. That sort of thing.

I have been totally out of academia since April, 2018. I don't imagine that I am ever going to return. Unless, somebody, somewhere recognizes merit besides that they have the backbone to bring that into their curriculum, in whatever capacity.

We'll see. Ryerson, I am going to be working with them on some level on a series on ethics for a special component within continuing ed. That is a whole other thing altogether. That is not University proper.

Otherwise, I have got a really, really interesting project coming up.

Over the last 20 to 25 years, you have noticed that I do some God debates.

Jacobsen: Yes.

DiCarlo: Every time, I am asked. I say the same thing, “What side would you like me to take?”

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

DiCarlo: There is always a bit of a pause if they are on the phone. They say, “You’re an atheist. Aren’t you?” I say, “Well, yes, to your religion, sure. But I am agtheist. I am an atheist to any stated world religion because I can’t imagine any of them have it right. They haven’t been able to demonstrate that. I am agnostic insofar as I am wondering, ‘What could we possibly imagine the concept of God to be beyond what our little peon brains have been able to fathom at this point?’ Since I don’t know, I am not going to try to guide my life by some conception of what that might be, and use what we have available to us: the principles of logic, the laws that we have figured out in terms of science, and critical thinking. Those will make things better for us and in understanding the universe. If we discover some god-like entity, Hey! Bonus! In the meantime, I am not going to get hung up on people’s weaker-than accounts of what they think their god happens to be and then expect me to go along with that. I can’t do that. It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

With all these god debates, none of them allow them to take my side and me to take their side. I have been able to get some people. One of them being Dr. Michael Murray. Do you know the John Templeton Foundation?

Jacobsen: Yes.

DiCarlo: He was the president of the John Templeton Foundation. He was at one of the Wycliffe talks in Toronto. He was on stage with Geordie Rose and somebody else. He was quite an interesting character. So, I contacted him.

I said, “Would you ever be able to do a God debate but switch sides?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “You’re kidding. Okay.” I contacted Richard Carrier. Do you know Carrier? Do you know his work?

Jacobsen: Yes.

DiCarlo: Okay, then we contacted a woman named Lorna Dueck, she is the host of a CBC show called Context. It is kind of a Christian show. She had Andy Bannister guy on it. I don’t mind Lorna. She was alright. Bottom line, Lorna Dueck and Dr. Michael Murray are going to debate Richard Carrier and myself on the existence of God, not a particular god, but a good old fashioned Socratic dialogue.

Carrier and I will take pro. They are going to take the con. They are going to argue against the existence of God. We are going to argue for it. It is going to take place on Friday, September 13th. The title is “The Switch Debate.” This will take place in Downtown Toronto at the Toronto Public Reference Library during some festival.

It will probably be getting a lot of attention over the next few months. The purpose or why I want this type of debate is to show a level of humility on the part of believers and nonbelievers, where they can give up their favourite side and can Steelman their opponent view to the best of their ability to show collegiality, knowing that we do not believe these particular sides.

But we should make every effort to be in the mind of another, as it were. My hope is to try to demonstrate to the world, especially the US, that it is a sign of intellectual maturity to be able to

consider the other person's side without calling them "crazy," or whatever, but try to understand the biases at play that lead them to get to that belief that differs from yours now and to understand that it might change in the future.

A great way to get the dialogue going is to imagine what it is like to be that other person, to have that belief different than our own. We don't do this anymore. The ancient philosophers used to practice this continuously.

Take the other side, "But I don't favour the other side." "We don't care. Take the other side and see what you can do with it." You can find some interesting things out about yourself and the other person.

It is about education and knowledge and beliefs in a way that allows us, as Aristotle said, "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." It is to be able to do this in good faith.

I have written up a short manifesto for this event in which Lorna Dueck, Michael Murray, Richard Carrier, and myself have to agree to take this serious and to make sure that we make the very best judgments on our part to put forward the strongest argument that we can without making it a mockery, without making it slip that we aren't arguing from this particular side and being disingenuous and letting our true beliefs about the other side slip through.

It is a short manifesto that we'll all sign and agree to prior to this event. We have a fairly distinguished moderator from a television show here called The Agenda here in Ontario from TVOntario. They are a fairly good journalist and will be a good moderator and will be fairly neutral.

The basic hope is that The Switch Debate can be a model for future discussions on important issues. This one will be about God. In the future, I would love to have it about the Israel-Palestine conflict and have scholars switch their sides. I would love to see debates on abortion or the gun debate, and have them switch and do the best they can to see how they can manage to try to argue what they know is directly [Laughing], diametrically opposed to their current belief system.

I think it is a healthy exercise in education and in public discourse. We have lost touch with that. So, I am going to try and bring it back, make it interesting, and make it relevant again. Hopefully, this will have some traction with the public.

I have been planning this with CFI for months now. We are going to go public with it in the next few weeks. We will start a marketing campaign. Because I was worried somebody else would take the idea and run with it, certainly not with God.

Carrier and I are fairly well known in the atheist community. I don't know about Murray and Dueck. They are certainly well known in their communities. It can help people hopefully pay a little more attention and what it means to have a civilized conversation without the attacks of the ad hominem. We're seeing this on the news.

A return to civil discourse is really what it is all about with all its wondrous aspects of humility and civility, and consideration, and due diligence, and taking things serious and doing the best that we can. I can let you know about this now as we are promoting it.

Jacobsen: In the beginning of the interview, you mentioned abortion in the U.S. and anti-vax in the world. What is the current state of the issues around abortion in the United

States? What is the current state of issues around anti-vaxxers or anti-vaccination activists of a sort around the world?

DiCarlo: In the States, you have about 5 states – Georgia, Missouri, others – that are making it really, really difficult for women to access clinics for abortions. The appointment of Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.

When you connect the dots, it looks like a challenge to a Roe v Wade challenge from 1973. It made abortion federally legal for women. It would be pretty gutsy to try to do that. If they already have the states being heavily involved in limiting the number of places in which people can have abortions, mind you, it is much more complicated than this.

At the same time of places offering abortions being closed, the number of places offering advice on reproductive capacities are springing up with names like Reproductive Information, Family Therapy and Counselling, and so on.

These are Christian organizations that do not talk, at all, about abortion or anything like that. This is really the flip side of shutting the clinics down and then having these things pop up in the guise of places that can give women information into what their options are.

People have gone into these. The Daily Show has done it. Samantha Bee's show has done it. They've gone in and pretended to be women in need and recorded what is going on. They are told, "You have to keep the baby. You have to keep this kid." They say everything, except, "This is a child of God."

Once we go in, we know what their tactic is. It is a separation of church and state issue. It is very heavy-handed rightwing Christian ideologue religious beliefs that are getting in the way of essentially liberty. I have no issue with Christians being against abortion. It is internally consistent with the beliefs.

I think their beliefs are overall wrong. I don't think they reflect how reality actually is. But I am also a person who cares enough about liberty to say, "You have the right to practice certain ideological beliefs." But then there is always a proviso that comes with it, "So long as your beliefs do not harm others or other species."

When they shut down abortion clinics and open Christian advisory clinics in the guise of being unbiased and neutral and whatnot, now, they are harming. Because what is going to happen, the pre-availability of abortion levels before Morgentaler's 1988 court ruling, *R v Morgentaler*, [1988] 1 SCR 30, came into effect to allow Canadian women to seek out and access safe abortions.

You will see a lot of young women and maybe girls seeking out abortions from people who are highly unqualified and will unquestionably cause the same type of harms that we saw prior to the legalization and standardization of these kinds of procedures.

Add to that, the increase of unwanted pregnancies and magnify the type of complication that could be raised with a household that does not want the children or can't care for them. What will happen to them? What quality of life will they have? It doesn't make a lot of sense.

If you're a Christian and if you put forward your political and social ideologies to stop women from getting abortions because you believe you are saving the souls of babies, you are creating far greater harm.

We have every right to call this out and turn over the rock into the light of day, and what harm is actually being done in the name of one particular Christian viewpoint. That is what is going on in the States now in several states. Alabama and others are following suit. Most of the people doing this are white males. If you look at it, they are white guys.

It is weird that these guys think they can have a claim over what women can do with their own bodies. Irony is very much lost in Alabama in that respect. So, we need to approach the issue of abortion and try to understand it in terms of the least amount of harm, and what is the greatest fairness and justice to all concerned when it comes to abortion.

You have a complex issue, but not so complex that we cannot make up our minds and generate laws to allow people, especially women, the freedom to exercise their decisions in a safe and effective way.

So, that is abortion. The anti-vaxxers, we are seeing measles on a 25 year high. Why is this happening? Because people have a little knowledge, which is a dangerous thing. The thing that scares me from the anti-vaxxer media.

For the longest time on public media, I have been seeing a lot of shows on CNN, MSNBC, Fox, where anti-vaxxers were given equal time to say their point. It is not as though I think they do not have a right to say what they believe.

But it is when they state the same premises over, and over, and over again that have been falsified. The media is unable to understand the basics of critical thinking. The conclusion is obvious: to not vaccinate your child. What are the premises? "That stuff, we don't know what it is." No, you know exactly what it is. You can go to the CDC website. You can ask your doctor. Your doctor will tell you exactly what is in it.

The media hardly ever tells the public what a vaccine is and how it works. To me, this is the most fundamental thing that you have to do. If you have a story of vaccination and anti-vaxxers, how is a vaccine made? How does it work? Once you explain this in 30 seconds, you can present the arguments.

If you don't know what is in it, here is what is in it. At that point, what can you say? If you just look at the numbers, the likelihood of adverse effects from a vaccine, on average through a world population, is 1 in a million.

The death of a child by measles is 1 in a thousand. So, if you just look at the numbers alone in terms of the parenting giving their child a vaccination, the number is with the vaccination. We cannot go off herd inoculations anymore, as this has dipped below 95%.

Herd inoculation if only around 95% of the public is vaccinated. 5% can say, "No." The last calculation was around 92%. The 3% is the reason why we're seeing the increase in mumps, measles, and rubella.

It is funny. Some say, "Don't even have an argument with an anti-vaxxer." You have to have the argument. It is about how to voice the conversation. I don't think I have the solutions to all of these things, but I want to make an effort to, at least, try to cross the bridge and try to connect with the anti-vaxxers.

Because if you don't, they're going to just dig in more. More and more children will suffer because of their ignorance. This is a really interesting time in human history. These people are not stupid.

These people are often educated. They are literate. But they read the wrong kind of things. Then the confirmation bias gets so insulated. It gets so built up. How do you get through the insulated ignorance to penetrate to the core of the belief system to inject a little bit of reason? So, it can, hopefully, multiply and collect within their collective intelligentsia.

So, they can try to better understand what is actually at play here. Friends of mine who were born in Africa and live in Canada. They are amazed that people would not get inoculated. They do not know why people would not want to get proper vaccinations.

They would tell me stories of lining up for half of a day to get inoculated because they knew that this was going to keep them alive. In a way, it is a privilege over here. You can choose not to vaccinate your kid. They are quite surprised by those decisions.

Jacobsen: It seems like a problem quintessentially found in North America, first world or developed countries. The idea of malnourished fat people in the population. We have this. Similarly, we have the option to comfortably throw up perfectly good meals. Although, granted, it comes in a disorder in bulimia, bulimia nervosa.

It can come in situations in individuals who have the option to just be insulated in their informational networks and then deny really essential healthcare for kids to stay alive.

DiCarlo: Oh yes.

Jacobsen: You mentioned the death of meritocracy. In the academy or in Academia, what defines meritocracy in a brief definition? Then, what are some symptoms you noticed earlier on in the academic career previous?

DiCarlo: In Academia, meritocracy, merit is fairly objectively determined. It is who you worked with as a Ph.D. student, what university you graduated from, where you did your post-doc, what have you published, where you have published, where you have taught, have you gotten any grant funding, what conferences have you spoke at, what do people in general think about you.

So, those are the types of things that you see on a C.V. When they come across a desk, there are pretty obvious ways in which you can tell the merit of a person. If you are hiring someone to be a professor, you bring them in and say, "You published this. You published here. You've got so many books. You've got so many peer-reviewed articles. You've attained so much money from this organization and this type of government granting organization and whatnot. Great, how well can you teach? So, you can teach fairly well. You're the complete package. You're the right person for the department."

That's how it was done in the 70s. This was in the beginning of the 80s and prior. Once political objectives became entrenched within departments, it became really skewed. So, entire departments got taken over by either political ideologies, nepotism, or both.

Here is an example: go to any sociology department in Canada and the United States, England, ask how many rightwing professors that they have on staff. If you go to Guelph, let's say 40 professors, they'd be lucky to have one, if that.

It is probably not even that. The university sings a good song about diversity. That might work for skin color, ethnicity, gender, ability. That kind of diversity, absolutely. Political, philosophical, ideological, no, no, pretty much every sociology department – not everybody, but pretty much – in Canada and the United States will be extreme left-leaning and very, very much involved in social justice from the point of view of a Marxist-Feminist approach.

Nothing wrong with that. It is another model. It is another way of looking at things. But everybody looking at things like that? That's pushing it. So, it doesn't matter what merit a person might have. If they are outspoken, or if they let us know that they are an atheist or even centrist, or who would even consider if there is any value to a rightwing idea, they are considered anathema.

Immediately, they are out of the door. A blind eye will be turned to the merit in those respects for political reasons. The nepotism is pure and simple. I just watched so many people [Laughing] get hired out of candidates. It is just how things get done at certain levels.

The old saying, "It is not what you know. It is who you know." Yes, I have watched, in some cases, women get hired still doing their Ph.D. over people who have had 15 to 20 years of experience and written several books and whatnot.

It does not matter what the merit is. Somebody wanted that person for what ever reason, political or nepotistic reason. I kid you not. The person not even with a Ph.D. in hand gets hired. It is like, "Okay, at the point, there's no hope for merit. The decision has been made for them. Why make an effort to accomplish anything if it is never going to be recognized on a system that has been built over hundreds of years?"

That is the situation in Academia now in the liberal arts and the humanities. The students are going to suffer. The students will suffer. When they get out into the real world, the problem is going to be exacerbated, right? It is so unfortunate.

That we're basically closing the minds of our youth. We are not giving them the tools to critically evaluate information. Instead, we are spoon-feeding them – vanilla mediocrity.

Jacobsen: If we look at the very sincere and different concerns of different constituents of the culture, one will be economic. Another will be intergenerational as expressed just then.

Another will be cultural health with culture defined broadly as arts, humanities, sciences, etc., in the general population having at least a working knowledge of those things and the processes that bring about that knowledge.

What would be an economic consequence of this or has been an economic consequence of this? What has been or is a cultural health consequence of this?

DiCarlo: So, economic, I think if you teach people false information about human nature and then that trickles out into the political realm, where laws are being developed and norms are being established for certain types of behaviours that don't fit with reality.

That are developed through ideological-based reasoning and is an inaccurate way with how the real world functions. Then you're always, as a society, going to be playing catch-up. You're always going to be putting fires out.

If you have an ideological version of crime, one of the universities I worked at. I was brought in to help with the critical thinking and ethics for a criminology department. They were all Marxist-Feminist. They said, "Basically, capitalism is bad and the patriarchy out there."

I said, "What does that mean?" They said, "If the world wasn't so controlled by money, and if the world was not so controlled by men, then crime would be less." I said, "How do you know this?" They said, "Come on, it's obvious." I said, "Really? How?" If we were communist and led by women, there would be a lot less crime." They said, "Yes."

I said, "I don't think so. I think communism, at least socialism in certain levels, was a bit of a failure. I am all for social democracy. People should be able to make as much money as they want, so long as they are not harming others. We should help those who cannot help themselves. There is absolutely no question about that. But why do you think if you think there was no such so-called patriarchy that there would be less crime? Can you actually guarantee that?"

I looked at crime from a very broad, collaborative, interdisciplinary view. I want to look at neuropsychology. I want to look at genetics. I want to look at developmental behaviour. I want to look at nutrition. I want to look at sleep.

I want to look at economics. I want to look at history. I want to bring a bunch of different disciplines to the table when we're talking about criminology. Because that's what is there. You want to look at the complete aspect of human behaviour, not just capitalism and patriarchy.

Those might be important. But they are not the only things that we have to look at. If they keep cranking students at in this field, and if those students go into whatever branches of government, policing, or law, and if they try to put a square peg into a round hole thinking this is how human nature actually works, they are going to be woefully surprised.

What will happen, a huge amount of dollars will go into trying to put a square peg into a round hole. Now, we will try to play catch-up because that is not the way people are. We need to understand them in a more comprehensive way. Humans are more complicated than that. We need to be fairer in understanding human nature.

I'll give you an example. A colleague of mine when I was at this particular university in the criminology faculty. I asked straight out, "I know we can't put a figure on it. If you had to, nature-nurture, give me some numbers." She said, "Oh! That's easy. Nurture 99% and nature 1%." I said, "You can't be serious."

She said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Really? Everything is nurture. So, anyone can change at any time." She said, "Yes." I said, "So, why didn't oppressed homosexuals when they were being murdered for simply being gay? Why didn't they just choose otherwise if nurture is 99% of human behaviour? What about a serial killer? We find they have a grapefruit-sized tumour near the cerebellum. It made them think that God was talking to them. That he had to carry these things out. Or Vince Li, the Canadian, who killed that kid on the Greyhound bus because God told him he was sitting next to the Devil?"

If nurture was 99%, he should have been able to stop himself, but he was schizophrenic. Serial killers and even pedophiles have been found to have major impairments with their brain function. That alone should indicate to you that you're wrong.

By the time I left the university, she changed her mind somewhat. She came to me and said, "I think nurture is 98% and nature is 2%." She gave me a percent by the time I left. That type of thinking is going on. To me, it is just wrong. It is just factually wrong.

We know that culture and biology play equal roles or roughly equal components. Your biology dictates an awful lot about your behaviour. Your culture frames the way in which the behaviour manifests itself.

To me, it is the most responsible way in which to see and understand human behaviour. When you don't and try to teach students that you can do and be anything, and can change, you have total freedom over who you are and what you will become.

I think it is so wrong. When they get out into the real world and try to make the real world fit with the mistaken ideology, it is really messing things up. Now, we are putting out fires because these people are in charge.

They are in HR. They are trying to hire on these bizarre political and philosophical ideologies. It is in the court system. It is in the schools. Really? This is how you think the world works and how humans behave. Where did you get your education?

What is happening, if merit is gone, and if this ideological hiring continues, it is just weakening the very fabric of society, the very understanding of society, and the ways in which we try to help individuals within society.

That is how I see that's going to be a major factor in terms of its effects throughout society in general.

To speak to the last one, cultural health, it will lead to a greater weakening of humanity if we don't understand ourselves honestly, warts and all. We have to understand the uglier side of humanity as much as we want to elevate the greater side of humanity as well if we wish to be fair

If we don't wish to be fair, that's fine. Let's admit to that right now, but let's stop being hypocritical and admit that we don't care about fairness in hiring of staff. Clearly, they don't care about it in the distribution of information.

Don't forget, I did my Ph.D. thesis on evolutionary epistemology. That looks at the ways ideas survive in a Darwinian model, an evolutionary model. The ways ideas compete and survive. If you get enough people in a particular area maintaining that certain ideas are better than others to the exclusion of the truth, you can see what is going to happen with the bogus concepts of human nature.

That are going to hold us back further, and further, and further. I am going to go so far, right now, as to tell you. The central problem in the humanities and the social sciences – liberal arts, humanities, and the social sciences – is that nobody is willing to talk about the elephant in the room.

The groups in power now in these faculties – sociology, history, philosophy – or these disciplines, now, have a great deal of difficulty coming to grips with this central problem, which will be the topic of my next book. It is this topic of free will.

They are running from it. They are all running from it. The simple fact is, nobody has been able to disprove the position of hard determinism. I am willing to accept that we have freedom in some unbeknownst way.

That we, in some way, choose. But if we are being honest with ourselves, we have reached a point in our evolution as a species that we pretty much know all effects are the result of prior causes. If that is the case, then there is very little real choice that we can make.

It can seem like it. In some ways, I think it is important for societies to live out that illusion. But people really don't like this conversation. I brought this up at one of the Imagine No Religion conferences. I gave a talk.

Then Daniel C. Dennett and I got into a scrape over it. Were you there?

Jacobsen: No, I could see the outplaying of this conversation, or dialogue, or scraping given the prior knowledge that I have of the two of you.

DiCarlo: Dennett has this weird soft determinism. That we choose. I kept asking him, “Of what is the will free?” He wrote books on it. I don’t fully understand it. Others don’t fully understand it. He said, “Christopher, you gave the example of the person with the tumour. Naturally, they weren’t free. Because they had the tumour. I, to my knowledge, do not have the tumour and, therefore, I am free.”

I tried to explain to him, “Whether you have the tumour or not, your brain is the function of prior causes to which you are completely out of control. So, it doesn’t matter whether you have a tumour or not. The same rules apply.”

The reason [Laughing] why you get to behave in ways where you don’t molest young children is because you don’t have the tumour, not because you don’t want to. It is not that you don’t choose to not have the tumor. You have a bunch of chemicals, neurotransmitters, coursing through your brain that keep you attracted to your wife or keep you attracted to yourself where you’re a prolific masturbator.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

DiCarlo: Whatever it is, you are only in control as much as you think you are. The fact of the matter is: whether you have a brain tumour or not, you are still controlled by prior causes. They are inescapable. They dictate the effects of your capacity.

If I think that I am a good person right now because I obey the law, do not fool around on my wife, treat my kids with respect, and love my dog, and all of that, people look at me and say, “There is an upstanding civilian in the grand city of Guelph Ontario.”

How much credit do I get to take for that? What if the situation was really different? What if, for whatever reason, I am living under a bridge, lost my family, addicted to crystal meth, have several types of socially transmittable diseases, and people drive past me and think, ‘What a despicable character that is’?

How much control do I have choosing to eventually go that way if I lost my job, my wife walked out on me, my kids thought I was a moron, and my dog bit me and ran away? It turned into a country and western song.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

DiCarlo: Right? How much control do we really have over what is the complete person right now? To me, that is at the very core. It is the elephant in the room of the social sciences and liberal arts professors, and humanities professors. It is what they will not talk about.

When you push them, they get a little scared. They get bothered, by it. It is a bit like death. Nobody wants to talk about death. We all ignore it. Until, we come close to it, somehow. There is a lump. It turned out to be benign, “Oh jeez.” You had a bad accident. You walk out of it.

We tend to push death off because are too busy trying to live here. It is a bit like determinism. It looks like I chose to have pancakes and syrup today. For breakfast, that I chose that. The fact of the matter, if I were born in Calcutta as a young Indian boy, I probably wouldn’t be eating pancakes and syrup for breakfast.

So, how much choice do I have for all these types of things? The fact of that matter is that I don’t. This is what I think is really at the heart of what is going on in Academia. When they see

guys like me come in and I am a pretty decent critical thinker, and I can hold their feet to the fire about what they claim, the university does not want Renaissance men.

They do not want people who rock the boat. That is most university's. That is not the University of Chicago. They are the exact opposite. The president came out and said, "If you come to this university, you are going to be challenged. If you cannot handle it, move on down the line to somewhere to where they will look for triggers warnings, things that might upset you and whatnot." A lot of universities have become very soft.

They have become so mired in mediocrity and are serving pablum, vanilla-based pablum, to their clients. They are not students anymore. They are clients. It is so unbelievably distasteful that we have let them down.

For me, to watch this happen, and to suffer, my family and I are in such considerable debt because I have been fired from so many universities. You never get hired. I am never going to get hired. I think I should have had a fairly decent career as an academic and should have been tenured years ago.

That has been robbed. The books that I should have written. The students that I should have counselled and supervised and mentored. All of that has been lost over the last 20 or 25 years. I think, "Should I sue the ministry of colleges and universities for this kind of thing?" But I have enough on my plate trying to survive day to day.

The fact of the matter is, I do not have the time for that. But what a sad reflection on what has happened to our university system over the last 25 to 30 to 40 years, it is sad. It is unfortunate.

Jacobsen: Did you ever hear the joke about how to feel happy?

It is to listen to a country music song backwards. He gets his dog back...

DiCarlo: ...[Laughing]...

Jacobsen: ...he gets his job back. His house is not burned anymore. His wife comes back.

DiCarlo: That's right.

Jacobsen: I am sorry. I know a few stories at this point. Some are public. Some are not. I will take a step back. Some are more public. Some are less public. This is on the left and right – socially, economically, politically, religiously. What does this portend if we look to the future of the nation-state here – if we look at the economic consequences, the intergenerational consequences of the clients, and the cultural health with the decline with, as you defined, meritocracy in Academia over time since the early 80s?

DiCarlo: Yes, I think it is both a crime against humanity. It is both a crime against information itself, especially if we allow it to take its furthest level of influence – which is to literally rewrite the past. It will be unfortunate if too much of the watered-down vanilla-flavoured mediocrity gets too ingrained into the intelligentsia of the public or the polis.

Then we can kind of do a lot of revisionist history stuff. We can rewrite a bunch of stuff. We can say whatever we want because it will satisfy the political ideology of the time. We will pat ourselves on the back.

The problem is, if we continue to be blinded, to allow ourselves to be blinded, to some of the harsher truths of human nature, we will do so at our peril; we will come to regret it. I am

involved in mental health. I am the Ethics Chair for CMHA. I do a fair amount of private therapy with various clients to try to help business as much as I can.

Sometimes, I see things in the mental health field, where I wonder where some of these people have been educated and who have educated them. Some are very good. Some are very knowledgeable.

Some are so old school that they want to stay in their silo. They want to just do what is necessary from 9 to 5 and then go home. But mental health [Laughing] doesn't shut down at 5 in the afternoon. We need a collaborative effort in understanding the complete human.

We need to have a system in which the psychiatrist can talk to the psychologist can talk to the neurologist can talk to the family doctor who can talk to the dietitian and the physiotherapist, and the occupational therapist and the housing person.

We need those people collected as a collaborative team if you really want to help that person. If that person does not have a house or a place to go to or lives on the street, they will constantly wonder where they will sleep at night.

If they have a drug issue, they will have to figure out how to make money to get their drugs. Then they will see the psychiatrist who will say, "I will take you off this medication and put you on the other medication. You have to get off pot." Who is going to do this?

It is such a lack of understanding of human nature. So many mental health patients self-medicate that it is not funny. I hold the medical establishment accountable for this and big pharma a little accountable for this. I am not a huge hater of big pharma. I know we need them.

I know they are valuable. What bothers me about big pharma is that they create medical or psychiatric disorders without understanding that these patients will self-medicate with booze or other forms of drugs, they should know this.

All psychiatrists say the same thing, "We have to get you back to baseline. You have to get off all your drugs." Are they even listening to themselves? Do they even think that these people are going to do that? Why would they? Their life is shit.

They are going through all kinds of horrific things. They are self-medicating with drugs. The reason is to escape the situation that they are currently in. The people who are involved – some of whom are great and others I have question where they got their education – are assuming that they can change, can just choose, a different lifestyle. I am thinking, "Are you out of your mind?"

How much of this is biologically based? The brain is the seat of all human experience. Except, you have gone through a 4-year education program to become a mental health worker on the frontline. You think these people are going to change for some bizarre reason? No! We need a far greater understanding of human behaviour, so we can best treat the complete, whole person.

That means that we have to understand them from the inside out – figure out what is going on in terms of understanding the mechanics of their bodies and then the interaction of those bodies with the cultural influences and the various systems through which they have to navigate.

If we can do that, we are doing the very best that we can for that person. Believe it or not, what I have been trying to do while here is that there is a place on the outskirts of town, it used to be a Catholic monastery called Ignatius College.

Let's face it, there has been a decline in enrollment to become priests and monks. So, it has been sitting fairly dormant. Small businesses are renting from the archdiocese. But I have collaborated with a realtor, a local realtor.

A guy named Mark here. He has been able to convince the diocese to transform the building into housing, which is very much needed in the city. I went to him and said, "From where I am sitting as the Ethics Chair at CMHA, let's turn the monastery into a new mental health facility, a world-leading and cutting edge mental health facility that does intake, assessment, treatment, housing, and employment all in the same place.

It can hold at least 75 beds. The infrastructure is fairly sound. So, I have been meeting with MPs and MPPs trying to get a hold of Doug Ford's health minister to start this up with some government funding to get some private donations and philanthropic interests to further this along for, at least, a 3 to 5-year pilot project.

Every politician said the same thing, "This is a great idea. This is exactly what we need to do with mental health." They always stop short. They send the letters to the minister of health and copy me.

I send notice after notice after notice. I say, "This will make you look real good." Believe it or not, it would be a win-win for the city of Guelph, the families, and it is actually a win for the Catholic Church.

They get to say, "Look at what we did with one of our old monasteries." I would want to coordinate with the University of Guelph with the psychology department and make this a research facility and treatment facility as a world-class institute for mental health. Everyone is sitting on their hands. I cannot get anyone to do anything.

Here is where I have used all my powers of critical thinking and insight into the mental health problem in my local area here. I have seen what appears to be a pretty decent solution to what any government should warrant as a 3-year pilot project. I cannot get anyone to move on this.

It is just so disheartening to see so many people fall through the cracks and either commit suicide or devolve into a state of being what you would never hope for or wish upon your enemies. We have the capacity to help them.

Everyone knows this could be a very good project. It is just sitting there. Nobody is doing anything, we are doing the same old, same old. I liken it to the analogy of being at sea on a wooden ship carrying a load of lumber. But you have to repair the ship while at sea.

You do not have time to dry dock and rerelease it, then get it going. The mental health profession is ongoing. You have to repair the ship while you're at sea. I think this is a pretty good way to do that. I still can't get [Laughing]...

Jacobsen: ...[Laughing]...

DiCarlo: ...these people to get any kind of serious traction on this. That lets you know one example within my little part of the world or what I am trying to deal with here, trying to make this world a little bit better of a place.

That's my situation here.

Jacobsen: Time's up. Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion based on the conversation today?

DiCarlo: To me, if you want a better society, you have to teach critical thinking fairly young. So, we are better enabled and more empowered to use information more clearly. So, we can utilize the best information and the best practices to be able to care more effectively.

One of the movements that I am very much involved with now is EA. It is called Effective Altruism. It is the idea that it is not enough anymore to just be compassionate and fair about issues. If you really want to make a difference, you really have to know how to be effective. You have to know how to make good working business models that allow that to occur.

I am seeing an enormous amount of waste. It is good intentions, but, nonetheless, wasted efforts in trying to make the world a better place. The core of this is critical thinking. If you teach this clearly enough, you will have a more compassionate world, a calmer world.

But also, a world in which people can speak their minds about what they feel is objectively relatable and accountable for helping humanity and other species on the planet. Until that point, we will continue in the current way that we're going with constantly putting out fires and constantly repairing this ship at sea without the ship sinking before we get to where we're going.

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

DiCarlo: My pleasure!

Ask Herb 15 – Sugar, Spice, and Everything Thrice: or, Three’s Company with Compassion, Reason, and Science

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 30, 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 finish up with an easy positive note and some summary reflections.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Freethinkers love to provide themselves with different labels to differentiate on the minutiae of differences in opinion for valid and invalid reasons. Regardless, a triplet value set comes in most of the groupings with compassion, reason, and science. Some minor squabbles about the meaning of each categorization. The general template of humanism here. What seem like the basic tenets for freethinkers? Why those values? How do those play out in everyday life? How would these impact the wider society if enacted in a broader way? What continues onward in their march as the impediments to this advancement fundamental freethinker values?

Herb Silverman: Many secularists are uncomfortable with the word “atheist” because it describes what we don’t believe, rather than what we do believe. After all, we don’t go around calling ourselves A-Easter Bunnyists or A-Tooth Fairyists. Other labels atheists use include freethinker, humanist, secular humanist, agnostic, rationalist, naturalist, skeptic, ignostic, apatheist, and many more. If you don’t know what each word means, don’t worry. Even those who identify with such labels often disagree about their meanings. Parsing words might be a characteristic of folks engaged in the secular movement. Though there are fine distinctions, which many of us like to argue about, it often comes down more to a matter of taste or comfort level than deep theological or philosophical differences.

Here’s an interesting distinction between Christians and secularists: Christians have the same unifying word, but fight over theology; secularists have the same unifying theology, but fight over words. At least our wars are only verbal.

At this point, you might ask, “What’s the difference between atheism and humanism?” And my answer is, “I’m not really sure.” I pretty much view them as two sides of a coin. I’m the same person whether I talk about what I don’t believe as an atheist or what I do believe as a humanist. Atheists and humanists try to be “good without any gods,” though humanists might focus more on “good” and atheists more on “without gods.”

So which word is better: atheist or humanist? My answer is neither or, more accurately, both, or even more accurately, it depends on the context. “Atheist” gets more attention and “Humanist” sounds more respectable to the general public. My “conversion” from agnostic to atheist was more definitional than theological. As a mathematician, I couldn’t prove there was no god, so I took the agnostic position, “I don’t know.” But when I learned that an atheist is simply someone without a belief in any gods, I also became an atheist.

Conservative religions tend to think morality is more about belief than behavior, and view this life as a preparation for an imagined afterlife. So how do atheists and humanists make moral decisions? We are guided by the expected consequences of our actions. We are committed to the application of reason, science, compassion, and experience to better understand the universe and solve human problems. The plight of the human race—indeed, of the planet—is in our hands, and social problems can be solved by methods that we develop and test.

Views of atheists can change based on evidence. We have principles and values written on paper, not commandments written on stone tablets. We don't give credit to a deity for our accomplishments or blame the devil when we behave badly. We take personal responsibility for our actions. Immortality, for atheists, is the good works that live long after we have died. I know what my afterlife will be. I'm going to medical school, just like my Jewish mother always wanted me to do. I expect to use all my body parts when I'm alive, but hope others can make good use of them when I'm dead.

Despite the growing number of freethinkers, we haven't been nearly as influential politically as most other minority groups. That's in part because we pride ourselves on being so independent. But to gain significant influence, we have to become more cooperative and establish our legitimacy as a demographic. That's why in 2002 I helped form the Secular Coalition for America, currently with 19 national member organizations, covering the full spectrum of nontheists. (Notice we say we are nontheistic, without any gods, so as not to offend those who prefer their special "word.") The Secular Coalition incorporated as a political advocacy group to allow unlimited lobbying on behalf of secular Americans, with lobbyists in Washington, DC.

Some may construe the mere questioning of faith or presenting alternatives to it as too negative. I disagree. Being guided by reason instead of faith is not negative. Religion is a lot like politics—you get more followers by making big promises. Belief in a heavenly father who will always take care of you might be reassuring, but it's important to distinguish between the world as we know it and the world as we'd like it to be. As George Bernard Shaw said, "The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one."

Here's an example of what I would consider inappropriate. Religious people sometimes say to me: "I'll pray for you." An inappropriate response would be, "O.K., I'll think for both of us." But this hurtful reply would only offend a presumably well-meaning person. I think the best response is, "Thank you." However, if the opportunity presented itself, I might get into a discussion about the efficacy of prayer with questions like: Why would an all-knowing, all-loving, god change his mind because you asked him to? Or why would a god who ignored the prayers of millions of Holocaust victims take a special interest in a football game? But I would only engage a person who seemed receptive to such a discussion.

As an atheist, some people assume I must be anti-religion. Not so. By one measure, I might be the most religious person in America. You see, I have not one, not two, but three different religions: I'm a member of the American Ethical Union, with Ethical Culture Societies; I'm a member of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, with atheist rabbis; and I'm a member of the UU Humanists. All three religions are nontheistic and active participants in the Secular Coalition for America.

I like to put a positive face on freethought. We want to maximize happiness, which usually involves making others happy, too. We have one life to live, and one chance to do something

meaningful with it. I think the mathematician/philosopher Bertrand Russell summed it up nicely: “The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.” My wife has a T-shirt with a simple four-word message describing freethought. It says, “Be good, do good.” That’s really all you need to do.

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

Ask Mubarak 4 – Nigeria’s Christian and Islamic Leaders

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

August 31, 2019

Mubarak Bala is the President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. We will be conducting this educational series to learn more about humanism and secularism within Nigeria. Here we talk about Nigerian Christian and Islamic leaders.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The context for social work and political engagement can come from the religious sectors of society. Often, though, societies create an environment more or less inhospitable to normal democratic processes for the secular. How can this improve in Nigeria?

Mubarak Bala: The secular system enshrined in the constitution also allowed for religious freedom, allowing the religions to also operate within the system, as long as the constitution remains supreme, sadly, its not the case.

We, the secular however, have operated with a mandate also extracted from the same constitution, we have for instance, helped not just the secular, in our social work, but all across the social strata, Humanists Global for example, has carried out several humanitarian works within Nigeria, even in Madrassas, where boys called the Almajiri are groomed to be exclusively Islamists, but we tutor them with secular values of humanism and education, with often gifts of pillows, blankets, shoes and food, which normally, they have to beg for on the streets.

Apparently, even the theological system could be bought over with aid and free education, and the clerics would normally look away, since they also are lacking in resources, in the poverty capital of the world, northern Nigeria.

Political engagements however, are a trinket of alternating buttons of secularism, theology, democratic, and attimes, dictatorial trumpism, it is normal in Nigeria, to have a politician or a political party, to have several voices and manifesto, depending on where or which community they seek votes. They preach the bible and or the koran when and where it suits them, especially in the local languages during townhalls, and preach secular democracy when abroad, or in International engagements. They preach tolerance at the centre, and play the tribal cards in the extreme regions. Certainly, we have a long way to go.

Jacobsen: How can the Christians and Muslims of the country be allies in this?

Bala: So far, funny enough, only humanist and atheistic activities seem to unite both divides that otherwise aim to eliminate the influences of one another, sometimes physically clashing in bloodshed.

The political class however, from either divide, tend to unite in looting and plunder, leaving both Muslim and Christian downtrodden to oppress one another as well.

It is our vision, to unite the divides with education, tolerance, rational thought, humanism and economic emancipation, we made headways... mostly on the internet. We however, suffer big big setbacks on the same platforms that are supposed to uphold free speech and liberal rights. Currently, many of our voices on facebook and twitter are under suspension, over ‘community

standards', hate speech allegations. The robots and algorithms hardly distinguish between criticism of religions and dogma, and actual intolerance and hate speech by religions and their zealots. We get reported often, and we get suspended, while Boko Haram propaganda accounts in Hausa/Arabic, still flourish and recruit.

Jacobsen: What Islamic leaders prevent social progress? What ones help it?

Bala: The clerics that laid the foundation of Boko Haram, sponsored by Saudi Arabia, the Wahhabists, and their counterparts the Shiites, sponsored by Iran, are still active. The government need their massive votes and so look away, unless faced with a real confrontation, such as the Abubakar Shekau Wahabism of Boko Haram and Ibrahim Zazzaki Shiism. Both are at war with the government, for a decade, and half a decade respectively.

Other smaller actors are backed up by state legislature, such as the 12 states that operate with Islamic sharia law, and so, do their fanaticism legally, such as seizure of alcohol from resident Christians, banning cinema and merriment, arrest and forcible confession of liberal persons with funky hairstyle or indecent nonveiled dressing, because the keratinous hair and nail arouse virgin-seeking mullahs.

Those helping it to some degrees are the traditional rulers, speaking out loudly against conservative barbarism, such as orders by Quran to hit the wife, or locking up women in the kitchen, the Kano emir almost lost his seat to his liberal views, and the President embarrassed himself with a joke to Merkel in Germany, that his wife's duties remain in his bedroom and kitchen.

Jacobsen: Same for the Christian leaders. What one hinder progress? What ones help move it? I mean progress for the secular and the religious not simply maintaining privilege for the religious.

Bala: They are mostly entrepreneurs, hardly hindering social progress, they just pay more attention to how to milk the 'sheep', and how to counter herdsmen and Boko Haram attacks, as well as how to give folks bigger manhoods at Church sermons, or how the woman could bear children... And other archaic stupidities Europe saw in the 1300s.

The political class, also delve into 'the word' to pick a word or two just to get acceptance, and sound as ancient Israel as possible. The lot are all funny not really a threat to social progress. So they extract legitimacy and privileges that benefits mostly themselves as the flock wallow under insecurity and poverty.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Mubarak, keep up the fight, I'm watching – for what it's worth.

Bala: Thank you.

Interview with Amy Boyle – Lead, Sunday Assembly Los Angeles

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 1, 2019

Amy Boyle is the Lead at the Sunday Assembly Los Angeles. Here we talk about the Sunday Assembly in Los Angeles and its community, and more.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, let's start from the top. How did you become involved with some secular community, either early in life or later in life? Also, how did you become involved specifically in the Sunday Assembly of Los Angeles?

Amy Boyle: I was not involved in any secular organizations until recently. I grew up Catholic and when I first figured out where my personal beliefs fell, to atheism, I didn't know any atheists and I wasn't aware there were other people who thought like me.

So later, I was around 17, 19, I was working for Organizing for America, doing some community organizing in 2012. I was aware of national organizations for skeptics and atheists and agnostics that communicated and supported each other, but I saw a need for something more local and positive. Working on those foundations that other organizations use, based around what we have in common and building something together with the people who share your values and your interests.

I happened to run into some other people who were starting a local chapter of Sunday Assembly around that time. It was the right idea at the right time. I thought it was a little project and it became a big project.

Jacobsen: What music is played at the Sunday Assembly of Los Angeles?

Boyle: It is a lot of stuff. We use live bands. We have a house band with a bunch of very talented musicians who met through the Assembly. Mostly you'll hear rock. Some rock anthems. Anything from Journey to the Beatles to Katy Perry. We have skeptic musicians.

So, depending on who the musician is and what the theme is for the month, we might put some folk in there. We have even done some Jewish folk songs and have had a cappella choir and a big musical choir come in and sing that style of music too. It is all over the place but mostly what people are going to jam in their car, on the radio.

Jacobsen: If you look at some of the demographics for the Sunday Assembly of Los Angeles, what are they? Why those specific demographics in your opinion?

Boyle: I'm interested in that. I'm hesitant to draw conclusions, but we do see people around my age in their mid-30s to early 40s. But it is a big branch. We have young children. Our oldest member is 94.

There is a slight majority of women, which is unusual for a secular group. We still are majority white, but not the white older male concentration that you might expect from an organization that is rooted at least in some way in skepticism.

Jacobsen: Do the majority of atheist, agnostic, free thought, deist, pantheist, humanist, etc. organizations in the West lean towards the near retired or retired white and male

population more than the women? Why would a Sunday Assembly lean away from this style of demographic in some ways, in some sub-demographics? Young people, women.

Boyle: I like to think that Sunday Assembly works hard to be family-friendly and inclusive. So, it is easier to bring the family and come out and try something. You cannot say “community” if you have children and the place is offering childcare, or there are other people who look like you.

We made it a point to try to include people from different backgrounds on the board and on stage. So, that helps. There is always more we could be doing. But it is not a bunch of people needing their room talking about what they don’t believe in, which is a luxury that a lot of people who are maybe younger or who are facing a few challenges when it comes to balancing life and family. There is that.

Of course, the music will skew a bit younger. For the young kids, we usually try hard to plan activities around the people who come to us. So, take suggestions and try to empower volunteers and encourage people to start book clubs or personal growth clubs or museum trips, we do a Saturday social the weekend after each assembly. It is always family-friendly. We go to the park or a festival or the science centre.

Those things all help bring in different people from the beginning and then once you have a core group that does not represent a monolith, it is much easier for other people to feel welcome. I should mention though that we are not a group for free thought. The free thinkers and atheists and agnostics and pantheists or whatnot, everyone is welcome.

While what we present from the stage is science-based, we are not there to talk about atheists or make fun of religion or tell people what they should or shouldn’t believe in. Ideally, it is a place you can take your Christian mother to and not be cringing the whole time. That’s the idea.

Jacobsen: America contains the largest number, per capita, of single parents. Most single parents in America remain single mothers. However, most of the public, secular voices tend to be men.

Would the inclusion at services like Sunday Assembly or other communities of childcare and other things help provide women with a window, energy, finance and timewise, to spend some of those resources in the public eye more to voice their own concerns? Both within the secular communities and to the general public about the secular communities.

Boyle: So, without a doubt. It is why we included pre-childcare from the beginning. It is not an easy priority to make. It is in the number of people at service, which is much smaller than the rest of the offering. But it is important and means we have moms and single moms and single dads. There are other voices on our board and in our midst. We were at LA Pride last weekend and it was mostly families with young children.

I have 5-year-old twins myself. It is difficult to wrangle all of that and juggle the logistics. But that’s also a demographic that is looking to celebrate and reinforce their values and their children as a need. We want to make sure they’re a part of, not the membership but, the leadership.

Jacobsen: How do secular communities inadvertently prevent women from a legitimate and substantial participatory role and leadership role in the communities?

Boyle: I have to pre-empt this by saying it is my opinion and I do think of secular communities are becoming mindful and getting better, but when you start by having a demographic in your

membership and in your leadership that is primarily male. You're already preaching to the choir. As a woman going to a large skeptic conference, it is a very intimidating feeling.

Everything from the casual mentions of wives at home from the point of views that you're hearing from the stage, to jokes that don't land quite the way it might in a mixed audience. Those effects add up. Unless you're actively doing something to correct that, it detracts for everyone who is sensitive to that thing or who wants to be a part of a group but isn't represented.

There are also some other sorts of bias. There are certain stereotypes that women are more interested in more alternative medicine or non-skeptical things or are more religious. So, that can affect the tone that you're putting out there and that in turn affects who you attract.

Jacobsen: Also, not only in terms of the serious structural and social interactions and systems, what about an individual perspective of ways in which the men in a community can be more attentive to listening? What about the ways in which the women can have those jokes potentially not land as well, but not be taken with a backlash too much? I state either of these positions based on statements from men and women in the community.

Boyle: I understand. It is much harder to build something than it is to speak out against it. That one of the best things that women can do with that energy, with that "backlash" is not to speak out but to make a point of having a voice.

Accept invitations to speak and support the voices that you might not hear as often. Including people of colour and those with different gender identities. For men, it is what people are starting to do, by having an awareness of this. By nominating people to your board, what is your representation like and are you listening to voices that aren't like yours.

Are you creating feedback mechanisms? You're not making assumptions; you're getting the information you might need. When it comes to inviting speakers and booking music, it takes more legwork. It is something we are constantly encouraging ourselves to work harder on. To get diversified, to make contacts outside of your own bubble and have different points of view up on stage.

Jacobsen: Any other organizations or communities performing similar services as a Sunday Assembly that are up and coming but not as much known?

Boyle: Quite a few. There are groups, and I'm always surprised at how many people are forming things that are very similar. When there is a need, people get together and a solution arises. There is another called Oasis that has at least a couple locations in the US. They're different than the Sunday Assembly. They're a secular gathering that has TED-style talks.

There is a place called Secular Hub in Denver. There are meetups for atheists and agnostic and free thinkers who meet up around science. So, yes, there are and there will continue to be a lot of people, especially younger people are leaving religion and are not that interested in what it has to offer. People will always need each other and the support of each other.

Jacobsen: Any recommended speakers, authors, or other public people to the audience today?

Boyle: Jill Zuckerman, who spoke at one of our first assemblies, I heard of good stuff on sociological findings around Judaism – and is a good speaker and author. We have had Wendy Jackson, who wrote a cool book which is a good collection of quotes. It is funny with them all put together.

I would recommend her. She's a great speaker and author. There are lots of great voices and people doing important work. There is no shortage. I would encourage people to look around and pick up something.

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

Boyle: Not really. It was interesting talking to you. I'm excited to see what's going to happen next. We are seeing a change in the way people in the US view atheists and the way people think about not capital A atheism, but secular humanist values.

We are going to see more communities that are forming around what they do believe in and doing good and forcing the world to see that these are people and they're people like you and to create a positive example of doing good.

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

Boyle: Thanks.

Isabelle of Secular AA (Montreal/Chomedey-Laval, Quebec, Canada)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 3, 2019

Isabelle D. the main contact for Secular AA for the Montreal and/or Chomedey-Laval, Quebec, Canada groups). Here we talk about her background and work.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Family background, e.g., geography, culture, language, religion or lack thereof:

Isabella D.: I was born and raised in Montreal, QC, except for a short period when we lived in Vancouver, BC. My mother's family was French-Canadian and so I am what you would call "Québécoise pure-laine" as some like to say, although I never really identified with that label. I don't know much about my father's side, as he stayed away in BC after the divorce.

My grand-parents were non-practicing Catholics but, as the first of their 5 grand-children, they had me promptly and properly baptized in church as a baby, dolled up for my first communion in grade one, and then embarrassingly overdressed for my confirmation in fifth grade.

My 1st grade teacher was a nun and would have us recite the « Notre Père » (french version of the "Our Father » prayer) first thing every morning. But I wasn't much of a believer even back then...

My mother was somewhat of a non-conformist hippie and had already taken us along to a few different religious groups she was exploring, such as Buddhists and mormons. So from a very young age, the notion that different people had different religions kinda just stuck and, to me, that was just the reality of things. I never felt one religion was better than the rest nor did I feel a compelling pull to adhere to the Catholic faith in particular.

Jacobsen: Personal background and some pivotal moments in education and in the social life around school:

Isabella D.: Mom was on welfare so we didn't have much of anything growing up and moved a lot. I must have gone to at least 5 different elementary schools in 6 years, sometimes jumping between 2 schools in the same year. So I was often the new kid in class, feeling "different" or like an outcast until I made a few friends.

In high school, I usually kept mostly to myself and got good grades, despite the chaos and instability of home. During those years, I was temporarily "placed" in foster care three times (at my own request) with friends and/or neighbours and was out in my own place at 17, while finishing high school and working part-time. I didn't mix well with the kids at school, having limited inadequate social skills, and was a bit of a loner. And so, having had a falling out with the in-crowd in my senior year, I skipped prom and couldn't wait to move on to college.

Jacobsen: After primary and secondary school, what was life like for you?

Isabella D.: Having been in a long-term interracial relationship since the age of 14 (and shunned by my family for it), I had my first daughter at 19 while in college and my second at 22, during university while studying Social Work (feeling I could do so much better than my social worker

did). My studies were interrupted for a few years after I became a single parent but I ended up going back to school and obtaining my bachelor degree in 2000, with my two beautiful girls posing beside me in my graduation pictures.

The responsibilities of single-parenthood kept me focussed and out of bigger troubles during my younger years. None the less, alcoholism caught up with me in my mid-forties and the time inevitably came to put an end to my drinking days. So off to AA I went and it was love at first sight; until religiosity reared its ugly head through the sponsoring I was receiving. It very nearly drove me away and out of the program. But then I found Secular AA and AA Agnostica on the net and felt I might be able to stay sober with the AA program after all. The problem was there was only one Secular AA group in the province of QC at the time and it was an hour away from me. Still, I went to check it out a couple of times and a few months later, in January 2019, the Secular AA Laval meetings started with the collaboration of two atheist AA members.

Jacobsen: In Chomedey-Laval, Quebec, Canada, what is the secular and agnostic meeting there?

Isabella D.: Essentially, it's pretty much like a regular meeting except without prayer and no reference to religion or a belief in "bible-God" as a prerequisite to achieve or maintain sobriety. So we don't read out the steps or "How it works".

One thing that is different is that we allow members that are too far to attend the meeting in person to connect either via Zoom or phone. Our meeting is also bilingual and open to all who wish to stop drinking and share their experience, hope and strength in a non-religious spiritual manner.

Jacobsen: How does this become an important part of AA community life for the freethought community of Quebec?

Isabella D.: This is huge for Quebec as there is currently only one other secular AA meeting (that I know of) left operating in the province, in French and not in the greater Montreal area. "Les Libres-Penseurs" (Free-Thinkers) was the first and was created in April of 2018 in Saint-Hyacinthe. Then the group "Esprit-Ouvert" formed in December of the same year, followed in January by Secular AA Laval, the latter being the closest one to Montreal so far. Unfortunately, "Esprit-Ouvert" shut down recently and is no longer holding meetings.

Jacobsen: What people come to Secular AA in Montreal or Chomedey-Laval, Quebec? What has been their feedback?

Isabella D.: It's been a mixed crowd of believers, atheists and agnostics so far, usually easy-going people looking for a meeting in Laval on a Friday night or a secular one specifically. The feedback has been very positive. They're not sure what to expect at first but quickly feel at ease as soon as the usual sharing starts and the vibe is always good. Our room is in a community center that is easy to get to and well situated near a highway with lots of free parking, plenty of tea and coffee and lots of good literature laid out on display. People are usually very impressed with the location and the care that is put into the set-up.

Jacobsen: How do you manage the community, maintain solidarity and a place for public healing, and the openness and inclusion for a wide range of new members from a variety of different backgrounds?

Isabella D.: We don't have a huge crowd of attendees just yet so it's not been too challenging so far. One thing I do try to emphasize is that it is a secular meeting to which all are welcome: believers and atheists alike. So respecting everyone's opinion while not imposing our own is very important. All should feel comfortable (and unapologetic) about their personal views on religion and God. This can get tricky with members who have been in contact with rigid Big Book thumpers at certain traditional meetings or as sponsors because they may need to vent. So there is a delicate balance to try to maintain in that respect.

Jacobsen: Any recommended literature or speakers?

Isabella D.: Yes! My favorite book so far is One Big Tent – Atheist and agnostic AA members share their experience, strength and hope. It stands out for me because it's the first AA approved literature that I find truly geared towards and helpful for secular members looking for a way to make the AA program work for themselves. I am also a huge fan of "Staying Sober without God" by Jeffrey Munn.

Jacobsen: Any exciting new developments for 2019/2020?

Isabella D.: We have a new location at a different community centre in Laval and a new meeting name to go along with it: "Friday Night Sober". Our next step will be to have the meeting listed on the AA.org website and then register as a group, once we have enough regular attending members. So come on down and check us out!

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Isabella D.: Yes. I'd like to invite anyone reluctant to giving AA a shot because of the "god thing", like I was, to give Secular AA a try. I truly believe AA has a great program that works.

I'd also like to invite any current traditional AA members who feel they are "anti-Secular AA" to keep an open mind and think of Secular AA meetings as an additional tool to help the still suffering alcoholic increase their chances of finding their way to a happy, joyous and free life in sobriety. "I want the hand of AA always to be there and for that, I am responsible."

Thanks for the opportunity to share. I hope this will reach anyone who needs it in the Montreal area of QC.

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

Press Release: Humanist activist and family threatened by Pakistan: Canadian government asked to intervene

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 3, 2019

From middle July but still relevant.

TORONTO – July 18, 2019 – PRLog — Humanist Canada continues to join a growing chorus of denunciation of the Government of Pakistan in its treatment of human rights campaigner Gulalai Ismail, including Humanists International and other human rights groups. Denunciation followed by calls to drop the sedition charge against Ismail.

Once more, we call on the Government of Canada to request and urge the Government of Pakistan to drop the charges of sedition against Ismail, as she worked, in a peaceful protest, to bring attention to the rape and murder of a 10-year-old girl, Farishta. Now, Humanist Canada extends the call to stop the (alleged) harassment of Ismail's family.

“If the reports about Ismail and her family stand as sufficiently factual and accurate, the charge of sedition against Ismail remains suspicious, even potentially contrived, and the harassment, or state discrimination, of the family remains unjust and unfair with the appearance of the conscious punishment of Ismail's family in the light of a possible spurious sedition charge against Ismail,” Humanist Canada Board Member and Young Humanists International Secretary-General, Scott Jacobsen, explained. “For example, according to reportage, the family of Ismail continues to suffer threats and harassment, a raid of the family home, with Ismail's parents, recently, booked under First Information Reports (FIRs) with accusations of involvement in and monetary support of anti-state and terrorist organizations.”

Martin Frith, President of Humanist Canada, echoed the sentiments, saying, “The intransigence of the Pakistani authorities means that Gulalai's only hope is public pressure from the international community. The Canadian government voiced support for human rights in the past. We urge the Government of Canada to act on the principles of support for human rights defenders and protection of human rights by publicly intervening in the case of Gulalai with the appropriate Pakistani officials.”

“They are under serious threat of arrest and in-custody torture. These are extremely serious allegations, [and] can cause their immediate arrest and long term [imprisonment]. It is [meant] to [torture] Gulalai Ismail and her family for being Human Rights Defenders and peace activists... Gulalai Ismail's mother is a house-wife and has been dragged [into] the matter to torture Gulalai Ismail and her family,” Saba Ismail, Gulalai's younger sister, said.

We urge members of the Canadian public and the international freethought community to email support to the Pakistani embassy in Ottawa at parepottawa@rogers.com. Human rights defenders and campaigners fight for the rights of others. Often, this comes with risks to themselves. Sometimes, they need defenders and campaigners, too.

“Ismail represents one of those rare and rarefied individuals known as human rights campaigners and defenders with the resilience, persistence, and moral courage to speak out on instances of

unfairness and injustice with the full knowledge of the difficult circumstances in which this happens and the probable legal, penal, and livelihood consequences of voicing unpopular and uncomfortable truths on fundamental issues of human rights important for the protection of the weak, often voiceless, and vulnerable,” Jacobsen stated.

For more information from Humanists International, please see here:

About Humanist Canada

Humanist Canada is a national not-for-profit charitable organization promoting the separation of religion from public policy and fostering the development of reason, compassion and critical thinking for all Canadians through secular education and community support.

Contact Information

Scott Jacobsen

Board Member, Humanist Canada; Secretary-General, Young Humanists International

Info@HumanistCanada.Com; Sec-Gen.Young@Humanists.International

1-877-486-2671

Martin Frith

President, Humanist Canada

President@HumanistCanada.Ca

1-877-486-2671

Short Reflections on Secularism w/ Dr. Herb Silverman

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 8, 2019

“The short text divides into three sections with “Introduction to Herb,” “Ask Herb,” and “Ask Dr. Silverman.” Each built in terms of complexity with the first as a biography of Silverman; the second as an educational series on secular activism in a dialogue format with Silverman; and the third as an educational series on the philosophy of mathematics and then moving into some mathematicization of secular activism – in a manner of speaking – in another dialogue format with Silverman. In a natural way, the introductory section of the three provides some basis as to the identity of the “Ask Herb” and the “Ask Dr. Silverman” person (same person). The second section focuses on the public life of Silverman. The mathematics section focuses on some facets of the academic and professional life of him. Herb and I discuss secularism from a variety of angles with an educational and dialogue format in mind. His articles appear in the Washington Post, Huffington Post, Humanistic Judaism, The Humanist, Free Inquiry, The Secular Outpost, and, with Short Reflections on Secularism (2019), Question Time & Canadian Atheist between February 15, 2019 and August 30, 2019, as well as other publications.

Many in the secular movement may not realize the impact of this liberal, Jewish, and Yankee atheist. He was born in Philadelphia and earned a Ph.D. in Mathematics from Syracuse University. He is the former Distinguished Professor of Mathematics at the College of Charleston. He published more than 100 research papers on mathematics and received a Distinguished Research Award. He earned the American Humanist Association Lifetime Achievement Award. He authored Complex variables (1975), Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt (2012) and An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt (2017). He co-authored The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner and Complex Variables with Applications (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy.”:

Source: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07X7QTL37/>

And now, a word from our sponsors...

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 9, 2019

In the work at Canadian Atheist, we have a series of “Links,” “Podcasts,” and “Organizations.” These, as far as I can discern, amount to associates – wonderful ones – of Canadian Atheist, who may not be known by some of the national freethought community. They’re listed along the left side of the website as resources to check out, so please do! We love them very much. But who runs them? What are they? Let’s learn some more about them, in order from top left to bottom left:

In the Links section, Godless Mom (Twitter) is a secular mom and funny commentator, Courtney Heard, who parents without God or gods. More recent writings can be found at Patheos. She states, “I am a well-traveled, well-read extreme left atheist mother, wife and writer. I have a little dude about 5, a stepdaughter about 11, a rescue pup about 13 and a husband who likes to play the drums. I was not born and raised anything in particular.” (Biography may be out of date.) Godless Mom has a number of talents to boot, including hand painting portraits of famous nonbelievers, and designing and selling t-shirts. There is a YouTube Channel, and valuable social commentary contributions on serious subject matter, e.g., prisons and inmates. And what would Godless Mom be, as a godless mom, without an Ask Mommy series? She runs a podcast, Common Heathens, with Mr. Oz Atheist, Donovan. If you want to contact Godless Mom, she says, “If you want to yell at me, send me death threats, try to convert me or just cheer me on, you can email me at mommy@godlessmom.com” (Before sending emails, see the FAQ.) Godless Mom is for hire and offers advertising space, and accepts qualified guest bloggers. Also, buy her a coffee!

Another entertaining and intelligent secular woman commentator, ‘Eiynah Mohammed-Smith,’ founded Nice Mangoes (Facebook and Twitter) who is Pakistani-Canadian and a former Muslim and freethinker with a focus on politics, religion, and sexuality in South Asia (emphasis on Pakistan in particular). She is working on a large number of interesting projects requiring a wide range interests, talents, and skills, including “creating [a] Podcast, Illustrations, Art, Children’s Books, Blogs, Articles.” Eiynah runs a SoundCloud program called Polite Conversations with Eiynah with the wondrously entertaining and direct tagline, “Polite As Fu@k.” She wrote the children’s book My Chacha (Uncle) is Gay. An IndieGoGo campaign helped fund the children’s book. Her work has been featured in Pakistan Today too. She accepts story submissions for consideration, nicemangosDOTblogATgmailDOTcom, and can be supported through Patreon (do it!).

Sandwalk was founded by Laurence A. Moran, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Biochemistry at the University of Toronto. Moran named Sandwalk because this was the name of “the path behind the home of Charles Darwin where he used to walk every day, thinking about science.” Moran is a longterm skeptical biochemist with a rich story of information and narratives, and research commentary, on the website. He authored or co-authored Principles of Biochemistry 5th Edition, Principles of Biochemistry: International Edition, and Biochemistry 2nd Ed. (1994). He has a series of awesome quotes on the site, too, including one from Darwin as follows, “The old argument of design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me to be so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered. We can

no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows.” William Paley, an English Clergyman, wrote *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1802) with argument for a divine watchmaker for the creation of life. This may have been peak creationism before the countervailing winds of evolution via natural selection rocked the boat with *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* from 1859.

In the Podcasts section, [Brainstorm Podcast](#) ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#)) works within the values of compassion, reason, and skepticism. It opens with a quote by Mark Twain on the front of the website, saying, “A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.” Twain was a humorist, journalist, and novelist – and funny. They describe the purpose of the Brainstorm Podcast as “spread critical thinking, skepticism towards fringe ideas, acceptance of scientific consensus, and fact based information. Over the years it has grown into multiple shows covering a broad range of topics and a conference that brings speakers from across the spectrum of skeptical activism to Saskatchewan.” There are some sub-shows or series within the main YouTube channel entitled [Hardcore Skeptic Examines](#) and [The Skeptic Studio](#). You can find more content in [Skeptic Voices](#), [Positively Skeptical](#), [The Brainstorm Rectable](#), and [Shift to Reason Radio](#). They have [discussion group](#), a [blog](#), [memes and pics](#), a [Discord server](#), a [Libsyn listing of their episodes](#) or on [Spreaker](#). You can support them at [Patreon](#) by buying their [merch](#)!

[Left at the Valley](#) ([Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)) is a Fraser Valley, British Columbia podcast. They [state](#), “We are just regular (outspoken, opinionated, brash) Fraser Valley residents who wanted to offer news, profiles, and opinions that are outside the (corporate owned) mainstream media. We like to showcase other (awesome and not well-enough renowned) people who are making things better in our little slice of the world with their innovative ideas and actions.” You can find their most recent episodes on [BlogTalkRadio](#). Archives are [here](#). They were kind enough to host a series of other resources for other freethought people on the [website](#). Also, they have a wonderful [set of photos](#) with some famous freethought people – lecture and speaker circuit secular folk – on the website too. On the main website, they have a wonderful series of books for discussion, and have published [survey data](#) about the listeners. They can be contacted via email at leftatvalley@outlook.com or in their [contact form](#).

[Life, the Universe & Everything Else](#) ([Facebook](#)) “is a monthly show that delves into issues of science, critical thinking, and secular humanism.” They function through or out of Winnipeg Skeptics. Their two [main producers](#) are Ashlyn Noble and Gem Newman. The musical director is Ian James with regular panelists being Lauren Bailey and Laura Creek Newman. They are on [Stitcher](#). They have had a wide variety guests and have produced a [staggering 100+ episodes](#). They can be financially supported [here](#), or [here](#). They can be contacted via email: lueepodcast@winnipegkskeptics.com and can be followed via the [Winnipeg Skeptics newsletter](#). Their archives and area for Apple reviews are [here](#).

[The Reality Check](#) ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), and [Instagram](#)) is an extremely productive podcast with over 500 episodes: “a weekly Canadian show that explores a wide range of controversies and curiosities by probing popular myths and exposing the surprising truth behind them.” It is hosted and run by Darren “crash from Krypton” McKee, Adam “fighting evil by moonlight” Gardner, Cristina “JUNO and Platinum award winning music publicist” Roach, and

“the engine that keeps TRC going” Producer Pat. It has had millions of downloads and “has been featured on [CBC Radio](#), [CFRA Radio](#) and [Guru Magazine](#).” You can donate or financially support them [here](#), or on [Patreon](#). They can be contacted via email info@trcpodcast.com or in their [contact form](#).

In the Organizations section, [Bad Science Watch](#) ([Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)) “is an independent non-profit consumer protection watchdog and science advocacy organization dedicated to improving the lives of Canadians by countering bad science.” They have been featured in the [media](#) and have a decent [news section](#) on the website. They’ve done a great job with building an [advisory council](#), [volunteer staff](#), a [board of directors](#), and having an [FAQ](#) and [Mission Statement](#). They have really good in working on a number of projects in the current period, [NHP Monograph Consultations](#) and [The Marketing of Natural Health Products in Canada](#), and in the past, including [Vanessa’s Law](#), [Bill C-17](#), [Ongoing Efforts Against EMF Pseudoscience](#), [Investigation of Anti-WiFi Activism in Canada](#), and [De-Registration of Homeopathic Nosodes](#). Bad Science Watch can be funded [here](#). You can take action or [volunteer skills](#) for Bad Science Watch. They have a [wide variety of needs](#) at the moment, too. They can be contacted via email info@badsciencewatch.ca or in their [contact form](#).

[British Columbia Humanist Association](#) ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [MeetUp](#)) “has been providing a community and voice for Humanists, atheists, agnostics, and the non-religious of Metro Vancouver and British Columbia [since 1982](#). We support the growth of [Humanist communities](#) across BC, provide [Humanist ceremonies](#), and [campaign for progressive and secular values](#).” It was originally formulated in one guise or another in the [1950s](#). It is among the most active and involved humanist groups in the country. With a [staff](#) and a [board](#), and [honorary members](#), they do a lot of great work. They have, systematically, put forth [issues of concern](#), which makes their activities that much more coherent and effective.

Their [campaigns](#) include [medical assistance in dying](#), [awareness of humanism](#), [ending prayers in the legislature](#), [freedom of expression](#), [human rights](#), [humanist action](#), [humanist marriages](#), [property tax exemptions](#), [reproductive freedom](#), [science](#), [secularism](#), [secular addictions recovery](#), and [secular public schools](#). Not only a wide variety of campaigns, but a wide range of places for outreach, e.g., [Comox Valley Humanists](#), [Kelowna Atheists](#), [Humanists & Skeptics Association](#), [Langley-Maple Ridge Humanists](#), [Sunshine Coast Secular Humanist Association](#), [Vancouver Humanists](#), and [Victoria Secular Humanist Association](#), as well as extensions with the [Queer Humanist Alliance](#) and [Humanist Action](#). They have the [BC Humanist Association Officiant Program](#), an [Officiants](#) listing, and a [Humanist Chaplain](#) listing too. For more information on their activities, please see their [Latest](#), [News](#), or [Blog](#) sections, or tune into their [podcast](#), or read any of their [books](#), [member stories](#), [reports](#), or [submissions](#). They can be reached via email at info@bchumanist.ca, or contact Ian Bushfield, Executive Director, at exdir@bchumanist.ca. They have a [members site](#), and [accept donations](#) ([join here](#)) and [volunteers](#).

[Dying With Dignity Canada](#) ([Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)) “is the national human-rights charity committed to improving quality of dying, protecting end-of-life rights, and helping Canadians avoid unwanted suffering.” It deals with one of the most profound topics of human life – its end. They are transparent with their [annual reports](#) and [financial reports](#). They have a wonderful resource about [how to find help](#) at appropriate times. Dying With Dignity Canada has another great [educational resource](#) for interested individuals. Also, they focus on a wide variety of issues salient to those who consider the representation important. They have an [patrons council](#), a [board](#)

of [directors](#), a [clinicians advisory council](#), a [disability advisory council](#), a [first person witness council](#), and a [staff](#). For those with an interest in keeping up to date with the activities, stories, and the like, of Dying With Dignity Canada, please make sure to read their [blog](#) or the [newsletter](#), even [attend a local event](#). For more information, email support@dyingwithdignity.ca. You can become involved through a [chapter](#), an [advisory council](#), or [volunteering](#), even [share your story](#).

[Canadian Secular Alliance](#) ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#)) “is a non-profit, public policy research and advocacy organization advancing church-state separation and the neutrality of government in matters of religion. We seek to represent all Canadians, religious and non-religious alike, who believe that the Canadian government should adopt public policies consistent with a secular state.” It is run by Bob Lent, Glen MacDonald, Greg Oliver, and Justin Trottier. They have a production of videos through [Think Again! TV](#). They have a number of ways in which the public can [become involved](#). You can [donate to them](#). If you have some questions, please see the [FAQ](#). They have a number of [friends of the alliance](#). They have a number of [policy positions](#) and [public statements](#) too. Or if you want to become informed on relevant activities, you can see the [news section](#), [media section](#), or the [events section](#). They can be contacted via email at info@secularalliance.ca.

[Centre for Inquiry Canada](#) ([Twitter](#)) “fosters a secular society based on reason, science, freedom of inquiry, and humanist values. We do this through the application of critical thinking skills; promotion of good science; adoption of secular decision making and through building communities of like minded people. CFIC is a national, volunteer led, charitable organization with several local branches across the country.” They have a well-qualified [board of directors](#). They are a strong advocate of [critical thinking](#) and [scientific skepticism](#) as seen in their “[Is It Science?](#)” campaign. They support [secularism](#). They have [an impact](#). They have an [Election Campaign](#). They have another campaign for removing [ideology from the 2019 election](#). You can become a member. You can [volunteer](#), as it is a volunteer organization. You can donate, whether [PayPal](#) or [Canada Helps](#). They are working to [build community](#). They have done this with a number of [Centre for Inquiry Canada](#) branches. For more complete of an idea about the long-term strategic plans of Centre for Inquiry Canada, please see the [Strategic Plan](#) and the newsletter entitled [Critical Links](#). Also, as is relatively normal practice, you can find more resources in the [Partners and Allies](#) portion of the page.

[Kelowna Atheists, Skeptics, and Humanists Association](#) “is a non-partisan body that seeks to foster a secular community guided by reason, science, freedom of inquiry and humanistic values. We are a community of freethinking people who put on events, workshops, conferences and work to promote critical thinking and evidence based reasoning in Kelowna and in the Okanagan for greater community and cooperation.” Even as a small and local organization, they have a full board of directors and support. They do something not normally, but happily, done, which is feature [members](#) and indicate the diverse nature of the nonbelievers. They have been part of [picnics](#), the [pride parade](#), a [skeptic café](#), and [more](#). They have a number of great [programs](#) including [Critical Thinking Parents’ Group](#), [Secular Humanist Thinkers Café](#), [Skeptics in the Pub](#), and [Living Without Religion Discussion Group](#). They do not necessarily endorse but list [local charities](#), [national & international charities](#), and [environmental charities](#). Their [education section](#) (including [defining skepticism](#)), [useful learning links](#), [secular](#), [humanist](#) and [freethought links](#), and [video resources](#) are good. They are part of the provincial call for the [secularization of British Columbia](#). They have further involvement of the membership, as

a great idea, with the [reflections page](#). For more information, please see [here](#), the [science news page](#), the [current news page](#). Events listed [here](#). Also, check out their [Winter Solstice Tree](#) and [sign up or even for their newsletter](#) (or both)! You can [join them here](#) ([another link](#)). They can be contacted through their [contact form](#).

Some Minor Coverage and Recent News on the Co-Founder of Aware Girls

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 10, 2019

Gulalai Ismail lives in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan (Wikipedia, 2019). She is the Co-Founder of Aware Girls with Saba Ismail (a sister), and a human rights activist (Aware Girls, 2019). Her social activism and human rights work exists in a difficult area of the world compared to most humanists. She earned the International Humanist of the Year Award (2014), Commonwealth Youth Award for Asia (2015), Chirac Prize for Conflict Prevention (2016), and Anna Politkovskaya Award (2017). Her story amounts to one of the more prominent feminist campaigners and humanist stories, and human rights defenders in the current period (Gettleman, 2019). For those who know about Ismail within the freethought community, they consider Ismail a tremendously impressive organizer for women's and girls' rights in a difficult area for human rights and freethought in the world – ranked 192nd out of 196 on the Freedom of Thought Report 2018 (Humanists International, 2018a; Humanists International, 2018b).

Do not take my word for it, in different areas of emphasis, Amnesty International – in previous reportage on the same person from late 2018 and early 2019, Human Rights Watch, the World Economic Forum, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have noted the specific case of Ismail, the conditions of human rights in Pakistan, the equality of women and girls in Pakistan, and the human development level of Pakistan (Amnesty International, 2019; Amnesty International 2018; UNDP, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2018). Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, the leadership of Pakistan, was called out by Human Rights Watch on its poor record for freedom of expression and attacks on civil society, freedom of religion and belief, women's and children's rights, terrorism, counterterrorism, law enforcement abuses, sexual orientation and gender identity rights, and the death penalty, even rejecting or not implementing several of the 2017 UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review key recommendations in its third UPR (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Based on reportage from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Reports, Pakistan ranks 150th out of 189 on the overall metric entitled Human Development Index (UNDP, 2019). Overall, Pakistan ranked 148th out of 149 nations on gender equality within The Global Gender Gap Report 2018 (World Economic Forum, 2018), as the recent report stated:

Similarly, women hold just 34% of managerial positions across the countries where data is available, and less than 7% in the four worst-performing countries (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Pakistan)...

... While women and men are already equally likely to attain managerial positions in five countries (Bahamas, Colombia, Jamaica, Lao PDR and Philippines), there are six countries (Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Pakistan) where the gap is 90% or more...

... Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are the top-ranked countries in the region, having closed just over 72% and nearly 68% of their overall gender gap, respectively, while the lowest-ranked countries

are Bhutan and Pakistan, having closed just under 64% and 55% of their overall gender gap, respectively... (Ibid.)

As noted by Imran Kazmi (2018), only Yemen fared better on this particular metric, in this World Economic Forum report. In other words, and back to the point, Ismail operates and fights for human rights, for well over a decade, in this difficult context for equality of women and girls for the purposes of education and peace through Aware Girls and similar initiatives. Recently, as reported and called out by CIVICUS (2019) on June 6, “Pakistani authorities must end their judicial persecution of human rights defender Gulalai Ismail... She is being investigated for defamation and sedition, and other charges under Pakistan’s Anti-Terrorism Act, for a speech she made condemning authorities’ inaction in a case of rape and murder of a 10-year-old girl, and has been forced into hiding.” Billy Briggs (2019) in *The Ferret*, reported almost identical actions on the Pakistani authorities or, stated, “Pakistani security services have also accused Gulalai of a litany of serious offences including sedition, financing terrorism and defaming state institutions, though the authorities have not filed formal charges against her.”

Similarly, Humanist Canada’s leadership have spoken on the case. Vice-President of Humanist Canada, Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, said, “The Pakistani authorities need to realize that the world is watching and will hold them accountable for what happens to this defender of one of humanity’s most fundamental freedoms, the freedom to speak out against injustice” (Humanist Canada, 2019a). Echoing some of the sentiments of the Vice-President, Humanist Canada President, Martin Frith, stated, “The intransigence of the Pakistani authorities means that Gulalai’s only hope is public pressure from the international community. The Canadian government voiced support for human rights in the past. We urge the Government of Canada to act on the principles of support for human rights defenders and protection of human rights by publicly intervening in the case of Gulalai with the appropriate Pakistani officials.” (Humanist Canada, 2019b). Dr. Mehdi Hasan, Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), stated:

HRCP is seriously concerned over reports that activist Gulalai Ismail’s family has been threatened, allegedly by state agencies, in connection with her work as a human rights defender. HRCP urges the state to investigate the recent raid on Ms Ismail’s house in Islamabad, reportedly by a large contingent of men in civilian clothes. A family member has claimed that their driver was forcibly taken away, interrogated and physically harmed. There are also worrying reports that the persons involved in this incident threatened to harm Ms Ismail’s younger sister if the former did not cease her work as an activist.

Ms Ismail’s family has already been subjected to similar intimidation to the extent that she has had to severely curtail her activism. As a well-known human rights defender who has consistently highlighted human rights violations, especially in KP, attempts to harass and threaten her through her family and other household members are unacceptable. The state must protect civil society’s right to dissent by ensuring that the incident is investigated transparently and those involved, held accountable. (2019)

As Hashim (2019) reported on August 14 in *Al Jazeera*, in May, there were raids on the Ismail home. Several others have provided support or identified the same or similar issue with the charges against Ismail. Peace Direct expressed “full solidarity” with Ms. Ismail (2019). They direct attention to a petition [here](#) (Avaaz, 2019). Humanists UK issued support (2019). Even Pakistan’s Supreme Court “rebuked the powerful military and intelligence agencies” earlier this

year (Agence France-Presse, 2019), also, National Endowment for Democracy reported on the attacks on Ismail through the charges by the Pakistani military (2019).

One problem for journalists, around the world in fact, not in Pakistan alone, comes from a climate of fear, induced and partially successful, to make speaking the truth and conducting honest journalism difficult (Ibid.). Zaffar Abbas, Editor-in-Chief of Dawn, stated, “[Journalists] know no new instructions are coming in from the editor, they know the news editor is not stopping them ... from writing certain things, but the overall atmosphere that has been created through intimidation and other methods, it is having a psychological impact and it is affecting our journalism” (Ibid.). Interestingly enough, Prime Minister Imran Khan visited President Trump in July (Briggs, 2019; BBC News, 2019). Before the trip, members of the United States Congress were asked to sign a letter organized through Alliance for Peacebuilding with emphasis on the Ismail case (Briggs, 2019; Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2019).

Alliance for Peacebuilding’s call was picked up by Humanists International (2019) within a week. “Specifically, we urge you to raise concerns over the treatment of internationally recognized peacebuilder and women’s rights activist Gulalai Ismail, who is under immediate threat of indefinite detention for speaking out against cases of harassment and sexual assault by Pakistani security forces,” Humanists International and Alliance for Peacebuilding stated, “Gulalai has been charged along with other activists who have been part of a nonviolent movement seeking a truth and reconciliation commission to investigate human rights abuses by Pakistani forces during counterterrorism operations” (Humanists International, 2019; Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2019). Circa July 15, 2019, the following organizations signed onto the call – full statement [here](#):

2-2 Consulting Group LLC

Alliance for Community Based Organisations

Alliance for Peacebuilding

American Friends Service Committee

Asian-American Network Against Abuse of Human Rights

Association for Women’s Promotion and Endogenous Development

Aware Girls

Benenson Society

Catalyst for Peace

Center for Advocacy in Gender and Social Inclusion (CAGSI)

Cepaz – Centro de Justicia y Paz

Charity & Security Network

Community Initiatives and Research

Cultura Democrática

Equity Now for Women and Girls

Global G.L.O.W.

Humanists International
 Idea Ghar
 Institute for Young Women Development
 International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
 Journalistes pour la Promotion de la Démocratie et des Droits Humains (JPDDH)
 JuventudLAC
 Karuna Center for Peacebuilding
 Nest
 Nonviolent Peaceforce
 Organization for Community Civic Engagement
 Organizing for Zimbabwe Trust
 Pakistan NGOs Forum
 PCDN
 Peace Direct
 PRBB Foundation
 Radial Show Cara & Sello
 RAW in WAR (Reach All Women in War)
 Roshan Democratic Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan
 Rural Women's Network Nepal (RUWON Nepal)
 SUSTAIN Cameroon
 The Business Plan for Peace
 The Kota Alliance
 United Network of Young Peacebuilding
 Virtueconomy
 World Youth Movement for Democracy
 Youth 21 for community development

This is far from complete reportage, limited to the last couple of months (mostly), and Ismail remains in hiding.

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Ask Annie Laurie 3 – A-Divine Divides: Free Expression and Speech, and Social Justice

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 11, 2019

Annie Laurie Gaylor is the Co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) with Dan Barker. She has been part of the fight against the encroachment of religion on secular culture, and human and women's rights for decades. She is the author of Woe to Women: The Bible Tells Me So (FFRF, Inc., 1981), Betrayal of Trust: Clergy Abuse of Children (FFRF, Inc., 1988), and Women Without Superstition: "No Gods – No Masters" (FFRF, Inc. 1997). Annie Laurie is among the most respected and prominent freethought women in the region, in North America.

Here we talk about social activism in secular communities.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Non-religious communities can, at times, differ in the emphasis of values. In a modern and, often, online context, some value freedom of speech, if American, or freedom of expression, if Canadian or globally-oriented, more. Others value social justice, based on human rights and equality. What appears to explain the difference in the emphasis of values in the non-religious or secular communities?

Annie Laurie Gaylor: Of course, in the U.S., we think of “free speech” probably because of the First Amendment. The underlying principle of the First Amendment is freedom of conscience: religious, political, speech (expression), the right to petition our government for redress of grievances. I think many freethinking or secular U.S. groups are very much engaged with human rights, equality and social justice, especially humanists who have a broad agenda. I do not really know what accounts for the difference, but I do know that ex-Muslims in the European Union (and UK) are very opposed to “identity politics,” which is used against them as they are often branded “Islamophobes” for speaking out against the Muslim religion or their treatment by Muslims. So sometimes there is tension between freethought rights and what is generally lumped together under social justice.

Jacobsen: It shows in the epithets, too. For example, some refer to individuals who value social justice more as Social Justice Warriors or SJWs. Some refer to individuals who value free expression or free speech more as Free Speech Warriors. How can a-religious communities engender a sub-culture away from epithets and more towards common values and civil disagreements?

Gaylor: We don't use the term “warriors” at FFRF. The best way to have harmony in any society is to keep religion and dogma out of it. That values all citizens equally and should promote civil discourse and an emphasis on what we share in common, rather than what divides us.

Jacobsen: Many women appear to report a different form of online harassment if public in their secularism or advocacy of women's rights: often sexual or gender-based forms of harassment. Can you relay some of the differences, please?

Gaylor: The language of the bible is not only misogynistic, but often lewd about “uppity” women or women in general. So it doesn't surprise me if religion's male followers take a page

from the bible to demean women who publicly make known their dissent from religion or act as autonomous human beings. Or even if just nominally religious men feel entitled to take potshots. Patriarchal religions ultimately despise women, and demand subservience, so feminist or secular spokeswomen are daring to defy these strictures. When the first women's rights proponents in the United States spoke, they were often mobbed, lights were turned out, they were humiliated, scorned, and the press went after them. Same old, same old! Elizabeth Cady Stanton reminisced that "The bible was hurled at us from every side." But still, they persisted!

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

Gaylor: Thanks for asking, Scott.

By Way of Re-Introduction: Note, “International Humanist and Ethical Union” Became “Humanists International”

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 11, 2019

The International Humanist and Ethical Union or IHEU was founded in 1952 in Amsterdam, Netherlands, by Julian Huxley, Jaap van Praag, Harold Blackham (Humanists International, 2019a). Humanism, as a philosophy and lifestance, needs little introduction to the community of readers here. The American Ethical Union, American Humanist Association, British Ethical Union, the Vienna Ethical Circle, and the Dutch Humanist League formed the first collective of IHEU (Ibid.). The first IHEU congress took place between August 22 and 27 in 1952. With five resolutions passed on the last day of the congress with the inclusion of the Amsterdam Declaration, not to be confused with the 2002 Amsterdam Declaration (Humanists International, 2019b; Humanists International, 1952). The 1952 Amsterdam Declaration emphasized the following principles:

It is democratic.

It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively.

Humanism is ethical.

It insists that personal liberty is an end that must be combined with social responsibility in order that it shall not be sacrificed to the improvement of material conditions.

It is a way of life, aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment, through the cultivation of ethical and creative living.

(Humanists International, 1952)

These ethical and humanistic principles formulated the basis for what became the international democratic body of the humanist movement beginning in 1952. The organization has been registered in New York, USA with the main administrative headquarters in London, UK with operation as a non-governmental organization or NGO. The function of the international democratic body of humanists is the influence on international policy with concrete steps in representation on a number of United Nations committees and other international bodies (Humanists International, 2019a).

Interestingly, the founding declaration, the 1952 Amsterdam Declaration, states, “Ethical humanism is thus a faith that answers the challenge of our times. We call upon all men who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this cause” – a faith (Humanists International, 1952). The 2002 Amsterdam Declaration advanced some of the notions with 50 years of development of IHEU:

Humanism is ethical.

Humanism is rational.

Humanism supports democracy and human rights.

Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.

Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.

Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination.

Humanism is a lifescape aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment.

(Humanists International, 2019b)

It went from democratic to the support for democracy and human rights, from a way of life to a lifescape, while remaining the same on items including the ethical nature of it. They have a youth branch for 18-to-35-year-olds entitled IHEYO or the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation (Humanists International, 2019c). As 2019 rolled along, and as the history of the organization developed more into the present, circa May/June of 2019, IHEU went through a name change into HI or Humanists International as part of a rebranding and the same for its youth branch from IHEYO to YHI or Young Humanists International.

With elections to the boards, now, we can see the rebranding and the leadership – some renewed and some new – to Humanists International and Young Humanists International (recommendation: use the full titles rather than the initialisms). Humanists International's Board composed of Andrew Copson (President, United Kingdom), Anne-France Ketelaer (Vice-President, Belgium), Boris van der Ham (Treasurer, Netherlands), Roslyn Mould (Board Member, Ghana), Kristin Mile (Board Member, Norway), Uttam Niraula (Board Member, Nepal), David Pineda (Board Member, Guatemala), Rebecca Hale (Board Member, America), and Gulalai Ismail (Board Member, Pakistan) – more on Gulalai in a recent article entitled “Some Minor Coverage and Recent News on the Co-Founder of Aware Girls” (Humanists International, 2019d; Jacobsen, 2019). “Young Humanists International executive committee is currently composed of 9 officers: the president, secretary general, treasurer, communications officer, and the chairs of each regional working group” with Marieke Prien (President, Germany), Jad Zeitouni (Vice-President, Belgium), Scott Jacobsen (Secretary-General, Canada), Anya Overmann (Communications Officer, America), Viola Namyalo (AfWG Chair, Uganda), Danielle Hill (AsWG Chair, Philippines), Hari Parekh (EWG Chair, United Kingdom), Rony Marques (AmWG Chair, Brazil) with the “WG” short for “Working Group” in each as in African Working Group, Asian Working Group, European Working Group, and Americas Working Group (Humanists International, 2019c).

Humanists International, as the full organization, represents 181 Member Organizations or MOs, which remains a staggering testament to the hard work and dedication of the entire global community to come together and the Board and staff – Gary McLelland (Chief Executive), Bob Churchill (Director of Communications and Campaigns), Dr. Elizabeth O'Casey (Director of Advocacy), and Dr. Giovanni Gaetani (International Development Manager) – of Humanists International (and Young Humanists International) to bring everyone within the global humanist democratic umbrella (Humanists International, 2019d; Humanists International, 2019e). A truly impressive achievement and growth trajectory for a, typically, marginalized or silenced – whether externally or internally – minority, or superminority depending on the specific context. All recent elections happened in Reykjavik, Iceland (Humanists International, 2019f). If you would like to join, or have an organization considered for membership, this would be highly encouraged and supported, as humanism and its values continue to grow as a community and a

life stance around the world – in even some of the most unlikely places (Humanists International, 2019g).

So there you go, IHEU is Humanists International and IHEYO is Young Humanists International.

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