

Conversations with the Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen



Conversations with the Humanist Alliance
Philippines, International

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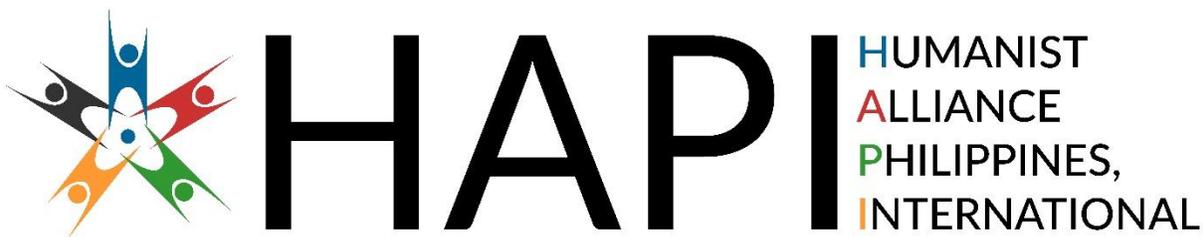
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Dedications

Our heartfelt gratitude to Scott Jacobsen for painstakingly interviewing the HAPI members and for his indefatigable ebullience for humanism. His effort in propagating humanism is greatly appreciated and forever, we cherish his contribution to humanity and HAPI.

Marissa Torres Langseth

I have enjoyed getting to know more about the humanist, and associated, communities in the Philippines via the contacts with Marissa Torres Langseth and the interviews with individuals involved with HAPI in some manner. The freedom to organize, believe, and have community as one wishes truly remain cherished values, of which humanists need in order to organize a philosophy, organizations, membership, social activism, and political parties.

In part, this is an honor to meet everyone and to read their stories, to share in community with them; in another component, it remains an ode to the statement, “I am not alone.” Humanist Filipinos and Filipinas have community and retain a great strength in it. As well, or in addition to a dedication to Marissa and the humanist community of the Philippines, it is a dedication to the founders of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* from December 10, 1948.

It is a dedication, in context, to the UDHR through Article 1 on the right to equality, Article 2 on freedom from discrimination, Article 3 on the right to life and liberty, Article 7 on right to equality before the law, Article 18 on freedom of belief and freedom of religion, Article 19 on freedom of opinion, Article 20 on the right of association, Article 27 on the right to participate in cultural life in community, and Article 30 on the freedom from state or personal interference in the aforementioned rights.

Also, this reflects the importance in the *Philippine Constitution* in Article II, Section 6 on the separation of church and state being inviolable and Article III, Section 5 on no law permitted respecting an establishment of religion or restricting its practice.

Thus, your rights as humanists and other freethinkers matter: do not let anybody state otherwise, firmly.

Scott

P.S. I worked to keep the tone and content within the original voice and grammatical style of the individual HAPI member and staff member.

HAPI Founder



An (Abridged) Interview with Marissa Torres Langseth, B.S.N., M.S.N.: Founder & Chairperson Emeritus, HAPI; Founder, PATAS

Langseth left PATAS in November, 2013 and founded HAPI in December, 2013.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So let's start from the top. What was your family background regarding geography, culture, language, and religion?

Langseth: I was born in San Antonio, Nueva Ecija. It's part of Luzon.

We are of course Catholics. We were poor. So, I was born poor and then at the age of 5 my father, who was a soldier then, was moved to Cebu.

Cebu is in the middle part of the Philippines; it's an island. And of course my mother is so religious, she goes to church almost every day. And this is why I see that religion is a poison. It's dangerous to society because people will go to church instead of working.

They would ask for food and money from the church. I mean from God not from the church.

We speak Tagalog in the Philippines. I speak different languages because I've been to so many places. Culturally speaking, religion is a big, huge part because it's like every Sunday, my mother would kick me to go to church.

She would buy new clothes for me so I could go to church. It's like she would force us to go to church even if there are no new clothes. She would force us. If you won't go, you have to be kicked several times and be woken up to go to church.

I didn't understand then but when I was in grade 5, when I discovered science, I began to ask the questions, "Why are we here? What is our purpose?" Nobody could answer me.

Jacobsen: What were some pivotal moments in early life or past grade 5 that you can remember?

Langseth: Pivotal moments, I would say in grade 5, it's science. When I was looking at the stars, I would imagine who made this. I was asking questions already in grade 5. And then in high school, I could not understand why I could not get gifts from Santa Claus when I was a good girl.

So, I did my experimentation, not my research. Why is it that Santa Claus doesn't give gifts to poor people? Now, I understand it's because their parents are poor. So, I applied that to God. Why is it that God does not bless the poor people? So, maybe, there is no God.

Jacobsen: What were some other early moments of moving towards an irreligious orientation or non-belief in God?

Langseth: There was one time when a priest in the military, we lived in a military compound. There was one time when that priest was trying to rape me. Of course, I'm good in running, so I ran away.

Why is it that these supposedly good people would try to touch other women, other girls? The part that made me turn to irreligion was when I was in Saudi Arabia, when I worked in Saudi Arabia, I worked there as a registered nurse.

I saw the different culture in Saudi Arabia. They're Muslims there, and how they treat women. They're treated like animals, like secondary citizens. Men were eating in a restaurant and the women were outside waiting for them.

And in fact, it's just so different. So I said if there were a God, why is it that the people in Saudi Arabia are worshipping another God named Allah? And then the highlight of my irreligiosity is 9/11 in 2001.

I saw the 2nd plane surgically slash into the 2nd building. So I thought if there were a God, why can't he stop that?

Jacobsen: What was the emotion running through you when you saw the plane hit the tower?

Langseth: It was terrorism, of course. That if there were a God, why can't he stop these kinds of atrocities? Why can't he? So I said to myself, "People who would still believe in God at that time. It's just so unreal to believe at that time really."

Because it was preventable. That was not an act of nature. It's not like a typhoon or earthquake. It's preventable. It is a human invention, a person. I looked at that plane blow up the twin towers. If there were a powerful human being or a God, he could have stopped that, right?

Jacobsen: Why move to New York of all places, the United States in general?

Langseth: I was hired as a registered nurse in Cebu and they were hiring for New York City. That's why I'm here. In fact, it's the best place in the world. I've been to so many places and it's the best place. I retired here two years ago from my job.

Jacobsen: Why did you pursue the post-masters in nursing?

Langseth: I want freedom. I don't want to be dependent on anyone. When you are a nurse practitioner, when you have that post-master degree leading to being a nurse practitioner, you are free to practice.

You do not need a doctor to be on top of you or screaming at you and telling you what to do; you do it. There is what you call an equivalence. We're like doctors in a way. We're independent.

There's freedom to practice wherever you want, whatever specialty you want. And of course the pay is high compared to just a registered nurse.

Jacobsen: Also, it's not a profession that will necessarily go out of demand too.

Langseth: [Laughing] We are so much in demand, believe me. I still get a lot of calls and invites to apply to them. It's always in demand, especially since there is a shortage of doctors in the USA.

Jacobsen: Also, you founded the Humanist Alliance Philippines International, or HAPI.

Langseth: Yes, because when I left or when I decided to leave PATAS in November of 2013, I found myself waking up at night and I couldn't sleep. I said if I leave and don't do anything, this group will eventually die.

So, I need to do something because I love to be happy and I want to be happy. I'm always happy. I said, "I will name it HAPI because I want it to spread and I want to share my happiness." I'm a member of American Humanist Association, for a long time. I said, "How come nobody even have made a society called HAPI? It starts with H. It stands for Humanism."

Then I crowdsourced: what the name should be? But I already had something in my mind like humanist, like it was supposedly the Humanist Association of the Philippines. The P for Philippines, obviously, and the I for international.

They said alliance is better. This is why it became the Humanist Alliance Philippines International. But if you call it HAPI, it's a positive acronym. And there's a music, it's also happy. I purposely launched it in January, 2014, so that people will say HAPI New Years with HAPI. It's called strategy [Laughing].

Jacobsen: What have been some of the more effective strategies for advancing the humanist movement?

Langseth: Number 1, I was always looking out for someone who can manage children. Or who has children, so we can feed them. That is a come on, so that people will see that we are good: we are good without God. We feed children, because the children, are our future.

So, I found Jamie. She has 200 kids. This was effective. We started feeding them in December of 2014 because it took a long time to find them. We have to interview. In fact, I asked around and she came to us.

It's so funny. She came to us because she saw HAPI members during one of our stints. One of our LGBT stints. She spoke to them and these people at the stint. We were so nice and they gave her food. And that was the reason why she said, "When I go back to Manilla, I am going to look for HAPI."

At the time it was coincidence and blessing you might say. We were looking for somebody like her. Then we found the children, we started in September 2014 and then it was bi-monthly, every 2 months.

That was for me just a come on because I am visionary. My vision is to attract these kids, to feed them, to make them feel we are not evil people and then finally the highlight of this is when we introduce literacy projects.

Like, for them, how to read, how to do some science work, and introduce some technology, I donated a computer to them so that they can look up our website instead of going to church. And we are successful because Jamie, the person in charge of these children, is now agnostic.

Sometimes, she says she's atheist, but she's agnostic, because at this time she still goes back and forth. So, that is the highlight. We are for education. Because when I was a kid, that's what the pastors do. They call us.

I was in high school. After school, they would invite us to go to one house and feed us, give us food and then they talk about religion, of course, there. Their God, and this and that. So, this is the way, maybe, but ours is better because we don't impose.

It's up to them to listen to us or not, but it's genuine feeding of kids because these kids don't get enough nutrition because they're poor. It's the slum area. We went there last June.

The convention was also my ambition because that would be the culmination of my leadership in the Philippines because I was ready to retire. The second highlight is the book, the HAPI Book: *From Superstition to Reason* is now in Amazon, EBAY and Barnes and Noble. But we get very little royalties. It is also available in kindle.

Jacobsen: What are some of the difficulties as atheists and agnostics and secularists and humanists as a community? What are some of the problems of community that we have generally?

Langseth: Generally, they think that us atheists are not good people; we are demons, evil people. We eat children. But to be honest with you, I have not felt that way here in New York City. Maybe, because I am in a different city and my neighbours are all diverse.

My neighbour on the right. She is a non-devout Muslim. She accepted me. I told her, “I don’t believe in God.” She accepted me as a human being. The one in the front, they’re Chinese. Of course, they don’t believe in God, the Chinese.

So in my neighbourhood, I live in an upscale neighbourhood in Queens. You cannot see homeless people running around. We’re not near a train station. Everyone has a job. Maybe, it’s because it’s my neighbourhood is why I did not feel any stigma, but in the Philippines it would be different.

In fact, Jamie told me she has to hide her being irreligious now. Of course, she goes to Church only upon pressure from her husband. But with me, I still go to church. It’s not pressured from my husband.

I go with him because I love my husband and that is one form of showing him how much I love him and how much I respect him. And the pastor is friendly with me.

Jacobsen: That always helps.

Langseth: Yes [Laughing], they’re nice people in the church. This is a Dutch Reform Church in Queens. It’s an older population. They’re nice. In fact, I even told them, “I don’t believe.” They said, “That’s okay. You’re here with us” [Laughing].

Jacobsen: So if Christian, a very here-and-now Christian, what are some of the more notable educational and social initiatives that HAPI has done?

Langseth: I have launched something as my retirement project: SHADE. Secular, Humanist, Advocacy, Development, Education, or SHADE, of course, it’s HAPI SHADE. With that, we have two cities that are active.

One is in Cebu. I met them. It’s called HAPI COMPRE in Cebu (Comprehensive Science High school). Would you believe that? I went to their school and presented something to their principal. One of the administrative personnel in their school as well. They accepted me so warmly.

I was like them. This is in the Philippines. This is in Cebu. HAPI COMPRE has 20 students who would help clean up the street. Their recent project was cleaning the street. Afterwards, 20 kids, they clean up the streets and then to show good will to the neighbourhood they would be fed with simple food, nothing fancy.

And then, of course, this is science school, so you expect these children to be intelligent. These people have chosen also during the general assembly. I was not in the general assembly in Cebu.

That was in 2016, so that was last years. They said their questions were out of this world and these kids.

They are our future. They are future scientists. So, I was happy to make a special event for them while I was in Cebu. We had lunch. We had unlimited ice cream and chocolate from the USA. Guess what, I took them to my mini library in the 2nd floor.

They read most of the books there, maybe 95 percent. They're all irreligious books. That was my style. I said, "Who wants to read?" So, they went with me. They went up and the most read book was *From Superstition to Reason*, from HAPI There were 3 books about me.

One is, of course, our own HAPI book. Number 2 is *Godless Grace*. I was presented there as one of the contributing authors to *Humanist Paths* by AHA. I'm a member of AHA. They also got my story, so a lot of these kids. They have read about me.

Now, they realize I am godless. I tell them face-to-face. Their teacher is also a militant atheist and an open atheist. I ask him, "My God, these kids. They're going to read about you!" He said, "That's okay. They know all about me."

So, that was the highlight in Cebu. Then when I was in Bacolod, I cried because they launched a HAPI SHADE event with the school. It's called Jamie Elementary School. So, there are 2. We are not just in the street; we are in academia.

The first one was in the Lyceum Debate Society of the Philippines. So, we are going to academia, but I would prefer elementary and high schools because these children – I don't like to say, but they are – malleable.

I hate to use the word brainwash because we were all brainwashed when we were children. But what I'm saying is, we can always direct them or make them realize that there's an option to religion: it is Humanism.

So, these kids are the HAPI COMPRE. These kids are so bright. When I ask them what Humanism is all about, they know what it is from the word human. Of course, trust in human beings but they are still children, they still say believe in God.

Finally, when I straight face told them, "Humanism, we don't believe in supernatural beings." They were not shocked. They were not shocked at all. So, I have an inclination to believe that we are Godless, or mostly Godless, but some are maybe apathetic to religion.

Jacobsen: What are the demographics of HAPI?

Langseth: It's mostly concentrated in Manila, Metro Manila. Because some islands, some of them are poor. They would need extra effort. They would need to put food on their table rather than do activism in Humanism.

Lately, we only have one or two active people there. In Cebu, we have many active people. In fact, some of them are not active because they always say, "I'm busy. I'm working." Metro Manila has a lot.

Also, the distance of the commute is better. So, we have more in Metro Manila. This is why we have HAPI Con in Manila. That is one of the many reasons too. Although, it's more expensive, but the attendance is more when we do it in Metro Manila than in Cebu or other places.

Jacobsen: If people want to donate to help HAPI, and the humanist, atheist, agnostic, and secularist communities within the Philippines, how can they do so? How should they do so?

Langseth: It's easy. We have a website. That's why we have the website. We have PayPal: donate via PayPal in the Philippines. That will go to the Philippines automatically. We have a HAPI bank because most of the Filipinos don't have PayPal.

They don't even know what PayPal is. So, they send their donation directly to the bank. We have PayPal for people who are abroad like me, like people in Europe. They go to our website. They read my articles, our articles and donate. We get a little here and there.

We have a few Americans who donate regularly, like 5 dollars, 10 dollars. That's fine. I met some of them. 99% of them are my friends who donate regularly. Some are overseas Filipino workers. We have a big donor from California.

She saw our article. She's a closet atheist. She saw our articles on the website and donated. I befriended her. Now, we're friends. She's been a great donor. He donated a projector, two projector sets. I gave her a book, our HAPI book. Another one is in Indiana.

I take care of our donors. They don't know how to take care of our donors. I take good care of them, even if I'm retired. I send them books, our HAPI book, because they want to read it. Because on the dedication page of our book, I mention their names.

That's how I took care of them because they've been with us since last year. That is one way to appreciate them and recognize their huge help to HAPI. I hope that they will continue to donate even if I have retired.

Of course, they are not happy. I have retired, but I have to or I'm going to be dead soon [Laughing]. I had death threats by the way. So, when I went to the Philippines for the HAPI Con, I hired two security guards. I paid them.

HAPI Members and Staff



Chat with Bong Faner — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become a humanist? Was religion in the family?

Faner: I didn't realize that it started when I started to have doubts about religions and gods in 2000. There is no higher being to help humanity but humans themselves. Prayers don't really help at all but makes people feel good, making them believe that there is a god that helps them. There is religion in my family, I am the only atheist, but one nephew is an agnostic. Belief range from the extremely pious to passive believers.

Jacobsen: What was a pivotal moment in becoming irreligious?

Faner: In the late 70s and early 80s, Protestant sects or 'born agains' were starting to gain foothold in the Philippines and were converting Catholics into these groups. I had cousins who were converted. I started to get curious on why and how these groups were successful in converting people.

I found out that their points of contention are that a lot of Catholic doctrines are not Bible-based and were just inventions by Popes and the Catholic hierarchy. In my own research, they were right. But I decided to take it one step further, is there really any evidence about god? I found out that there is really none, and it all comes back to faith — believing in the absence of evidence.

Jacobsen: What is your best argument for humanism?

Faner: History has shown that relying on the supernatural to solve human problems is an exercise in futility. Prayers did not prevent millions of death during the Black Plague. No amount of prayer can prevent natural disasters as earthquakes and hurricanes.

'Thoughts and prayers' after a mass shooting have been total failures. Only humans can help its own species. Science, which is a product of human minds, has helped humanity far greater than anything.

Jacobsen: Why are you a humanist in worldview and ethical life stance?

Faner: Due to my belief that humans alone can help themselves.

Jacobsen: How does the humanist life influence your political and social views if at all?

Faner: It doesn't. I take so many factors in consideration.

Jacobsen: How did you find HAPI?

Faner: During the early years when my non-belief was evolving, I read books and searched the Internet about atheism in the Philippines. Being a very religious country, I never expected a lot of Filipino non-believers. I was wrong.

I never expected to find a lot of young, Filipino non-believers. I learned about the existence of the atheist group PATAS, Filipino Freethinkers, and other groups. One of these groups morphed into what has become HAPI.

Jacobsen: Who is a hero within it?

Faner: Marissa Torres Langseth. She was the founder of both PATAS and HAPI. I admire her zeal. I don't know her personally and based on what I have read, not everybody likes her, but I can't judge her either way. I still see her as a beacon of hope for freethought in the Philippines.

Jacobsen: Any favourite books relevant to humanism?

Faner: I haven't read any book exclusive to humanism, but I have read plenty of books about non-belief and evolution. What are your hopes for humanism in the Philippines?

I hope that Filipinos will see the light and wean themselves from relying too much on praying for everything from passing an examination in school, to averting natural disasters. I would like to see the day when they would use rational thoughts in solving everyday problems and improving their lives.

Interview with Lucille V. Hoersten

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You are on the international council for HAPI, and in Germany as its representative. How did you find HAPI? Why did you think it was important to join the organization?

Lucille V. Hoersten: Good evening too. I neither found nor joined HAPI. I was incidentally added into the fb group. I also did not apply for any position, I got assigned, of which task I try to do as good as I can. I do not find it important to join the group.

Jacobsen: How important is it, and in what ways is it, for humanists to come together under a unified banner within a single country for international outreach?

Hoersten: It is not important, but it does feel good to know one is not alone, that there are humanists/atheists too. It is then like home. Just like I do not need religion to be able to help & function. But I make it a habit to help once I feel I am needed.

Jacobsen: What have been some of our initiatives with HAPI, or some of the general projects of HAPI, that you're proud of in their success?

Hoersten: I find all projects beneficial & I am profoundly grateful for everyone trying to contribute & help. And I am deeply happy that there is this atheist union that awakens critical thinking/rationalism, & gradually eradicates the acceptance of superstition & handed over dogma.

Jacobsen: What have been some honest failures? How can the next set of humanist leaders learn from these?

Hoersten: There are indeed existing failures. But that is a matter I find best discussed & solved internally. Life is a learning process & so we try to learn a little bit more every day. I hope we will be able to widely promote critical thinking.

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for the humanist movement in the Philippines in the coming years?

Hoersten: I hope we get to help more less fortunate people. I hope we learn to be grateful to each other & to really love each other, so much that it eradicates power greed in the union, so that we can all fully focus on altruistically providing humanitarian aid. To live our lives for a cause.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Lucille.

An Interview with Alvin John Ballares — Executive Director, HAPI

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What do you see, and experience, as some of the main difficulties for freethinkers and humanists and formal irreligious in the Philippines?

Alvin John Ballares: For the first question, I always get misunderstood by people especially in the workplace. That I think is the consensus amongst us freethinkers and humanists in our workplaces. My long time GF broke up with me when she found out about my Atheism. I was frowned upon for countless times already by my colleagues when I told them about my atheism

Jacobsen: How did you find HAPI, and why did you join it?

Ballares: I found HAPI through a friend who was a practicing Wiccan. (He's now dead). I joined HAPI basically for that sense of community; people who share the same worldviews.

Jacobsen: What do you think are some of the bigger bigotries against irreligious people in the Philippines in law, in culture, and in social life?

Ballares: Biggest bigotry is on the moral side. Reproductive health issues, like church, discourage the use of condoms which is, by the way, one of our strongest advocacies in HAPI Bacolod. Irreligious people are tagged to be the ones promoting Reproductive Health. There's this one time that we had to move away from the place where we were distributing condoms. People were sent to us by the local parish to fend us off.

Sex/sexuality is avoided like plague by the majority of people in this country. Most Filipinos are wired to think that it's immoral to talk about sex. LGBT is quite of an issue up until now. We still don't have same-sex marriage for the reason of immorality- say the pedophile priests.

The Philippine law doesn't give us protection from persecution. We don't get that privilege to express our secularism openly. It is often welcomed with sarcasm and curses from Hell.

Jacobsen: What seems like some of the activities and initiatives that are moving the dial forward towards more equality for humanists, freethinkers, and similar others in the Philippines?

Ballares: Basic activities would include building more platforms for the promotion of the arts: visual, poetry, etc. We initiated this event we call Rekindle to promote humanism through arts (modeled after the Renaissance). Whenever we gather as a group of atheists and promote secularism, people listen to us. We do it subtly.

Jacobsen: What are you hoping to do in the near-future on the activist front?

Ballares: I'm hoping to do more of what we do in Rekindle. We would like to promote Rekindle nationwide, to our chapters.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time.

An Interview with Andy Uyboco

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your relationship with HAPI? How did you find them?

Andy Uyboco: I learned of HAPI via Marissa Langseth whom I have been acquainted with for some time before she founded the organization.

Jacobsen: What is the state of humanism in the Philippines at the moment?

Uyboco: I think it's a growing movement. There is less stigma about it than when you position yourself as atheist or irreligious. I think HAPI is taking very positive steps in promoting humanism because it is not just about another group ranting against religion, but there are actual programs in place to uplift the general well-being and happiness of people.

For example, there are people in HAPI who are focused on educating poor children, there are others promoting environmental concerns, and so on.

Jacobsen: How do you see the future of humanism in the Philippines?

Uyboco: I have a bright outlook towards it. As long as people are committed to working for the good of humanity, then we can transcend the artificial wall of religious differences.

Jacobsen: What will be some of its difficulties in the near future, and even at present, in free practice in social and cultural life, and even political and legal life?

Uyboco: Present and near-future difficulties — in terms of philosophy and political views (e.g. secularism) — would still be difficult to implement because most people still adhere to a strong religious belief system.

It does not help that at present, there are a number of politicians and government figures citing religion/faith as a motivation for crafting policies or procedures.

(<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/863105/pacquiao-invokes-bible-to-defend-death-penalty>)

Jacobsen: Is Duterte a problem for the irreligious in the Philippines?

Uyboco: It depends. If we're talking about religious issues, I don't think it's a problem as he's been pretty liberal about dissing religion himself, and that sort of helps a bit in breaking the chains of religious fervor.

However, if you talk about humanist policies, then that's where the issues will start coming in. Even though I supported him in the last elections, I will be the first to admit that he doesn't make it easy for humanists to defend him.

I do not think he is an evil man, just an old man who is set in his ways — as I explained to someone before who wondered how I could support him.

I look at him like an ornery old relative who likes to cuss and bully everyone around, but he's done enough good things to show that there is a heart that cares underneath that tough exterior, and I and many in Davao understand and kind of give him leeway for that, even those in my circle that are irreligious.

But I know and realize that that itself creates problems as he is under international spotlight whether he likes it or not, and his careless statements here and there would be dissected and may be even interpreted as policy.

Jacobsen: Any upcoming work coming out of the school of design and arts?

Uyboco: Oh, I haven't been teaching for 7 years now since I moved back to Davao City from Manila. I've been in the pharmacy business since then, growing and expanding the family enterprise that my dad started back in the 50's.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Andy.

Chat with Christopher Villadelgado Barredo

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How was HAPI incorporated into your life?

Christopher Villadelgado Barredo: Chance, if I remember rightly. I was highly active in online debate groups before and the HAPI founder, Ms.M, chanced upon me, I think.

It's a little vague now, but being a part of HAPI was a very fulfilling experience for me as it allowed me to help through writing and publicizing projects.

Jacobsen: What made humanism such a compelling life perspective for you as a comprehensive practical philosophy?

Barredo: I have a wonderful family I guess. I also had awesome fictional parents like Capt. Picard in Gene Roddenberry's Star Trek: The Next Generation.

I was a humanist long before I knew about the term itself. Wanting to help make the world a better place, the adherence to the scientific method and the good values instilled by my parents were already an integral part of my character and personality growing-up.

I loved the arts in all shapes and forms, and when you internalize the lessons in literature, like books, comics/manga, movies and TV series — especially anime/cartoons, you end up with a very nice goal for the world no different from that espoused by modern day superheroes — humanism.

When people truly wish the best for everyone else and are concerned about the next generation, like the hero characters in the Japanese anime, Naruto, or the BBC's Doctor Who, the world becomes a happier and kinder place.

Kindness I think is one of the best values the human species innately has and it has served humanity in its survival. I believe more of it is necessary if we want to spread amongst the stars. Kindness begets more kindness and true concern creates bonds of unity and cooperation.

Humanism as a comprehensive practical philosophy allows us to keep the best parts of our society and humanity without any of the harmful and useless baggage present within religions.

This I think is the best thing about it. Anywhere on the planet that you travel to, kindness, empathy, sound logic and family are always game changers in a world of strife, marginalization, prejudice and madness.

I would even dare to compare it to the best thing about science — physics is the same anywhere and everywhere and so is humanism. That's something religions don't have. Humanism is a true and unifying natural world view and the good thing is that it's not subject to superstition.

Jacobsen: What is your best coda statement on humanism?

Barredo: Humanism unites us, one and all, through the best values humanity has to offer.

Jacobsen: How does religion influence politics?

Barredo: In all the wrong ways, and I say that unapologetically. Religion is a wolf in sheep's clothing, it maintains its benevolence in words and does promote good action every now and then, but it will always come at a cost as it also, like a computer virus, implants marginalization, demonization, dehumanization and passes judgment upon people through a belief system based on superstition rather than evidence and actions.

Statistically, where religion is strong; poverty, violence, anti-science, miseducation, closed-mindedness and enmity the are most powerful. Imagine the voting and lobbying power of that.

Scripture provides reasons to be good, but also good justification to be hateful and spiteful. The sad thing is that, rather than openly declare that these harmful parts should be discarded, the pious would be violent and antagonistic against those who criticize.

What kinds of laws and culture would such ideas develop? Definitely not a kind and open one. Religion may teach people to be kind to those who are of their house, but at the end of the day, there's always a fiery judgment for any who do not share its faith.

The historical trends never change where religion is involved. Religion causes severe delays in scientific, cultural and economic development to such an extent that it can be named as one of the, if not THE biggest, hindrance to planetary cooperation outside of run-away capitalism in a resource limited world.

Jacobsen: Does this make religion more of a political movement?

Barredo: Yes, of course. Imagine all those laws and lobbying that create more problems than solutions. Religion declares how things should be done, usually in very specific terms. Like how much a woman is worth if a father chooses to sell her.

Let me give a few examples of problems that are largely caused by religion in politics; anti-climate change, the flat Earth movement, terrorism, anti-vaccination, alternative medicine and a myriad of other anti-scientific nonsense. These are all caused by indoctrination into faith-based thinking.

Religion rejects the scientific method, a method which relies on evidence, peer-review and fact checking, in such a way that it kills intellectual development. Why else would they be highly interested in our children?

Children are the easiest to manipulate and brainwash due to their developing brains. Superstition, where once it helped people work together is unravelling society and keeping us from making highly needed progressive change. As they say, never underestimate large groups of uneducated crowds.

Jacobsen: Does religion tend to treat women as inferior and as untrustworthy?

Barredo: It depends on which religion we're talking about. For the 3 great monotheisms, I would say yes! It doesn't matter what kind of excuse the apologists and cafeteria religious say, if we want the gist of the underlying cultural view, one needs only read and study what the Torah, Bible and Qur'an say.

Jacobsen: What social activist initiatives are you working towards now?

Barredo: I am currently working with other like-minded humanists, wonderful people, on a project. However, it's still hush hush at the moment until we get our matters settled. But watch out for it.

I never considered myself a big name, but I am highly vocal both on and offline, and attend social functions where I can meet diverse kinds of like-minded folk. In small ways, I try to make a difference in the human rights, environmentalist and humanist movements through various organizations.

If those small functions end up being big things that influence people to be more humane and scientific, then it is of worth to me.

Jacobsen: How do you find the humanist movement in the Philippines as a whole?

Barredo: It needs more publicity, honestly and frankly. Most people are humanistic without realizing it and that is a good thing, but I think we need more publicity as there is power and strength in knowing. The common thing you hear when you mention humanism is. “what’s that?”. That needs to change.

Jacobsen: What targeted objectives are the most important for the development of humanist values within Filipino society?

Barredo: A higher education standard both at home and in institutions. Good education has always been the greatest support of humanism in any society. As of right now, humanism is communicated in English mostly since it’s the international medium.

However, for the common folk, this gets lost due to the weakening standards within our education system. For me, the target is always the empowerment and development of the next generation.

Publicity allows awareness and we can have more of that through grassroots projects, media publicity, discussions and conferences. An educated folk will have more lobbying and voting standards and that is the best way to translate the global movement’s mission and vision into practice.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Christopher.

Barredo: Thank you for the opportunity to say something!

Chat with Rayd Espeja — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Did you have any family background in religion?

Espeja: I grew up in a religious environment. Two of my uncles are priest and an aunt which is a nun. My grandmother used to gather us every 6:00 PM to have our novena while every Sunday she would drag us to church and receive the Holy Communion.

I used to be an active member of the Legion of Mary and later became the Youth Leader of our sect which is the “Rosa Mystica” The Mystical Rose.

Jacobsen: How did you find humanism?

Espeja: It started as a spiritual venture which allows me to enter various religious sects when I was younger. My eagerness to find some answers leads me to what I believe right now which is Humanism.

Jacobsen: How do others in the culture seem to leave religion?

Espeja: There are some corners in religion that will definitely leave you confuse and thirsty for answer. Those people who opted to leave are actually the people who fully understood the religion itself rather than those who questions without knowing. It is like, when light is casted the brightest, the shadow lies is in its darkest.

Jacobsen: What makes for the proper definition of humanism?

Espeja: Humanism is when you completely trust and respect your fellow and build confidant out of them.

Jacobsen: What is the main prejudice from the dominant faith against the faithless?

Espeja: Faithless are empty vessel. They are lost and never truly seen the mighty work of the creator. I often laugh it out whenever I encounter such prejudices from my acquaintances, friends and even my family. We can never change them thought about us if we counter them with words just to defend our belief, instead I would let them see it through the works I committed with.

Jacobsen: How can people with ties to family and culture through religion leave it without backlash? Is this even a mild possibility?

Espeja: My country is dominantly religious and I cannot imagine how other faithless people able to get away with it. Perhaps, if only we are open with our belief and able to let them understand how being faithless makes us a better version of ourselves. What I mean is that, we should act on it instead of indoctrinating them.

Jacobsen: Why do people seem to leave the faith and embrace humanism? How can we expedite that process as a movement?

Espeja: Religious Faith oftentimes rough especially towards our LGBTQIA+ fellow. Some freethinkers, enlightened people embraces Humanism and stand otherwise with what faithful are believing in. Making ourselves visible might encourage other to step in and join the cause. As human, our main reason to live is to look after with one another.

Jacobsen: What is the general treatment of women in religion in the Philippines?

Espeja: Women in religion are treated as a second class citizen. Yes, they are free to practice the religion, but they still need to submit themselves with a male superior.

Jacobsen: How did you find and become involved with HAPI?

Espeja: We used to be part of a freethinking group in Facebook and we are fond of flaunting our ideas, bragging things we had done just to prove that we are part of the country's thinking class. Later on, we got bored and found ourselves completely useless since we never initiate putting all our ideas in actions.

So then, Marissa Torres Langseth came. She is one of the annoying people you'll ever meet on web, but I must say this annoying lady knows her job so well. She told us to establish the local chapter of HAPI here in Bacolod City and like a wild fire all the ideas we have manifested into projects.

Jacobsen: What is the best reason for hope in the irreligious movements?

Espeja: Being in an irreligious movement allow you to become more selfless, and that is the main core of being a Humanist.

Conversation with Michael Madriaga — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become a humanist?

Michael Madriaga: I was raised in a Roman Catholic household, the eldest among three boys. I spent my early and formative years in a Catholic school as well. I was surrounded by religiosity in almost every facet of my life, but it didn't stop me from asking questions about the beliefs and traditions that were being taught to me.

“Why do we do the Block Rosary?” “Did we all really come from just two people?” To sate my hunger for knowledge (and perhaps to escape my random existential musings), my parents supplied me with books — volumes of them. I took interest in topics revolving around astronomy and biology.

I also loved to read about beliefs held by various religions outside of Roman Catholicism. I started to compare them with one another. For some reason, however, I could not believe in any of them. I was looking for something tangible to hold on to, something that I could test or examine and prove to be true or false.

I guess this way of thinking eventually led me towards non-belief in general. In the course of this journey, I started to consider that every person is responsible for his or her own actions and that ascribing events or circumstances, whether good or bad, to a supernatural agent is intellectually dishonest.

I saw people as complex individuals who, given the right amount of motivation and opportunity, can excel and be the best that they can be.

Jacobsen: How did you find HAPI?

Madriaga: I found HAPI through Marissa Torres-Langseth a couple of years back. We know each other even before its inception as I was also a member of PATAS (Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society) and it was there that I first learned about secular humanism and its values.

Jacobsen: Why is humanism the right worldview and ethical life stance for you?

Madriaga: Humanism allows us to view various aspects of life outside the rigors of traditions or religious dogma. It espouses value in evidence-based decision making and scientific inquiry. It serves as a bridge, a common ground, where people of various creeds and affiliations can unite and work together for a goal that can be beneficial to everyone.

Jacobsen: What is the best argument for humanism to you?

Madriaga: We progress farther together as a species when we learn to look beyond our individual predispositions and work together to create a better world for our children.

Jacobsen: What was your most moving experience as a humanist?

Madriaga: It was after the Typhoon Haiyan struck Tacloban in November 2013. We lost contact with pretty much everyone in our coastal town in Capoocan, Leyte after the storm knocked out the power and communication lines. I went there in person shortly after the typhoon struck to check on the community and find relatives who we've lost contact with.

It was good to know there were zero casualties that time in our area, thanks to the technical information that we've been receiving about the incoming storm from friends and relatives who've been tracking it as it traversed the Pacific before impact. The concern by the time I arrived was that the relief goods from Tacloban were scarce and took a lot of time to get there.

We managed to organize a small relief effort to provide food and water to the locals with the help of the barangay officials and provide information to their worried kin outside the island that they are safe. The people of that community belong to different faiths and, in the face of adversity, they managed to set aside their differences and looked out for each other.

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for the next few years for humanism within the Philippines?

Madriaga: It may seem like an uphill climb, given the current conditions in this country. Filipinos consider their faiths and political affiliations as part of their identity. Antagonizing them for what they believe in simply won't work.

To be able to change hearts and minds and for another to consider one's own proposition, we have to be able to find something that we all can work with. HAPI's programs such as HAPI SHADE and HAPI Trees are great avenues to reach out to people and inspire them to participate in activities that would enrich the lives of our citizens and of future generations.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts?

Madriaga: We can agree to disagree on a lot of topics and concerns, but what matters is how we deal with each other at the end of the day. Let us practice what we preach and put our deeds before our creed. Cheers!

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Michael.

Conversation with Jason Quizon — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become a humanist, explicitly?

Jason Quizon: I came from a poor family in the province. We never have a house to call our own, we barely made it thru the day. We are 5 siblings, all of us in school, a miracle in it self. My Father works as a pot maker and my Mother has a small store.

We never have much, but my parents never hesitated to share food to our neighbors. We are living close to our relatives (father side), they never showed the same kindness of our parents to our neighbors.

They almost always bring us down whenever they can. I guess those were my motivation, to become kind as my parents and to never become like our relatives.

Jacobsen: How does being a humanist change your life?

Quizon: When I was Saudi Arabia, I joined Bible studies and born again Christians. The pastors are hostile towards other religions. It made sense to me during those days, reading the Bible, it was the right reaction. I am now more accepting of other people's beliefs.

I see to it that I find the kindness in them irregardless of their belief. I try to be the best person I can be as that is the best argument I can have aa to being good without really believing in a god.

Jacobsen: How do the religious treat you?

Quizon: My relatives and friends who knows me treat me well. Acquaintances and new people I meet always assume I am Catholic. I was never assaulted personally. Online it's different though.

Jacobsen: How do the religious treat humanists or the irreligious generally?

With contempt. They almost always say that we are Satanist. Come to think of it, I don't mind being with the Church of Satan, as their commandments are way better than any other religion.

Jacobsen: What is the importance of the humanist worldview and ethical life stance as an applied philosophy?

Quizon: We are living in the now, and we are living with other humans, with real people. A lot of things decided upon in my country for example are influenced by religious dogma to the point that it causes harm aside from being totally nonsense.

At this day in the age of the Internet and globalization, no one should lose their life because of blasphemy, no mother should die because priests say reproductive health is not approved by god

Jacobsen: What makes a good humanist?

Quizon: A good humanist do good things because its the right thing to do. A good humanist also calls out bullshit in his/her society.

Jacobsen: Why are human rights more salient than transcendental moral law?

Quizon: Moral laws varies by culture, and by time. Human rights are universal and never changing. Human rights are never subjective, hence should be upheld before any moral law. But we all know that this is not the case.

Jacobsen: What is the best argument for making humanitarian and humanist changes to the country to you?

Quizon: Look at the most progressive and happiest countries in the world, these are mostly humanistic in nature.

Jacobsen: What are your dreams for humanism in the country for the next ten years?

Quizon: For Humanist based organization to penetrate the common household and the at same time have a strong presence in the government.

Chat with Rholdee Dela Mance Lagumbay

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was your background in religion growing up?

Rholdee Dela Mance Lagumbay: Well, I was born a Roman Catholic family. My Grandfather is a hardcore RC. Every Sunday we go to church. But when we go home, I feel empty. When I grew up, I started seeking. I found other Christian Churches and attended their services.

Still I find something is lacking. You see, Christian Churches always say that “Salvation” is only through Jesus Christ. But how about others who did not know Jesus in their lifetime? This idea deeply troubled me as I was growing. This is the “emptiness” I felt.

If God was so wise, why can’t he understand the fact that there are some who will never know him in this lifetime?

Jacobsen: How did you find Catholicism?

Lagumbay: Catholicism, Roman Catholicism (to be very specific) for me is not more of a Spiritual institution, but a Political one. It was created by Constantine the Great to expand his influence over Rome. He used the teachings of a Great Spiritual Master, wrapped it with Myths and Legends — viola! Mar Yeshua Ha Messiach became Lord Jesus the Christ.

The Bible was compiled to support this Claim. He who says something against their “Canon” is then a Heretic. Excommunication was the most painful thing to happen. If you’re not killed, you’ll be put into exile.

The word Catholic means Universal. This should’ve been the focus of this Religion. Everyone is Part of the “Body of Christ” so to speak. Christian or not, Theist or Atheist, we are all part of the whole Universe, therefore Kathulikus (Greek word for Universal). This has been wrongly used by the Roman Catholics.

The Catholic Universalist Church is part of the Growing Liberal Catholic Movement. We are the type of Catholics who do not believe in the Authority of Rome, but we believe in the Divinity and Dignity of every man. We are the Heretics, the Gnostics, and the Mystics.

Jacobsen: What is mysticism within the Catholic tradition?

Lagumbay: Mysticism, is acknowledging that life in itself is ‘Mystical’. Man is the temple of “God”. Now, when I say God, I do not mean an old man in the Sky, but the One Ultimate Reality.

It’s the all pervading Energy Consciousness that surrounds everything and everyone. The whole Universe, including “us” is made up of this Energy Consciousness. If you like, this is somewhat to what Star Wars called, “The Force”.

Jacobsen: What is Mysticism within the Church?

Lagumbay: It is actually the belief that God is within everything and everyone, yet beyond everything and everyone. This “God” that I speak of is both immanent and transcendent. We are all “Mystically Connected” to everything and everyone in the whole Universe. As per Albert Einstein, “Everything is Energy”.

We are made up of the same substances. Our bodies are the real Temple of God. When we Pray or Meditate, the real “communion” with God happens internally, not in a church building. Now,

this is the greatest mystery. Man is the meeting place of Both the Divine (Spirit/God/Higher Self) and Mundane (Physical/Lower self). His body is the Temple of the living God!

As Catholicism evolved, it acquired so many rituals that helps Man attune to his higher self (e.g. Ringing of bells, incense, kneeling, raising of the Chalice, singing, etc.), so we retain these practices up until this time, since we believe this is vital to our Psycho-spiritual evolution.

Jacobsen: How do you practice the teachings of Jesus Christ in your universalist church?

Lagumbay: The Catholic Universalist Church has no doctrines or Dogma. We consider ourselves 'pre-Nicene' Catholics. Meaning, we do not adhere to all the councils. We do not even use the Nicene or Apostles creed.

We believed that the core teaching of Jesus was Love. It is giving highest respect to everyone.

We believe that the best way to serve "God" was to serve our Fellow man. We were given orders by our Master Jesus to Love, not to Judge our fellow man.

We welcome everyone to the Church and worship with us regardless of Gender, Race, Religion, Political Beliefs, etc. The Sacrament is also open for everyone. We do not believe in 'conversion', since religion is not important.

Connecting with God is a personal thing to do. You can do that without having a religion. The only advantage if you are in CUC is that, you are free to whatever you want to believe. The Church will not condemn you for that.

We will encourage you to pursue your Path (e.g. BUDHISM, HINDUISM, ISLAM, ETC.) as we believe every man has different paths that is necessary for Spiritual Growth.

Jacobsen: As a Catholic priest in the Catholic Universalist Church, is this a title different or a content difference being in the universalist church as opposed to the common title of "Roman Catholic Church"?

Lagumbay: For the Catholic Universalist Church, the priesthood is Servant Leadership. It is a Vocation, not a profession. We as ministers do not accept "payments" for sacraments.

We prefer to be called as "brothers", but in the PH people call us "Father". It sounds weird for me being called 'father' by people 60 to 70 years of age, but eventually, I got used to it.

Priesthood, for us is a facilitator of the Sacraments. We lead the Worship Services. However, we do not see ourselves Higher than anyone in the congregation. In the Mass, we "worship" with everyone. We are all equally important.

Again, you do not need a Priest to connect with God. We are just here to aid you with the rituals you need. Nothing more.

Jacobsen: How do you view the teachings of Jesus Christ?

Lagumbay: Jesus Christ, or Yeshua Ben Yosef was a radical Jewish Rabbi who knew the Higher Spiritual truths (about God/the Force) and is far more advance than any other 'teachers' of his time. He calls God "Abba".

This does not mean Father, but is actually 'Heavenly Father/Mother who is the Source of Everything'. Jesus had female disciples which shows equality. He often speaks of the "Kingdom

of God is Within!", meaning, we co-create heaven here on earth by 'following his teaching', not by believing that 'he is God'.

Jesus, for us is more of an Enlightened Master just like the "Buddha" of Buddhism. He embodies the 'Wisdom of the Cosmos', which he showed to us through words and actions. Jesus knew that every man has this Divine potential to become like him.

The goal of Christianity is not to believe that Jesus was God, or the Only Son of God, but an active transformation of one's life through Love and Compassion. Master Jesus showed the way we need to follow. Mistranslations made Jesus the "Son of Man" (Bar Nasha in Aramaic). But it's wrong.

The word in Aramaic is Bar Enash, which means, "Son of Mankind". So, Jesus was preaching not about his "Second Coming", but he was preaching this grand awakening or Enlightenment of the Masses. It is when us, Humans will finally awaken to our true potential and evolve into a higher being (which was embodied by Jesus 2000 years ago).

Jacobsen: What trends among the youth trouble you?

Lagumbay: What troubles me about the youth today is having "unprotected" and "uneducated" sexual practices. I am not pro or anti pre-marital sex. However, these acts have great consequences if done in wrongly (e.g. STD's, teenage pregnancy, etc.) Education must be the youths number one weapon. They should be properly informed about this.

I guess movies and social media has a great impact on youth today. I also believe that this platform can help educate the Youth.

Jacobsen: What trends among the elderly trouble you?

Lagumbay: What troubles me about the elderly is that, most of them has closed minds and hearts. For them, they have already reached the "pinnacle" of wisdom, so they stop learning. There are no more room for new Ideas and innovation. They are the hardest people to deal with.

Jacobsen: Robust societies have rich ties between generations. How can we regain that in the digital era?

Lagumbay: For me, genuine love and compassion creates a very solid tie between people, regardless of race, gender, nationality, age, etc.

If the Youth and the Elderly could both educate each other using the language of "Love and compassion", then I guess both generations can learn from each other.

Jacobsen: How do you practice the teachings of Jesus Christ in your universalist church?

Lagumbay: God is love. Jesus showed this through his life and teachings. He did not preach about the "end of the world", but he preached about the future of Humanity. He preached about the evolution of the Soul, perfected through the purifying flames of 'Hell'.

For us, hell is Real but temporary. A God of love will not punish his Children for Eternity. Going back to "the Force" concept, we are all part of God. God can never punish a 'part' of Himself forever. You cannot say, "finger I do not need you because you are sinful."

Instead, you redeem your finger. Same is true with God. The purpose of punishment is for us to be corrected, and become better individuals. Why do you think God will punish ‘for eternity’ a person that only lived a short and temporary life here on earth? That is totally nonsense.

The belief of eternal hell is for control, and for money-making as well. It is far more logical to believe in karma and re-incarnation (which was originally one of the earliest teachings in Christianity).

Jacobsen: As a Christian Gnostic, how does this overlap with humanism, especially through HAPI?

Lagumbay: Spirituality and Humanism is “inseparable”. Why?

Because, “God is our Highest Self. It is the ‘Spark of the Divine’ that makes us truly Human.” I am a Spiritual Humanist. I also believed that Jesus was a Spiritual Humanist. He puts more weight on Human Dignity than following rigid rules and dogmas. He understood that “Laws were made because man do not understand Love. Love is the Fulfilment of the Law.”

That is why I am still here on HAPI, despite of those Radical Atheists bashers.

Jacobsen: How did you find HAPI?

Lagumbay: I found HAPI Before I became a Priest. I was so lost at that time. I had been through a series of paradigm shifts. It was a journey of “Spiritual Awakening”.

I bumped into HAPI through Facebook. I met a lot of likeminded people, surprisingly most of them are Atheists and Agnostics. It was through HAPI that I met Gino Paradela, whom introduced me to Catholic Universalist Church which I am now a minister.

Jacobsen: What is the history of Christian Gnosticism in the Philippines?

Lagumbay: Before us, I have not known of any authentic ‘Christian Gnostics’ in the Philippines. Most of the groups I know are ‘imitations’, or simply “false gurus” promising Enlightenment using the teachings of Master Jesus.

However, in it’s simplest form, everyone can become a Gnostic. Gnosis is a Greek word for “Knowing” or “Wisdom”. It is knowledge not based on books or external teachings, but an ‘internal revelation’ of the Divine (God/Spirit). Gnosis is attained through meditation, contemplation, and action.

We value the Bible, in the sense that it does not hold an absolute truth. It’s not a rulebook, but a compass. Read the scripture, contemplate, forget it’s meaning, meditate, and read it again. You will view the scripture in a different light.

And of course, you take action afterwards.

Jacobsen: If you could take one principle in the Bible for humanists, what would it be?

Lagumbay: Love. That is the core principle of the Teachings of Master Jesus. If we have Love, then we don’t need complicated Laws. Love is the fulfillment of the Law. The Laws are made because of Love.

Love is the force that binds everything and everyone. God is Love! When we say, “do not do unto others what you don’t want them do unto you”, that doesn’t mean you are being kind because of a Reward of Heaven, or you are afraid of Hell’s punishment.

You do ‘Good’ because the moment you look at into the eye of your fellow man, you see the Soul of God in him, which is also the same Soul in you. You do not hurt them because hurting others would also mean hurting God; and to love others is to love yourself More.

Jacobsen: If you could take one lesson from the Bible, what would it be for humanists?

Lagumbay: When Jesus was accused by the Priests of Blasphemy, he answered back, “Is it not written in your law? ‘I said you are gods’?”

Jesus was actually referring to Psalm 82:9 that says, “I said, you are gods, and all of you are Children of the Most High.”

Being that said in the Old Testament, and hearing that from the mouth of Master Jesus, we can conclude that Ancient Masters knew this One Ultimate Truth — that we all made up of the Same cosmic Substance, and we carry the DNA of God (e.g. The Force).

We are the co-creators of our own reality. We can make our earth a Heaven or Hell depending on how we live our lives. Worship means to serve God, and we do that best when we serve our fellow men.

Jacobsen: If you could re-interpret a mainstream interpretation of Christianity for the general public to have a change of heart and mind about The Gospel, what would it be?

Lagumbay: “Nobody is coming. GOD has already SENT YOU.”

Let us not wait for a Messiah that would save us from damnation. Only we can save and uplift ourselves from the Hell that we are into right now. Only us can change our bad behaviour. Only us can change our attitude.

Only us can overcome our addiction. Changing ourselves, we are also uplifting our consciousness. By doing that, we are also others. Thus, we are contributing to the Grand Awakening of Humanity.

Do not wait for Master Jesus to be re-incarnated on the World. We all poses the ‘Christ Consciousness’ within us. We need to awaken that ‘Divine Spark’ in us. We are born in this world to heal it. We are the ‘Messiah’ in training.

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for Christian Gnosticism and humanism in the Philippines?

Lagumbay: Well, I hope that Christians will be more open minded in the future. Gnosticism is a way of life. You can keep your religion, however, you can choose to ‘tap’ the ‘Spirit’ within you, then following rigid rules and church doctrines.

If your church rules contribute to spreading Genuine Love, then Go practice it. If not, don’t support it. If many of these rules contribute on hate, division, elitism and discrimination, then maybe you need to find a new Church.

I hope that Humanism will not be demonized by mainstream Christian Churches. I am looking forward to a future of Atheists, Theists and everyone in between will work together for the

betterment of Mankind, rather than arguing who is right, when that act does not change anything at all.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts?

Lagumbay: Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts, words and ideals about Humanism. I hope and I pray with all my Heart that One day, there shall be no walls dividing Mankind. I hope that mankind will finally be free from the enslavement of Religion.

You see, instead of us accessing God within and unleashing our true potential as Divine Beings, religion trapped us into believing that we are damned, and that we are hopeless if we do not submit into their authorities.

Let us take back our Powers. We are the Temple of God. Our Hearts is the Altar of Sacrifice. We best serve. God by serving our Fellow man.

When I look into your eyes, I see the Soul of God. It is my Soul. To hurt you, is to hurt my self.

And to love you, is to love myself more.

Namaste.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Rholdee.

Chat with Ralph Alvin Ace Rapadas — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you find the humanist community within the Philippines?

Ralph Alvin Ace Rapadas: I found HAPI because I was a member of Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society (PATAS) where a lot of HAPI's members were originally from. I found out about PATAS in Facebook the summer before I started my 1st year in college way back in 2011.

I actually became really active and revived/founded a freethinker/humanist organization in my University. Things have slowed down with my involvement in these organizations but I still keep in touch with the people I met.

Jacobsen: What was your early experience with religion in life?

Rapadas: I've been raised a Roman Catholic. When I was still residing in the New Jersey, I attended after school church programs. During my 6th grade in elementary school, I was certain I wanted to become a priest.

I enrolled in the University of Santo Tomas High School, the Catholic University of the Philippines. Ironically in my 2nd year, I became an atheist after learning about biology and the incompatibility of science and religion.

Jacobsen: Do you think that religion is a net benefit or not negative?

Rapadas: I strongly respect and support an individual's rights to have a religion. There is no doubt that religion has helped many people overcome their hardships in life however, I believe that religion is unnecessary especially in the advancement of society.

I view religion as outdated and preferably obsolete in terms of how we understand the world through science and the societal norms encompassing morality.

Jacobsen: How does religion influence politics in the Philippines?

Rapadas: For a secular country, religion plays a major part in influencing politics in the Philippines. The Catholic Church once campaigned for and against certain candidates depending on their stance on the then Reproductive Health Bill which is now a law.

Another example would be the bloc voting practiced by members of the Iglesia ni Kristo (INC) wherein leaders of their church would dictate who their members should vote for in elections.

Jacobsen: What is the nature of religious faith to you? What is its core aspect?

Rapadas: For me, religious faith deals with the human need for emotional support and it also conveniently provides "answers" to life's questions. Why are we here? What is my purpose? It also addresses the human fear of mortality by selling the idea of an everlasting life.

In a nutshell, religious faith for me can work in a manner similar to a placebo but is ultimately unnecessary.

Jacobsen: If you could advise youths about humanism, what would you advise?

Rapadas: Try to develop a strong understanding of philosophy and ethics. Be proactive in seeking out new information. Do you think that there is an ultimate meaning to life or that we

make her own meaning of life? I think that we make our own meaning out of life. For myself, I am currently leaning on the epicurean/hedonistic philosophy.

Jacobsen: What books do you recommend about humanism from Filipino authors? Who is the Filipino hero for you?

Rapadas: I currently don't know any humanism books from Filipino authors.

Jacobsen: If you could reference one quote or statement that best represents humanism, what would it be?

Rapadas: An Atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist believes that deed must be done instead of a prayer said. An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death.

He wants disease conquered, poverty vanished, war eliminated. Madalyn Murray O'Hair, this quote is for atheists but mostly applies for humanism.

Jacobsen: Do you think ordinary humanists or the stars of humanism are the best people to speak on it?

Rapadas: In other words, those who talk about it in a high level or those who live it day to day. I think both have a right and authority to speak on it. The stars may have a bigger following but it doesn't necessarily relate to expertise in humanist philosophy.

Talk With Alain Sayson Presillas — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you come to find the humanist movement in the Philippines?

Alain Sayson Presillas: I only found out about humanism online. By joining atheist groups and eventually leading me to the humanist movement.

Jacobsen: What have been some of the major obstacles in personal and professional life as a humanist in the Philippines?

Presillas: For me, I cannot just go around telling everyone that I am an atheist but somewhat comfortable telling people of being a humanist. My job as a teacher somewhat keeps me at bay because most of my colleagues are very religious and closed to the idea of being an atheist or humanist.

Even our department of education has a motto of “maka diyos” which means for god. Our values and decisions in the department are fashioned of being that of the biblical principles. And anything that is bible based is considered not good.

Jacobsen: What have noticed in terms of the law that discriminates against humanists there?

Presillas: Not really discrimination, but from documents and everything else, being religious and religion plays a role or a requirement, which in I find it unfair and self serving only those who are religious.

One thing to be considered is, I cannot write humanist in my birth certificate because it is not a religion.

Jacobsen: What about discrimination in culture and social life as general rules of thumb?

Presillas: Individuals who are not religious are considered evil or has no morals for the most part.

If your family ties and culture are engrained in religious principles it is difficult to make a decision that is not religious based, the parents have a say, religion has a say and community has a say to decisions that you make in your own personal life.

Traditional and religious people tend to discriminate on you because you are viewed as somewhat free spirited and cannot be controlled by those who are older than you are.

Most good and quality schools are run by a religious order, which is the curriculum is driven by religious dogma, even though you have an option not to take such subjects.

In every social event, that I attend, prayer is always a starting point before anything else

Jacobsen: How does religion have social privileges in society, especially Christianity?

Presillas: Majority of Filipinos are Christian, holidays, documents, etc. favors only one religion. It makes only the rest of the religion as a second choice and those that belong to that religion they're not considered part of bigger privileges. It widens more the gap of Christians and not Christians.

Jacobsen: How can Christians be prejudiced against non-believers?

Presillas: My experience is mostly in treating non-Christians, I am referring to Muslims and other religions. For the atheists, they are considered evil and wayward individuals because they lack the morals and the Christian values.

Jacobsen: What is the relationship between religion and the state there?

Presillas: Very closely related, the constitution says it and part of it. Leaders are somewhat guided by the fact that their religion plays a role in important political decisions.

Jacobsen: How did you find HAPI? How does it provide a refuge for you from the mainstream religion and life?

Presillas: I found out about HAPI thru online. I was able to prove to myself and to others that we can help each other without religion, that we don't need religion to be good and of service to humanity.

Jacobsen: What are your activist hopes for humanism in the coming few years?

Presillas: I am hopeful that humanism will flourish in the Philippines for the coming years as more of the Filipinos do have access to information and more advocacies in HAPI that others will actually value what do and somehow do get influenced by us.

Conversation With Bryan Valentino — Member, Humanist Alliances Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What's your background regarding religion?

Bryan Valentino: I was raised as a Catholic and I got introduced to other religions as well so I'm familiar with how most religions work and what they teach here in the Philippines.

Jacobsen: What was your first introduction to HAPI?

Valentino: I was invited to the group by its first lead convener Mark Janeo. I was a bit familiar to the organization already and I like it because aside from it being a discussion group, there are also some humanist events that people can participate in.

Jacobsen: If you could make one on the spot, what's the better argument for humanism?

Valentino: My understanding of humanism is that it's a better approach to a better world because it puts "faith" in or requires human action rather than waiting for a miracle to happen.

Jacobsen: What is the community of Humanists like for you?

Valentino: So far it has been fun because there are a lot of people who share the some of the ideals that I have. Also, most of the humanists that I know are people who you can have an intelligent conversation with so it makes me understand the world a little bit more.

Jacobsen: How does religion influence political and public life generally in the Philippines?

Valentino: Religion in the Philippines greatly affected legislation before but I believe Filipinos are slowly becoming more secular in the way they see things. For example, it was unimaginable before for a same sex marriage bill to be filed in congress but I think it was early in Duterte's term last year that someone proposed the bill.

Unfortunately, it was turned down both by congress and Duterte but nevertheless, it's still implies that the people's opinions are gradually changing for the better.

Jacobsen: What is a major reform Filipino law could undertake to have more equality for the irreligious?

Valentino: I think it would be nice to have the separation of church and state in the constitution clearly defined so that we can demand secularism from schools and not be required to attend or participate in religious assemblies or subjects.

Jacobsen: Does the current government pose a threat to the free practice of humanism in the Philippines?

Valentino: Well, hindrances or challenges have always been there even before the current government came to be such as the lack of laws to enforce secularism and discrimination against the irreligious but with the power of social media and the fact that the technology here in the Philippines is improving, I think we will be able to make more people understand what humanism is faster.

Chat with Angelique Anne Villa — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you find out about HAPI?

Angelique Anne Villa: I found out about HAPI through J-rik, he introduced me to other HAPI members: Rayd, Alvin, and Zenki.

Jacobsen: What made the humanist message initially appealing?

Villa: The book released by HAPI made a lot of sense, “From Superstition To Reason”.

Jacobsen: Who has been a guide for you, as an exemplar of humanism living by example?

Villa: I’m new to humanism, but I lost faith since I was 13. I’m still trying to know more about the people involved and how they established it.

Jacobsen: What do you see as the differential treatment for nonbelievers in the Philippines?

Villa: A big yes, even my mom was like “what happened to you?” but she didn’t make any violent reactions though. I can feel how other family members look at me with disgust when I talk about not believing in their god. It’s been just hi-and-hello between me and them since 2010.

Jacobsen: Also on the sex and gender front, how are women treated by the major faiths?

Villa: I haven’t experienced any discrimination yet, to be honest, but I feel bad for a friend back in high school that her mom wouldn’t let her join the volleyball team because they’re Christians and she was advised that it’s better for my friend to sing in their church.

Jacobsen: Does humanism provide a more modern and respectful message?

Villa: For me, yes it does. I know a lot of Pinoys would find it disrespectful if it contradicts their beliefs they’re most likely going to hate it.

Jacobsen: Does religion seem to be more or less compatible with human rights, women’s rights and reproductive rights, and so on?

Villa: Religion is less compatible in terms of reproductive rights, with the LGBT community, and more. Although I haven’t personally experienced this, I see it on the news and it’s so off. The irony between the “love thy neighbours and respect thy neighbours” and ousted gays, lesbians, trans, and the rest is simply not making sense.

Jacobsen: What are you hoping to see as a change in the nature of the public image of humanism in the next few years?

Villa: I don’t expect to see much in the Philippines, I’m not under estimating Pinoys but the fight to push humanism in the country is going to be hard when every family’s foundation is religion. I just hope to see they’d be more reasonable in the future so politicians can stop using religion as their back-up if they feel like losing the elections.

Interview with Jean Karla M. Tapao — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you find HAPI?

Jean Karla M. Tapao: HAPI was introduced to me by Ms. Marissa T. Langseth, the founder of HAPI (Humanist Alliance Philippines, International). I have known her for years because of my brother, who is an atheist and activist.

Jacobsen: Was there a family upbringing within a religious framework?

Tapao: Yes. I was born as Catholic but I was raised an agnostic. My parents are both Catholics. We usually go to church every Sunday, I read biblical books and I do pray etc... but I was raised as an agnostic maybe because I love science since I was in grade school and my Science teacher was really good in Science and I was surrounded by people who have different views and beliefs about life.

I have a catholic sister but she converted herself to the Muslim religion, I have two catholic brothers, who are faithful but not really religious, and the person who introduced to me the world of science, my atheist brother. So, because of that, I have learned a lot of things not only about religions, politics and science but also to be a humanist.

My siblings and I were living in one roof since birth so even though we have different views and beliefs we make sure our limitations to maintain the harmony and strong bond in the family.

Jacobsen: How did you come to formally claim yourself a humanist if at all?

Tapao: Since I was young, my family and I are already helping the needy but it's not only about helping and it will never end there. Everyone could become a humanist but the consistency of being a humanist is a life time action.

I am a humanist in mind and heart and that's the most powerful key that I have right now. I want to open the hearts of every one to humanism because being a humanist could change the world.

Jacobsen: What seems like the summary statement on a good humanist or humanist ideals?

Tapao: A good humanist for me could help the people in a short period of time but humanist ideals are for a lifetime. To inspire everyone and to continue what we have started could make a lot of changes. We, as humanists of HAPI, can do good without divine interference.

Jacobsen: How does science provide a more robust and reliable framework and epistemology for understanding the world than religion?

Tapao: To be available to compare both sides, we should have a great knowledge about science and religion. Science is based on reality and it was undergoing through the process with facts and evidences.

If we only engaged in one side, it is really hard for a person to defend his or her side to particular matter, it's just like you are closing your life in one box, but once you go beyond, you gain more knowledge and better understanding to your questions and it became clearer and clearer and that's the time that you can tell which is reliable or not.

Jacobsen: How does religion influence politics in the Philippines?

Tapao: People are molding their lives according to the way they wanted to be. What I am trying to say is, if we go back to the history of religion and politics in the Philippines, you can see the changes.

We all know that most of the population in the Philippines are Catholics. To be able to have what you wanted in life, you must have the courage to fight for it because of the surrounded obstacles, and that courage will lead you to build your own power, the power to create new ideas, environment and people.

Once you get that power it will spread into different angles, it could be good or not. The current situations we are facing right in the Philippines were brought by our own history.

Jacobsen: Could the government ‘crack down’ on irreligious activists and humanists?

Tapao: Yes, if they wanted too. Government has the most powerful weapon in the world but without its people, it will be useless.

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for the coming years of the irreligious movement in general and the humanist movement in particular?

Tapao: As a humanist, we know what is wrong and what is right, we know how to respect other’s views and beliefs, and even though we are different from one another we should know our own boundaries. If I can live with harmony in one roof with my Muslim sister, Catholic brothers and Atheist brother so why can’t do it in our own country?

We cannot have the changes we are aiming right now but I am hoping that today’s little steps could make everyone happy in the future. :)

I am Ms. Jean Karla M. Tapao, a Teacher, a Girl Scout master and a HUMANIST.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time.

Tapao: Thank you Scott. :)

Conversation with Bede Daniel Garcia — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become a humanist?

Bede Daniel Garcia: I guess it was a very long process. I am, after all, a son of a devout Roman Catholic mother and an Ex-Priest... And I did live in a predominantly Christian country... I did not know anything about Atheism nor humanism when I was very young... I was, however, always curious. I would read on Philosophy and Epistemology during my math class. I would engage myself in topics where everyone else in my age group would not have done otherwise.

When I was in college, I met a girl who would “strengthen my faith in the Judeo-Christian Religion” ... I remember going to church everyday of the week from 4pm — 8pm (Afternoon prayers, consecration of the blessed sacrament, Rosary, evening mass, and vespers).

I would also stay over up until 10pm on Saturdays because I was the lead Bass for the church’s choir. I would come back Sunday morning to attend mass and sing in the choir....

It went to a point where I was being invited by the priests to join the seminary....

I guess, it all started when my mother was diagnosed with Cancer... I suddenly questioned everything even more... I went through the very same questions that every agnostic or atheist would go through... I won’t go into detail as the arguments become very repetitive....

I then started delving into humanism as a means for me to find an anchor/compass if you will... I was so used to being “guided” by the doctrine that my psyche was not able to function without one...

humanism became my religion...however, I do not treat it as one... I treat it as a guiding principle. One that I would base my actions on....

Jacobsen: What is your own personal goal in the humanist movement?

Garcia: Sad to say, I have gone quiet... I have lied low...

My only goal is that I educate the people who I am surrounded with... those who have the interest to learn. In my opinion, I will have started to act like the hypocritical religious folks who try to force you into believing what they believe in... If I force them into understanding and following what I think, then I would be no better than them...

Jacobsen: How did you stumble across HAPI? Who was your first contact? What was the interaction like?

Garcia: I was introduced to HAPI by Ms. Marissa Langseth....

I have known Ms. M during our previous conversations when I was still with another group called PATAS (Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society) ... But in my personal opinion, once a group becomes too grounded, they start to become very political...and that is why I left and became inactive...

Jacobsen: Why is humanism the correct view to you?

Garcia: Well...because humanism is tangible... when it comes to support, solving problems, anthropological issues...everything becomes very attainable because everything is limited by the simple fact that we are human...

i find solace in knowing that my support comes from my family and friends... i find comfort in knowing that what i do creates the meaning in my life... that all the problems are man-made and therefore needs man-made solutions... that I am who I am and that this is the only life that I can live...and that makes it even more precious... that my goal in life is to be happy and to create an impact to those closest to me...

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for the humanist movement in the Philippines in the coming years?

Garcia: With all due respect, when I held atheistic views. I have always thought that religion was the enemy. However, being a humanist... I only hope that people are guided with one single principle that I have learned throughout the years and throughout all the religions that i have studied... To always be kind to others and to treat them the way you want to be treated... To love humankind as this is the only thing that is certain in life...

Religion is a personal thing... and so is humanism and any other world view... the wonderful thing about being a humanist is that we see the beauty and good in all manmade precepts... religion, opinions, politics, and whatever else there is in the world...everything has had its beginnings and its end.

I just hope that people begin to open their eyes and to act accordingly and to aim in the betterment of humankind... that is it...simple and straightforward... I do not wish ill on theists, agnostics, or atheists... i just hope that everyone will get along... everyone will find the common denominator that will bind us all together. and that is being human... the finite nature of being human, to my mind, must be enough to bring us all together...

Conversation with Brian Dela Masa — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Was there a family religious environment?

Brian Dela Masa: I wouldn't consider it as a religious environment. We just went through the motions like most Christians do. We try to go to mass every Sunday. We pray the rosary every Halloween.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find religion as not for you?

Masa: I started having doubts while watching bishops lie through their teeth about contraceptives on TV. I found a group in Facebook that was also frustrated as I am about church leaders. It got me into researching about religion.

Jacobsen: Why do you think people are drawn to religion?

Masa: People can't help it. They were raised with some form of religious belief.

Jacobsen: What is the best argument for humanism?

Masa: We only have each other.

Jacobsen: How did you find HAPI?

Masa: I was a part of PATAS before it branched off to HAPI.

Jacobsen: Why is the organization important in a largely religious country?

Masa: People should know that there are alternatives to religion.

Jacobsen: Does religion have sway over politics there?

Masa: Yes. It took an eternity to pass the reproductive health bill. And we're the only country in the world without divorce.

Jacobsen: Is there a way in which religion can be weakened and more tolerable, and so away from the fundamentalisms that it is prone to?

Masa: People should be aware that religion and politics does not mix. That not favoring any religion would ultimately be beneficial to all religions.

Jacobsen: How many people believe in the devil, angels, ghosts, and so on in the Philippines?

Masa: Most Filipinos.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts?

Masa: A person's beliefs is only a part of the person. We should always find the middle ground for us to get along.

Interview with McJarwin Cayacap — Member — Humanist Alliance Philippines International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did religion influence your own family background? What was it?

McJarwin Cayacap: I was baptized a Catholic as an infant. My mother was a devout Catholic; my father, so-so. But my aunts who lived with us were more devout than my mother. I was sent to schools run by Catholic orders — the Dominican Order, the Order of Saint Benedict and the Missionaries of La Salette.

As a kid, I was a member of ‘Kids for Christ’ of the local diocese, while my parents were members of ‘Couples for Christ’. Other couples would come to our house, and organize prayer meetings and bible studies. My sister and brother were born in a Catholic hospital.

When I had to get some stitches, my mother would send me to the same Catholic hospital, and would let nuns pray over me during surgeries. I did say that my father was a so-so; he left for South Korea when I was 5, so I have no idea of his religious practices when **he worked there**.

Jacobsen: How did religion enter your young life if at all?

Cayacap: The schools I went to had a general course for Religion or Christian Living Education. We would study passages and stories from the Bible, the Seven Sacraments, the Ten Commandments and the Eight Beatitudes.

We would memorize prayers and litanies. We were expected to identify every piece that is on the Eucharistic table. We were required to attend Sunday mass and write a reflection paper about the homily. I was also a member of the school choir.

I would give Bible readings at the lectern during school mass. We were required to dress up for the first Friday mass every month. That’s how religion entered my young life, and I accepted it whole-heartedly because I did not know better.

Jacobsen: Do you recall any moments of explicitly identifying as a humanist or an atheist?

Cayacap: I started intentionally missing the Sunday mass and not saying a single prayer. I felt it was a burden to make sure I do this and that on Sundays, before a meal and before sleep. “Why can’t I just be good to myself and others?”, I asked myself.

Whenever I was stuck in traffic, I would stare blankly at the window and think of the highs and lows of my life. Then, it dawned on me that something never made sense.

When I had the opportunity to study the times of King Henry VIII of England and Pope Alexander VI, I grew disappointed with the Holy Mother Church. It was in 2014 when I first identified as an atheist, but learning about secular humanism was the turning point of my life.

Jacobsen: When did you find the formal humanist community or at least the non-religious community in general in the Philippines?

Cayacap: Since I identified as an atheist, I had been looking for people like me. I remember following Filipino Freethinkers and attending one of their film screenings in 2010. But since they mostly do meet-ups, talks and podcasts, I decided to look elsewhere. That’s when I found Humanist Alliance Philippines, International.

But I did not sign up immediately. I was giving it much thought because I was very busy with work, too. It was not until 2017 when I finally had the time to busy myself with something other than work.

Jacobsen: How has Marissa Torres Langseth been an inspiration for you?

Cayacap: I met Marissa after I met HAPI. I signed up as a volunteer who was eager to learn how else he could contribute to humanity. I never thought the founder nor any of the leaders would have reason to talk to me until my first assignment in December of 2017.

I was sent to a city outside Manila for a few days to represent HAPI. The city was having its first LGBT summit, and HAPI was a donor. I took photos and wrote an article about it, and that was how I got Marissa's and the other leaders' attention. Eventually, I and Marissa started chatting and learned about each other's life story.

What has inspired me is her courage to make HAPI happen and keep it despite a history of treachery and misgivings. She never lost the heart to protect her fellow Filipinos from the age-old misery disguised as religion. It is no easy undertaking but she still does it no matter what.

Jacobsen: What seem like some of the more important moves needed in the non-religious activism in the Philippines for increased equality of the humanists, atheists, agnostics, and other freethinkers?

Cayacap: There are a number of secular groups in the Philippines, but I must say it is a shame that they never have a united voice when asked about issues and policies that concern the common Filipino.

We have, however, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. The conference speaks for the Catholic faith about almost every issue and policy there are, and that is exactly what HAPI would like to have beginning in Manila, the nation's very capital. Soon, humanists, atheists, agnostics and other freethinkers can formally convene.

Like the Congress, there will be representatives and committees as well. On a side note, HAPI has been offered to seek party-list representation in the Lower House. We are studying this offer very carefully now. All of us are on the same secular side; all we have to do is come together.

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for the future of the movements in the Philippines and elsewhere for that matte?

matter?

Cayacap: I hope that there will be a way for all secular groups to know each other and collaborate on a grand scale so we can approach every part of the world the appropriate way, and eventually get to the hearts and minds of many societies. In a decade or so, we expect to see more people identifying as non-religious.

We can only attribute this to recent breakthroughs in science, and a more critically thinking generation of humans. Just the same, I hope for a united voice throughout the world.

Jacobsen: How can people start to get involved in their local non-religious community?

Cayacap: At HAPI, we walk the talk. We even act more than talk, and that is how we think people can best involve themselves in us. So, if a person is willing to volunteer time and effort for a good cause in spite of a rather busy schedule, then he or she is ever welcome in HAPI.

For those who are not comfortable with physical activities, you can still join HAPI, especially in Manila, as we will do regular meet-ups to discuss important issues beginning this month of June. And for those not in the Philippines, know exactly what you can do — your natural talents and acquired skills — and find a local non-religious community where you can use some or all of those.

That is how you get to love what you do while inspiring goodness. That is how I am having a great time now with HAPI.

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

Edgardo Reguyal Cayetano -Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become involved in the humanist community in the Philippines?

Edgardo Reguyal Cayetano: To kill my curiosity, I searched for atheist groups in the Philippines and I come across a few including PATAS, ARMMC, I can't remember exactly how I become a member of HAPI. But one thing I'm sure is when i saw Jamie's post about her charity projects, i become interested and feel the urge to chip in a little bit to help out.

Jacobsen: How much does religion, such as the Roman Catholic faith, influence political life in the Philippines?

Cayetano: Religion and Politics are 2 legs chasing each other in the Philippines. It is either the politicians using religion or religion using politicians

I mean, religious institutions

Jacobsen: What do you consider the strongest are argument for reason and against things like superstition or magical thinking? Why do so many Filipinos find magical thinking convincing? In fact, in a more humorous note, why does most of the world?

Cayetano: In the world of make believe, nothing is impossible. If you have nothing, you can only dream. That is magic! Poverty is one reason why people tend to believe in magic, wishing there's a quick and easy way out. Ignorance is another, the lack of education and understanding makes people vulnerable.

Jacobsen: What kind of work do you do with the humanist community within the Philippines?

Cayetano: Physically I'm not involved in any work with HAPI i can only send support due to my busy work loads.

Jacobsen: What kind of charity events have you done in the Philippines before being formally a part of the humanist community in the Philippines?

Cayetano: I have been involved in person with charity events like feeding programs and relief good distribution in some areas of the Philippines.

Jacobsen: What is the organization The Good Fortune?

Cayetano: The Good Fortune was formed and organized here in Australia by myself and a friend. Its main purpose is to help out poor street kids in Manila doing feeding programs. It all started when my friend was touched with sadness looking at the kids begging for food.

He then contacted me and a few more friends to help out. We come up with the feeding idea and we did it several times until we decided we need to continue and keep helping as much as possible when we can.

Jacobsen: What are your hopes for you the humanist movement in the Philippines? What can be an effective means for the young and the old to get together and rapidly change the Filipino culture for more secularism and set an example for other countries throughout the world?

Cayetano: My wish is to see the rest of the world living a free life without fear being persecuted for something they haven't done. Eradicate religion as much as possible and replace it with a much more effective human government concentrating on equality and safety of everyone.

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

Mark Richardson — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What is your own affiliation or relationship with the non-religious community in the Philippines?

Mark Richardson: My connection with the Philippines started when I was introduced to a Filipina, at IDIC a community group, mainly for seniors, here in Seattle. I actually can't remember how my association with Marissa and the HAPI group started except to say it was through Facebook somehow.

Jacobsen: What is your own perspective on Filipino lack of religion? That small number of people who do not adhere to a formal religion?

Richardson: I consider the atheists, humanists and freethinkers in the Philippines to be amongst the most respected of groups in my mind, not quite up there with ex-Muslims, but close. They, especially the youth, are at the front line in the battle with the church establishment.

The saturation of religion throughout Filipino society and the immense societal pressure to conform from family, friends and community elders must make any expression of secular thought very difficult.

It must take much courage for anyone to break out. I know Filipinos are one, if not the, greatest user of social media in the world and I hope they use this to counteract the influences of religion.

Jacobsen: What do you consider the best argument for reason and against superstition?

Richardson: I think Epicurus' concise logic on the existence of evil adequately deals with the notion of God, the "loving", omnipresent, omnipotent entity featured in the monotheistic religions.

Other less perfect and less powerful entities that might be called gods I dismiss like they are in science fiction shows like Star Trek TOS (the episode "Who Mourns for Adonis" springs to mind) where false gods only appear god-like by having more advanced technology.

I must make it clear, at this point, that I do not want to take away a person's need to have faith and believe in whatever they want. Without some form of sinister mind-control this would be impossible anyway. What is absolutely essential, though, is that this religious freedom does not impinge on the other aspects of our lives.

Both historically and currently, it is clear that religious dogma, or interpretations of it, has led to persecutions towards minority groups, racism, generally bigoted behavior, hostility and, unfortunately, much bloodshed.

The wall of separation between church and state is a concept of paramount importance that must be maintained and defended. Laws and public policy in general must be determined through secular thought only.

Jacobsen: Do you have any recommendations for the young in terms of building a coalition of activists for secularism?

Richardson: Continuing the great work of the HAPI group (and others) with the focus on educational programs for the young, and building up the grass roots activism, is the best way

forward I think. One concern I have is that the secular groups do not become too fragmented and thus lose the ability to effect change.

This is an issue for the secular movement in the USA, in my opinion, and there is a definite benefit of having strength in numbers. With a strong grass roots membership and a minimum of organizations to represent them, I think it will be easier to influence the politicians, law makers and educators.

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

In Conversation with Leonardo “Nards” Go — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family background in religion? What are your own story and educational background? How did you find humanism and HAPI?

Leonardo “Nards” Go: I grew up in a deeply religious (Catholic) and conservative, family. We were praying for the angels every night at 6pm, prayed with the rosary every night with my parents and grandparents in my elementary years, going to Church every sunday, participating in religious events.

My father was a Liturgical Assistant, my aunts and uncles, active in church groups, I was once an altar boy and *ave maria*, Boy Scout awardee (knights of the altar — the highest award for a Catholic Scout), went to catholic schools from prep all the way to college and of course, got my education from nuns in an exclusive school in my elementary then to proceeded to another exclusive school run by Jesuits in high school and all the way to college up to my Masters.

I once taught World Literature and Philosophy to a non-sectarian community college for a while in our hometown. At present, I work for the City Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (CDRRMO, that would be Emergency Management Agency in the US) in our city as assistant to the head.

My item is Environmental Management Specialist. Actually, I hold 2 offices, as I am also officially with the City Environment and Natural Resources Office (EPA in the US), but since my area and training is climate change adaptation and mitigation; hence, I also sit at the CDRRMO.

I found humanism, when I started to become politicized, during my college days, as I was starting to notice the hypocrisy, inequality, and beliefs and customs of society that I grew up in, specifically the kind fostered by the Catholic Church.

The most glaring is that of attributing everything as God’s will, even in gambling, Filipinos pray for signs before making a bet; ours is a combination of mysticism and Catholicism, after reading inspirational books (I started reading in High School) and exposure to Western culture through movies, TV, and other mass media sources, I slowly started to realise that we actually hold our destiny in our own hands.

While it is good to be inspired by God, to do good things in his glory, in our country, there were more disturbing cases to the contrary, our beliefs (and religious attitudes) in God have actually become a hindrance to our full potential as human beings.

Nowhere is it more evident than when it comes to disasters, it is a big part of my job to go around the city and the countryside giving lectures on how to make their communities more resilient.

It is always not easy, especially when people, believe that disasters are an act of god, and everything is his will and has a purpose and leave everything to his mercy and pray. Humanism for me is the ultimate empowerment, which seems to be the byword in government endeavors these days.

I came upon HAPI when I was invited by a Facebook friend, environmentalist and fellow caver, Jennifer Gutierrez, then the executive director of HAPI Phils International, it was only natural that I accepted the invitation.

Jacobsen: How does the world see the Philippines from the outside under Duterte? How are humanists generally treated in the Philippines? How do Filipinos, in general, view humanists and the humanist community?

Go: It's mixed there are those who say, "It's a dangerous place to live, what is with his War on Drugs and all the extra-judicial killings happening around," while there also those who see that it is much safer since most of the criminals are either killed, arrested, or on the run: also because of his War on Drugs.

Jacobsen: How can the non-religious overcome religious privilege, e.g., building a coalition and a solidarity movement? What are the areas of religious privilege within the Philippines?

Go: By being non-political, and less confrontational, a lot of the non-religious groups are affiliated with the radical left, although they have worked with religious groups especially when speaking for human rights and against poverty.

That is because they find common ground, but that is still limited, when it comes to women's rights, birth control. They are on opposite ends, using less confrontational methods, as opposed to leftist non-religious groups in promoting their agenda, which has actually turned off and alienated the middle class, who are actually the most influential sector in our society.

I am at a loss by what you mean by "religious privilege." But if by that you mean, areas not influenced by religion, I can only say. Those that are affiliated with the left, of the political spectrum

Jacobsen: When in the Philippines, and looking at the political situation, how does religion influence politics?

Go: Very much, it has influenced our way of life, but consider this, almost every politician will always claim that he was sent a sign by God. Before he decided to run, he goes to church to pray prior to filing his candidacy.

If he wins, his victory is celebrated by a mass; no session, meeting, brain storm is done without prayers first. Elections take a form of evil vs. good, with everyone claiming to be the good guys. It was religion that helped the late Pres Cory Aquino topple the dictatorship of Pres Marcos.

It is religion that has influenced why family planning has never taken off here.

Jacobsen: Why is religion such a large influence on the country? What are some of the main prejudices that the irreligious experience in the Philippines?

Go: It is said that our history can be summed up with the joke: 300 years in the convent (Spanish Rule) and 50 years of Hollywood (The American Rule), blame it on the Spaniards, who justified their conquest as a mission to spread Christianity (by the cross and sword) and to keep the natives submissive, and the Americans who perpetrated the same albeit to a lesser degree, still to keep the natives in their place.

When it comes to religious prejudice, let me just site a few personal experience as an example, when my sister got married to an American in Thailand, only our parents, and their friends, came. None from relatives because the wedding was done in a Buddhist church and ceremony.

When my daughter decided to become a born again Christian missionary, I was chided by my friends, and relatives, for not controlling my daughter and letting her leave the catholic faith.

During previous typhoons, our governor and mayor ordered that we would not receive relief goods from the UN Commission on Population and Development, and not to accept joint projects with them because they supported The Women's Reproductive Health Care Bill because the Catholic Church was against it.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Go: Humanism is and will always be, the ultimate empowerment.

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

In Conversation with Rupert Aparri— Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family background in religion? What are your own story and educational background? How did you find humanism and HAPI?

Rupert Aparri: Like most Filipinos, I was raised in a Catholic home. While the male members of the family weren't religious, the females were (and still are) devout. My mother is 70 years old. When she went to a small town in Georgia, USA, right smack in the midst of the evangelical US South, the first question she asked was: "Is there a Catholic Church here?"

My grandmas and grandaunts and great grandma all lived to be nonagenarians so just imagine being with these tough religious women who practically IMPOSED their beliefs on us, grandchildren. No, not in a violently threatening way, but through something more fearsome — the threat of eternal damnation.

I recall my grandma (father's side) and her sister together with my grandfather praying the rosary every night. And when they could no longer go to church because of old age, they'd wait for the priest to come on Sundays so they could receive communion. That's how "Catolico Cerrado" they were.

However, while my paternal grandma was religious, she was, in fact, a liberal. In 1935, she got pregnant out of wedlock. That must have been quite a scandal in those times. Interestingly, she studied under the American Thomasites.

They were intrepid volunteer teachers from the US who taught Filipinos in a non-religious set-up. It must be noted that under Spain, the friars had control in educating the masses, so we can suppose that they prioritized religious brainwashing to perpetuate the subjugation of the people.

My father, a lawyer-accountant wasn't religious. He seldom went to church, and when he did, it was observably just by force of tradition, not because he was afraid to go to hell. He was, after all, a man of integrity whose reputation was absolutely beyond reproach and from his example I learned that one can be "good without God."

My siblings and I were sent to a Catholic school administered by Chinese priests forced to escape China during the Cultural Revolution. So aside from superb math and Chinese language lessons, I also grew up learning Catechism. I attended religion subjects which, in retrospect, were a waste of time.

In college, I went to the University of the Philippines (UP), a secular public school established by the Americans in 1908 when they were still our colonial masters. Our public school system is among the best and lasting legacies of the United States, by the way but I digress.

UP taught me secularism. Prayers and going to Mass were no longer compulsory.

Ideas could be freely exchanged, and because I entered college right after the Marcos dictatorship was toppled, we breathed in the air of freedom with gusto — enthusiastically challenging conventions to which we were otherwise accustomed.

My humanism germinated in UP but my absolute disavowal of the god-idea came in phases, culminating one day, ironically, when I attended a Catholic Life in the Spirit Seminar shortly after I got married.

By then I was already a doubter. So when I confessed to a priest by lamenting “Father, I have doubts about the Sacrament of Penance, and if it is a sin to doubt, forgive me.”

The priest’s reply: “I’m not going to give you absolution.” And right there, it struck me. I really couldn’t force myself to believe in the bullshit anymore. I honestly don’t recall how I “found” humanism. I was barely even aware of the term until I became FB friends with Ms. Marissa Langseth. She referred me to a FB Group and we’d occasionally chat.

I think this was after she read my FB Note on atheism. Or perhaps somebody referred me to her. One time I got into a weeklong online argument with an Evangelical friend on the existence of God. Of course, debating with believers is like banging your head against the wall, but I had lots of time and ammunition, so to speak. I had facts. My friend had verses of the bible. No match.

As a humanist, I haven’t been able actively engage in HAPI events because of my restrictive work schedule. But I’m happy to say that I’m raising my children to be good not because they are scared of an imaginary being or the promise of eternal reward, but rather because this simply is the right thing to do. My wife respects my views although she’s still keen on Pascal’s Wager.

Jacobsen: How does the world see the Philippines from the outside under Duterte? How are humanists generally treated in the Philippines? How do Filipinos, in general, view humanists and the humanist community?

Aparri: Duterte is, to put it lightly, a controversial figure in Philippine politics. By appearances he is uncouth, disrespectful of women, scoffs at human rights, considers mainstream media as adversaries, and has cursed the Pope, Obama, and officials of the EU and the UN.

Also, he probably isn’t aware of this, but he is a cringe-inducing racist. (He referred to Obama as “ang itim itim” — very black, and dark skin is derided in the Philippines, a country where skin-whitening soap and lotion sell like hotcakes.)

Kinda reminds us of someone else, huh? Anyhow, Duterte doesn’t have a nuclear arsenal so we’re fortunate. Duterte is an admitted murderer though and has even bragged on national TV about killing people. Yet he still has a very favorable approval rating among Filipinos!

So how is he regarded internationally? I’ll say it’s a mixed reception. Democratic, progressive nations regard him with disdain. Consider the G20 meetings, for example. Traditionally, the Chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is invited to the G20 meetings, which was hosted by Germany in 2017.

The Philippines was ASEAN Chair in the same year but Duterte was not invited. He and his government has been criticized by the EU, Australia, the UN, and even the US under Obama. But Duterte just retorted to such criticisms with profanities. He has been very friendly with China and Russia though. Ohhh, those parallels again.

As for the Filipino people and the Philippines, I can only offer snippets of impressions about us by foreign friends, now that Duterte is in power. I work in the field of international relations so I’ve had the fortune of visiting 17 countries in the past 3 years.

Also, I have been hosting foreign exchange students and INGO volunteers since 2009. Aside from travelling in Europe, Asia, and the US, I have brought the world to my home. Germans, Swiss, Ecuadoran, Spanish, Turkish, Japanese, French, Belgian, Norwegian, and a Dutch have stayed with us as family members.

No American because the US deemed our place “unsafe.” Right now, there’s an Italian boy with us.

Anyway, their impression of the Philippines naturally changed when they started living among the Filipino people. So once a foreigner actually experiences being among us, Duterte becomes an insignificant blur. Internationally, we’re probably known as seafarers (more than 50% of the world’s seamen are Filipinos); nurses (40 thousand in UK and Ireland, hundreds of thousands in the US) so we’re actually in the healing business; Filipinos are literally everywhere.

In the US, Fil-Ams are the 2nd highest earning minority (after Indians) and among the best educated. We do have our sad stories as a poor nation (shithole?) but we are among the happiest and most resilient people on earth. We should be, otherwise we won’t endure living in a country located in the ring of fire, typhoon belt, earthquake zone, and tsunami prone area.

We’re also very welcoming. During the Holocaust, we were the only country that readily accepted Jews who were escaping from the Nazis. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, we also welcomed the so-called White Russians.

The Vietnamese boat-people also made our shores their home before they eventually proceeded to their final destinations. That’s how we are as a people, and I think it’s in our cultural DNA to be so accepting. There are also pejorative references about us.

Like we’re regarded as “Oreos” — brown outside, white inside; a nation of domestics and caregivers, etc. Such impressions have stuck, no matter how unfair and we’ve learned to regard them nonchalantly or better still, dismiss them with humor.

Humanism has been a steadily growing movement in the Philippines. But compared to the religious, we are still vastly outnumbered. So humanists — and again the term and idea haven’t caught on yet among the majority of the people — have not yet reached a critical mass where they can disrupt commonly held beliefs and values. In other words, because we aren’t a “threat” at present, nobody really takes much notice of us.

So HAPI members can go to communities and do philanthropic deeds and they will be welcome. But there are also levels of tolerance for humanism. You shouldn’t venture into Muslim areas if you’re an identified humanist. You’ll most probably be killed there. Yes, the degree of evil among modern day religions vary, with Islam sadly being the most toxic and violent now.

Jacobsen: How can the non-religious overcome religious privilege, e.g., building a coalition and a solidarity movement? What are the areas of religious privilege within the Philippines?

Aparri: Like the United States, we have a non-establishment clause in our Constitution. But this hasn’t really been observed. Cases in point: We have an Office of Muslim Affairs. This has been one of my pet peeves but I can only whine because I don’t want to get bombed! Shariah and Islamic lessons are being taught using public school facilities.

Professors lead prayers before starting their lessons in public universities. Government resources are being used during Catholic Church events. There are churches, temples, and mosques built through public funds inside our military camps!

Religious idols are displayed in government buildings. In my wife’s workplace, a Philippine government bank, Catholic masses are held within office premises every first Friday of the

month! I could go on and on about religious privilege. We still have a lot of evolving to undergo in terms of being an actual secular democracy.

As humanists, we can't just barge into the religionists' zone and tell them they're wrong. That's the first thing I learned during my arguments with religious friends and family members, including my own mom.

Logic will not persuade godly people. They will just yell back and bombard you with more nonsense. When you argue with them and point out the falsities of their religious beliefs, they tend to be defensive because you're attacking their core; their being.

Therefore, since we are obviously more reasonable, it is up to us to adjust to their tantrums. There are religionists, however, whose spoiled brat antics involve murder and mayhem, and with THEM, we have to be less congenial.

In terms of solidarity and building coalitions, we should primarily focus on environmental protection, because climate change poses an existential threat to our people, whether religious or humanist. To answer the question on how we can overcome religious privilege: I say through patience and education. It'll take years to undo what was imprinted for centuries.

Jacobsen: When in the Philippines, and looking at the political situation, how does religion influence politics?

Aparri: Religion influences Philippine politics in many forms, from the completely insidious to the relatively benign. For example, the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ) led by a certain Eraño Manalo is often courted by politicians because the sect votes as a bloc as dictated by the leadership. At about 5 million members, they can make or break political careers.

Allegedly, in exchange for votes, favors are given to the sect, like plum positions in government, particularly the law enforcement offices. There's also a sect led by Apollo Quiboloy, who refers to himself as the APPOINTED SON OF GOD. He's extremely wealthy, the money raised from tithes, but which he attributes to the blessings of his father, God.

For a time, he was visibly too friendly with Duterte, even offering to lend his private plane and helicopter to the president.

A thinking individual would be frightened to see his president palling with The Appointed Son of God, but that's where we are now. The Catholic Church, as one would expect still meddles in our political discourse, vehemently opposing a Divorce Law, and a Reproductive Health Law.

The RC still insists that contraception is a sin and one who uses condoms goes to hell. We're the only country aside from the Vatican where there is no divorce. In this instance, Duterte's irreverence has been helpful. He has ignored the Church's importunings and threats of fire and brimstone.

The most damning influence of religion on politics, in my opinion, is the Muslim rebellion in Mindanao. While the Christian sects only try to influence political outcomes by threats to the soul and moral suasion, the Muslims actually kill in the name of Allah.

And the government acceded to their demands by giving them autonomy — the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. Now they want more; their own state within a federal government. The Mindanao problem is complex, but suffice it to say that without the inherited hatreds passed on by religions, this would have been easier to address.

Jacobsen: Why is religion such a large influence on the country? What are some of the main prejudices that the irreligious experience in the Philippines?

Aparri: Spanish friars spread Catholicism in the islands for 4 centuries. They did this not just by friendly persuasion but also by threat of physical harm and death. Colonizers used religion as a means of social control. Such a method was extremely effective.

Fear of torture and execution, coupled with the thought of wallowing in a lake of fire for eternity are quite persuasive. The influence of the church in the country is thus a vestige of our colonial past that is difficult to forget. This isn't to say that we have to expunge ourselves of our history.

As a Filipino, I am proud to be a child of the East and West, and under the present circumstances thankful that I was born Christian, rather than Wahhabist or Salafist. But we do have to be honest and accept that our religious heritage stemmed from unholy intentions of mostly wicked men.

Atheists, or apatheists, and now humanists are considered "sinners" in the Philippines. I have been accosted, ridiculed, even asked why I say Merry Christmas when I don't believe in Jesus Christ.

But these are just the ridiculous chidings of pesky friends. More troubling, for instance, is equating communism with unbelief because it gives misguided and ignorant religionists in government to persecute you. Also, woe unto you who claims unbelief and you're branded a Satanist. You could get physically assaulted.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Aparri: For centuries, religion has been an anchor in the lives of people and communities. It is no wonder therefore that absent such anchor, people and communities would feel hopeless; bobbing up and down, to and fro in an ocean of problems and uncertainty.

At least with the god-concept, there is this notion of security and stability. It is a challenge for us, humanists, to articulate to our fellowmen, that we have EACH OTHER, and this in fact is more reassuring than beseeching an invisible, non-existent entity.

Having said that, in places where I am a stranger, I find sanctuary in Catholic church services, just to be with something familiar. And this, I think is the last purpose of churches and their rituals and incantations — to provide a sense of familiarity and camaraderie. It is only after recognizing this that we can begin an honest and fruitful conversation with the believers.

Thanks.

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

Interview with Dennis Pulido on Humanism

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to religion or irreligion, what was family background in it?

David Pulido: I'm from a catholic family, in a mostly christian community.

Jacobsen: How does personal background feed into this as well?

Pulido: That is, how has religion influenced you, personally? I don't really think it has influenced me personally. But at the very least, I can empathize with people of faith and see things from their point of view so I don't get biased with my secular decision making.

Jacobsen: When did humanism become a practical reality for you?

Pulido: When I took a long vacation in the Philippines in 2014, I decided to help out the local street children and homeless people. My methods may not be perfect, but at least I try. That is when I realized I want to contribute somehow.

Jacobsen: What were some of your early involvements in the community?

Pulido: Pretty much when I was in that Philippine vacation in 2014.

Jacobsen: How does HAPI provide for the needs of the community in the Philippines?

Pulido: While HAPI provides charity work, which is done by various religious groups in the Philippines, it is clear that one of the biggest problems of the Philippines is how religion and superstition get in the way of real practical solutions, and I'm hoping HAPI is the means for the Philippine community to understand that.

Jacobsen: What makes a good humanist — so to speak?

Pulido: Someone who adheres to and lives the humanist lifestyle. A good humanist understands that we are all human beings and because we share space in this world, we are accountable for one another.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in humanism?

Pulido: By having practical understanding of the problems and utilizing practical solutions.

Jacobsen: Who are some exemplars of humanism to you, in the Filipino/Filipina traditions?

Pulido: I can't really say I know anyone. Growing up in the Philippines, I admit I have become jaded and even pessimistic about the attitude of the Filipinos towards what really matters. I think this provides an opportunity for myself and others like me to be the exemplars for future generations.

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

Pulido: Thank you.

Interview with Rizalina Guilatco Carr on Humanism

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to religion or irreligion, what was family background in it?

Rizalina Guilatco Carr: I grew up in a very religious family, just like many of us who are from the Philippines. I studied in private Catholic schools.

Jacobsen: How does personal background feed into this as well? That is, how has religion influenced you, personally?

Carr: My mother kept on having children (10 that lived, plus 2 miscarriages and 1 that died in the first few days). She would always get post-partum depression. The sisters of my mother, when presented with the option of her having an abortion to keep her sanity, could only say to my mother, “Fear God!”

Only my father’s sister, who was a nurse, wanted my mother to have her “tubes tied” to stop having more children. My family’s constant fear of the church and the eternal condemnation of hell was the source of my angst. I struggled to get answers on my own, until I read the books of Richard Dawkins and then met my atheist husband.

Jacobsen: When did humanism become a practical reality for you?

Carr: Having gone through a traumatic period in my personal life, I managed to survive it without calling on a god. (“No outside intelligence!”) My husband and I didn’t mind going into personal debt to achieve what we thought was the right way of helping those for whom we cared the most and who had the ability to succeed in life, given a chance.

Jacobsen: How did you find the humanist community?

Carr: Through Facebook, I found the humanist community.

Jacobsen: What were some of your early involvements in the community? Also, how do people tend to come to the humanist community and become involved early on in their work with it?

Carr: My only contact with the humanist community is through HAPI in Facebook, although my husband and I share that perspective. From an early age, I was always part of “community building.” It started in my first year of college, through the Leadership Training Course sponsored by our local YMCA.

Then I joined a “service-based” sorority, and it opened my eyes as to the many ways we can contribute in our community. My involvement with our Filipino and Canadian community has continued through my 38 years in Vancouver, Canada.

My husband and I were co-founders of GO-MED, a non-religious, apolitical medical mission group that provides free needed surgeries for the poor in the Philippines and Peru.

Jacobsen: How does HAPI provide for the needs of the community in the Philippines?

Carr: I admire HAPI’s commitment of service and Motherland needs everyone’s effort to nation building. After all, Philippines is a Third World country. On a personal note, we also have our own projects and other charitable work that we personally fund.

Jacobsen: What makes a good humanist — so to speak? Someone who adheres to and lives the humanist lifestyle.

Carr: A good humanist conducts his/her behavior in an ethical way. While some want their advocacy known, there are also those who contribute quietly. When you have many resources available to you, kindness comes naturally. It is more difficult for people to follow ethical behaviors if their stomachs are growling and their loved ones are suffering.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in humanism?

Carr: We must try to be inclusive. Secular beliefs should be accompanied by good deeds, or people will continue to believe that atheists are godless devils. If we give opportunities through employment and volunteerism, and offer collaboration with local communities, we can open bridges in bringing many people together. Everyone has something to offer.

Jacobsen: Who are some exemplars of humanism to you, in the Filipino/Filipina traditions?

Carr: The people I grew up with, are examples of “taking care of one another.” I hope I honor these traditions through the work and help that I am still doing. Marissa Torres Langseth’s courage in having a loud voice to bring people together and to help one another in a common goal. Her message and commitment should be spread around!

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time.

Interview with Michael Sherman, Chairman — Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to religion or irreligion, what was your family background in it?

Michael Sherman: I was raised Roman Catholic in the American south. Mom was raised Southern Baptist and dad was raised Catholic. So I actually had influences from both denominations; however, we attended Mass regularly and only went to Baptist church when we visited friends who were Baptist. I college I joined the Church of Jesus Christ of latter-day saints (Mormons)

Jacobsen: How does personal background feed into this as well?

Sherman: My journey to humanism and agnosticism took a number of years. So as you will see by my answer to the first question I was involved in two cults, the Catholic Church and the Mormon Church. My move toward humanism was also influenced by a 3rd cult that I was involved in.

This cult was called “Straight Incorporated (Straight).” Straight Inc. was a very controversial behavior modification program that touted itself as drug rehabilitation program for kids and young adults that promised to “fix” your child from drug use and to change any adolescent behavior that the parents did not like. (i.e. growing up in the 1960’s and 70’s)

Straight was actually a money-making organization that over its 17-year history brought in over \$100,000,000 paid for by parents and insurance companies. The “therapy” offered by Straight was totally provided by children and former clients who were themselves still children.

There were almost no medical professionals working in the organization and those that were provided no therapy. Think of Lord of the Flies. The treatment methods that were used were modeled after North Korean thought reform and brainwashing techniques of American GI’s during the Korean War.

This included housing us in large metal buildings up to 350 kids sitting in chairs for up to 20 hours a day, depriving us of sleep, food, water, medical care, schooling and any actual human care. We subjected to beatings, harassment, rape, group verbal attacks, endless group thought reform, constant singing and physical intimidation.

Our minds were never or rarely left to think on our own. It is very difficult to explain how it was in the program unless a person actually witnessed or lived it. For the most part, the organizations higher ups were Christians of some sort and while Christianity was not the main emphasis, we did sing Christian songs.

(For more information on straight, please google “straight, inc.” This was my first questioning of religion and Christianity. I remember thinking if these people are Christians, why are they treating us like this?

I moved away from Mormonism and ultimately left the church as I began to study and learn more about the church, its leaders and its teaching. I am somewhat of a liberal/progressive and the Mormon Church definitely leans hard to the right and has strong authoritarian beliefs.

Jacobsen: How has religion influenced you (me) personally?

Sherman: I went through the motions as a child of being religious but I really can't say that it influenced me for the good. My parents taught me how to be a humanist by their examples; however, they did not call themselves humanists.

Both my parents are practicing Christians. As an adult, religion has influenced my attitudes and beliefs in a way that has made me want to have nothing to do with it. I see in the American fundamentalist religions nothing that would want me to be a part of it and I see nothing of the teachings of their Christ.

Although, I still read the Sermon on the Mount and have been able to glean some good from that. Sadly, the passages in those sermons are not practiced by many American Christians.

Jacobsen: When did humanism become a practical reality for you?

Sherman: I think I have been a humanist longer than I knew what defines a humanist. By education and practice I am a geographer and city planner. This career choice has allowed me to practice humanism daily.

In the later parts of my career, much of my focus as a planner has been on grass-roots, bottoms up planning efforts like the development of neighborhood plans, development of community garden programs, outreach to minority communities and underserved areas.

So humanism became a practical reality for me in 1987 at the start of my career as a city planner, although at that time, I had no idea what humanism was.

Jacobsen: How did you find the humanist community?

Sherman: I was officially introduced to humanism by social networking and the Humanist Alliance Philippines, International (HAPI)

Jacobsen: What were some of your early involvements in the community?

Sherman: My early involvement in the humanist community as a humanist took place in June 2016 when I attended the Asian Humanist Conference in Manila which was sponsored by HAPI.

Jacobsen: How do people tend to come to the humanist community and become involved early on in their work with it?

Sherman: Humanism fulfills a need for many people to do work for the betterment of humankind as well as for non-human animals. The humanists that I know are all in for humanism with a great passion. The members of HAPI and the groups / organizations that we align ourselves with are leading by example.

Jacobsen: How does HAPI provide for the needs of the community in the Philippines?

Sherman: Responding to that question could take all day as HAPI is the leading organization of humanist efforts in the Philippines. Our programs focus on the betterment of all people in the Republic of the Philippines.

We do this through our Nutri-Camp (nutrition campaign), SHADE (Secular Humanist Advocacy Development & Education) program, ARK (Acts of Random Kindness) project and the way our members live their daily lives. Some of the most amazing and selfless humans I have met are members of HAPI.

Jacobsen: What makes a good humanist?

Sherman: The first thought that comes to my mind is a person who practices humility and kindness in their daily affairs. A person who recognizes that it is possible to do good in this world without a belief or need for a god or book of rules (bible).

I think the optimal word here is “practices”. Humanism is not only a belief system but also a way of acting and interacting with this world. Humanism is a belief system in action/

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in humanism?

Sherman: Start with being the change that you want to see in this world. Practice kindness. Practice humility. Follow the golden rule, treat others as you would want to be treated. Again, my belief is that humanism isn’t just a way of thinking; humanism is a way of action, a way to live one’s life.

Also, I would recommend that someone interested in humanism find a group of like-minded people. Come visit our webpage. www.hapihumanist.org We are always looking for new members who are interested in learning more about humanism and those who are confirmed humanists and practice a humanist lifestyle

Jacobsen: How can people become involved in humanism?

Sherman: Action. Be the change you want this world to be. Humanism starts with individuals.

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

Interview with Joshua Ofiasa Villalobos — Member,

Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family background in religion? What are your own story and educational background? How did you find humanism and HAPI?

Joshua Ofiasa Villalobos: Family Background in Religion. My parents and their parents were staunch Catholics. In fact, my grandmother use to pray for funerals in exchange of small amount of money.

And since I was born, i find myself being with her in every funeral where she use to offer her service. We do recite the ‘mysteries’ and ‘Our Father’ and ‘Hail Mary’ for a number of times in a single night of service.

When I turn 10, I discovered new religion for myself. It is called ‘born-again christian’ me and my older sister go to that church thrice or twice a week. And at age 11, I got baptized. Own Story. I was born on April 13, 2002.

I live in Bacolod City and I’ve also lived in Bantayan Island, which is the homeland of my mother. We are 5 in the family. My sister is 10 years older than me, while me and my brother has 8-year gap.

They both have their bachelor’s degrees, my sister in Elementary Education and my older brother in Marine Transportation. But both of them are still applying for the job that fits their educational achievements.

My father is a Janitor and a Messenger whose salary is not enough to cater our needs inside the house. While my mother is a housewife. She manages our very small ‘tiangge’ or sari sari store. We live in a squatter area near the river. Educational Background Since Grade 6, I have been active in the school organization.

In fact, that year I was elected as the SPG President and also graduated as Class Salutatorian. And on my 9th Grade, I joined the School Publication and other clubs such as Supreme Student Government(SSG), Youth for Environment in Schools-Organization (YES-O).

Here is the list of my participation in different organizations in the school this year: *Ang Tanawang Marapara (official Filipino school publication of Bata National High School) -Editor-In-Chief/Punong Patnugot *English Guild — President *Supreme Student Government (the highest student-governing body of Bata NHS) — Senator * Youth for Environment in Schools-Organization (YES-O) — Public Information Officer *Citizenship Advancement Training- 1st Lieutenant, S4 Assistant, Supply and Logistics Officer *Disaster Risk Reduction Management — Auditor.

Jacobsen: How did you find humanism and HAPI?

Villalobos: Honestly speaking, no filters and no dramas, I love HAPI. Since our first meeting, I have seen my life’s purpose and that’s to work with HAPI. Me and my friend, Glemir is very happy after our first meeting in HAPI.

Because the people are very witty, strong and kind at the same time the advocacy is very clear and the people are very happy to get along with. Before, even though we are leaders in our school, we don’t have that self-esteem.

But HAPI-Bacolod taught us how to believe in ourselves. In 2–3 months as member of HAPI Junior and now elected Head, I think I have developed to be a better me. My colleagues also talk about how they enjoy HAPI. For me, HAPI is very serious in their main advocacy of promoting humanism.

Jacobsen: How does the world see the Philippines from the outside under Duterte? How are humanists generally treated in the Philippines? How do Filipinos, in general, view humanists and the humanist community?

Villalobos: Maybe some other people, especially those who are not Filipinos see the Philippines as a bloody place since the drug war has started. Maybe some of the people who are unaware of the killing scenarios here thinks that the Philippines is a beautiful place and it has many to offer in terms of it's delicacies, tourist-spots and welcoming community, I think that the world see Duterte as a dictator and a fascist.

Jacobsen: How are humanists generally treated in the Philippines? How do Filipinos, in general, view humanists and the humanist community?

Villalobos: Secular humanism or simply humanism is not known to the Filipino people yet. Honestly, If I didn't join or know HAPI, I wouldn't know the essence or meaning of humanism. Since the Filipinos are known to be respectful, I think the humanist community is accepted and respected here in the Philippines.

Jacobsen: When in the Philippines, and looking at the political situation, how does religion influence politics?

Villalobos: Religion and belief greatly influence the politics here in the Philippines. Especially the Catholic community has been very active in joining or sharing their thoughts and stand at some certain issues here in the Philippines.

Jacobsen: Why is religion such a large influence on the country? What are some of the main prejudices that the irreligious experience in the Philippines?

Villalobos: Maybe because we are once colonized by the Spaniards and they've baptized our ancestors. Our beliefs and traditions were greatly influenced by Catholicism. Here in the Philippines, if you're irreligious, you're bad. If you don't believe in a god you're an evil. If you don't pray you go to hell [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Villalobos: Thank you for the opportunity, Scott! I am always here for another interview. I hope this might help HAPI, IHEYO, and other humanist community.

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

Interview with John Miles — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to the Filipino community at large, what seems like some of the more prominent cases of individuals abusing religion for personal gain?

John Miles: Abusing religion? No, using the religion at its full extent, yes. Because religion limits human thinking. The drift occurs when the person starts ignoring logic and his instincts.

Separation from his instinctual nature inevitably plunges civilized man into conflict between conscious and unconscious, spirit and nature, knowledge and faith. It controls how people thinks and in the end those one's on the top of it gains power.

I would like to share this message from Carl Sagan that got me in tears about his perspective of Earth, Space and Humanity as a whole: The Pale Blue Dot — <https://youtu.be/wupToqz1e2g>.

Jacobsen: How does the world see the Philippines from the outside under Duterte?

Miles: Working in an oil/gas industry and living abroad gives me a very narrow view of this subject. Frankly, I don't give a fuck.

Jacobsen: How are atheists generally treated in the Philippines?

Miles: Like the lowest kind of human being — my family struggled for years accepting the fact that I do not believe in any deities. I've struggled 2 years before that, trying to accept that I have been fooled my whole life of a lie. They tried their best to convince me and when they realized they can't. I was disowned for years. Just recently they started talking to me, and I am very happy for that.

People, not only in the Philippines see us as "Satan worshipers" not realizing we don't believe in Satan too. That shows the idiocracy of an individual and right after that, they change how they interact with me, so I learned fast when to shut my mouth and when to speak up.

Jacobsen: How can the non-religious overcome religious privilege, e.g., building a coalition and a solidarity movement?

Miles: The only way non-religious can overcome religious privileges is to take it away from them. Away from our government, away from our kids and away from our school system.

But not take away their freedom of what to believe as long as they don't affect the factors that matters the most. When an individual believer is trying to change the law in line with his personal faith, that's where it should stop.

The more we educate children and give them the knowledge and freedom to question everything is the more our future will be a bit brighter without religion.

Jacobsen: When in the Philippines, and looking at the political situation, how does religion influence politics? How did you find humanism and HAPI?

Miles: Politics in the Philippines is greatly influenced by religion. Roman Catholics has a great role in Philippine's political agenda. And for this I am ashamed of my country. People that have ridiculous ideology should never have anything to do with government, or in real life in general.

Culture is important but it's time that we have to weigh things between nonsense religious activities to more productive and viable or realistic things in life.

Jacobsen: Why is religion such a large influence on the country? What are some of the main prejudices that the irreligious experience in the Philippines?

Miles: Religion has a large influence to each region around the world, whatever religion it is. Religion controls how people think and in Philippines —

When you have been told “There is a God.” all your life.

When religion has a big part on our culture. E.g. Television shows, celebrations, government decisions. Etc.

How people reacts and how they treat when they find out you're a non-believer.

It's pretty hard for people to think outside the box. Almost impossible, it's even unthinkable for a person to even consider the possibility that there is no God. Despite the fact that there is absolutely no evidence to such claims.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Miles: I would like to share this quote from Neil deGrasse Tyson — “God is an ever-receding pocket of scientific ignorance that's getting smaller and smaller and smaller as time moves on.”

I am a great believer of unity, love, values and truth. And we all should be. Although I validate my views of truth in accord with recent facts and evidence discovered by science; but until the claim of a deity or any other religious ideologies proven true: Religion has no say of how I live my life, no place in my family, not included of category how I choose my friends, and should NOT be welcomed in our society.

Thank you for this opportunity Scott.

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

Interview with Reginald Gajete — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to the Filipino community at large, what seems like some of the more prominent cases of individuals abusing religion for personal gain?

Reginald Gajete: Its politics. The Philippines is mostly populated by religious conservatives, so using religion will definitely give you an edge especially during your campaign.

Jacobsen: How does the world see the Philippines from the outside under Duterte? How are atheists generally treated in the Philippines?

Gajete: From my standpoint, the Philippines is on a radical paradigm shift under Duterte, there have been a lot of changes lately, some positive and some negative. I like to call it “The Birth of New Age Philippines” In general, atheists in the Philippines are still treated with disrespect and pity, but it’s slowly changing, people are now embracing this concept.

Jacobsen: How can the non-religious overcome religious privilege, e.g., building a coalition and a solidarity movement?

Gajete: To be honest it’s still a challenge. The best thing to do is not declare your disbelief and you’ll be fine.

Jacobsen: When in the Philippines, and looking at the political situation, how does religion influence politics? How did you find humanism and HAPI?

Gajete: If a new bill is passed but it’s not in line with the church’s teachings, it won’t be signed or it will take time to get it signed despite the social and economic benefits. One good example is the Reproductive Health Bill which was a big issue that took 14 years before it was finally signed.

I think it’s when I got bored with atheism, got fed up with the endless arguments and nothing is being resolved. Then I came across a website about humanism, read their articles and then I realized that this is what I wanted to do. Upon researching, I found out that there’s no humanist organization in the Philippines.

That’s when a good friend of mine contacted me about a new organization she’s building, her name is Mrs. M or Marissa Torres Langseth. She asked me to lead the first chapter, so I said yes, then HAPI just kept growing and I’m so proud of what Ms. M’s mission have become.

Jacobsen: Why is religion such a large influence on the country? What are some of the main prejudices that the irreligious experience in the Philippines?

Gajete: I think it’s because religion is closely tied with the traditions and cultures in Philippines. If you tell anybody that you’re irreligious then they’ll conclude that you’re immoral and evil, and then you’ll lose credibility in every direction.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Gajete: Thank you for giving me this wonderful opportunity. More power to you and your cause.

Interview with O'Neal de los Trinos — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family background in religion? What are your own story and educational background? How did you find humanism and HAPI?

O'Neal de los Trinos: I lived my youth steeped in two religious traditions: Roman Catholicism and Calvinist Protestantism. I was raised Catholic, became a Protestant in high school, and reverted to Catholicism in college (before becoming an atheist thereafter).

On my mother's side, life and family centered on the Roman Catholic Faith and its traditions: everyone in my extended family went to Sunday Mass together, and almost all adult members prayed the Rosary together once a week, as time permitted.

All major religious festivities and activities were faithfully observed, with high regard accorded to introducing children to established Catholic practices and keeping alive enthusiasm for the Faith among adults.

On my father's side, Protestantism is the foundation upon which the religious life of the family is grounded. Though my paternal relatives are strict Methodists until now, my uncle's denomination — the Presbyterian Church — had a deeper impact on my religious formation as a teenager.

In fact, I converted to Presbyterianism, given I initially found Calvinism, as expressed in the Presbyterian Faith, more coherent than Catholicism. At my young age, I was already more partial to logical coherence than any other consideration, a factor that later led to my reversion to Catholicism and eventual "deconversion" to atheism.

I went to a Protestant "Bible School" for one year after high school. It was an experience I always pleasantly look back to. In college, I majored in the Humanities (with specialization in the Humanities) at the University of Asia and the Pacific (UA&P).

I opened my mind to different, opposing paradigms by which to view or interpret reality. I was naturally susceptible to religious skepticism. Suddenly, Thomas Aquinas no longer proved to be the exclusive authority on any issue relating to the big questions of life: appeal to an unmoved Mover no longer seemed inevitable when we ask about the origin of the universe.

Descartes' epistemic doubt overturned experiential knowledge as the unarguable beginning point in natural theology, or in any discourse, for that matter. Kant's localization of "causes" in the human psyche undermined the causal transcendence of God.

Accordingly, Hegel's elevation of the conscious mind as the ultimate arbiter of knowledge, and even "being" itself, compelled me to abandon divine revelation as the basis of pursuing absolute truth. Though Hegel's archaic model is admittedly flawed, at least, his general vision of an all-encompassing, comprehensive logical system by which to understand and discover knowledge proved to be the way I was most comfortable of pursuing.

At first, I applied much effort in intellectually justifying my Catholic religion philosophically; after college, I realized it was a futile exercise. A self-consistent worldview founded upon reason and evidence required some honesty that eventually drove me to atheism. Since the center of my evolving worldview was the human mind, it was natural for me to make its good *the* ultimate

good. Its perfection *the* ultimate goal of life. Hereafter, I embraced humanism as the closest label behind which I could anchor my ideas and beliefs.

As for HAPI, its lovely founder, Mrs. Marissa Langseth graciously introduced me to it via Facebook. My recollection is poor, but I believe my first encounter with her was through a different atheist group, PATAS, sometime in 2012.

There was a heavy atmosphere of negativity among them. Eventually, Mrs. Langseth founded HAPI. It had a clearer, more elevated vision, i.e., to help build the human community and raise the dignity of its marginalized constituents.

Of course, I still have misgivings about its overall agenda, in view of the very visible participation of the LGBTQ lobby; however, all things being equal, HAPI is the best among humanist groups in the country — it welcomes everyone, both theistic and otherwise, insofar as the person believes in the power and primacy of humanity.

Jacobsen: How does the world see the Philippines from the outside under Duterte? How are humanists generally treated in the Philippines? How do Filipinos, in general, view humanists and the humanist community?

Trinos: Strictly speaking, I cannot speak on behalf of outsiders with regard to their impression of the country under Duterte, but I have gathered enough feedback online and in international television news to give you a glimpse into this shared perception.

The Philippines is generally perceived to be a state overrun by anti-drug vigilante death squads operating at the behest of a belligerent semi-dictator whose loose, vulgar mouth makes President Trump seem like a Victorian gentleman taking his afternoon tea.

Both liberals and establishment conservatives the world over detest the alleged excesses of our president. Whether this portrayal is accurate is not part of the question.

How are humanists viewed and treated in the Philippines? Generally, the terms “humanism” and “humanists” do not register in the popular collective psyche. Of course, I am referring to regular Filipinos — the type you see executing the latest dance craze as they see it on television, or strolling aimlessly around the mall to beat the tropical heat. Even the ones who occasionally wax eloquent with armchair speculation about the latest political issues prevalent in the country.

Encounter with the concept of “humanism” is limited to studies of Western history in high school or college, if there were any at all. Regrettably, just like any piece of knowledge that does not readily contribute to a high-income career, it is forgotten.

In my country, knowledge is mostly not an end in itself; it is merely a tool for future wealth. Any other avenue that leads to wealth is equally meritorious; the quicker, the better. For this reason, television gameshows and pyramiding business schemes are extremely patronized throughout the archipelago.

Frankly, most Filipinos have very little familiarity with the technical term, “humanism”. Humanists are all around, but hardly any ordinary person would be able to consciously distinguish humanists, as conventionally defined, from just about any religious person who likewise devotes his time to caring for humanity and pursuing knowledge that precludes appeal to theistic assumptions.

Nevertheless, there is one group for whom the term “humanism” enjoys currency: Evangelical born-againers.

“Humanism” has had its reputation soiled in Evangelical circles where the term is associated with a disordered worship of the human potential in contrast to humble faith that puts God at the center. “Humanism” is occasionally mentioned in Evangelical pulpits as a trend indicative of a prideful rebellion against God.

Since the Evangelical faith is growing in popularity, especially in urban localities, I can only expect resistance to the acceptance of humanists among the general public, in the event the term enters popular culture.

As far as my experience in the country can tell, Liberal arts students are the ones who are most equipped with a functional, appreciable grasp of “humanism” and what it entails. They know it when they see a genuine “humanist”. Among the relative few who associate with humanists and know what humanism truly is, there is admiration, to a generous degree.

The humanist community in the Philippines is at its nascent stage of growth. It is only becoming well aware of its need to make its identity established and its presence felt through charitable activities geared towards community development and education. Social media exposure also helps advance its online visibility in the wider world, in hopes that such will eventually make certain the positive acceptance of humanism and humanists in the public arena.

Jacobsen: How can the non-religious overcome religious privilege, e.g., building a coalition and a solidarity movement? What are the areas of religious privilege within the Philippines?

Trinos: The pervading cultural infrastructure in place do not allow for conditions that are conducive to the introduction of coalitions and movements that are straightforwardly “non-religious” or, as I interpret the use of the term in the question, “atheistic”.

Whereas “humanism” has very limited foothold in the public consciousness, “atheism” is decidedly a divisive concept that connotes loose morality and even the wholesale abandonment of an ethical conscience.

Atheists are people even serial killers and prostitutes in my country deride. Atheists are the untouchables. Declaring one’s atheism presents a definitive guarantee that one’s courtship or job application will not end in success.

I see no conceivable opportunity, at present, by which to promote a “non-religious” (atheistic) agenda to counteract the force of religious privilege. Atheists who are humanists must content themselves with promoting independent initiatives that primarily focus on community building, charity, education, and health that may be indirectly oriented towards a secular agenda but in no way threaten the status quo or the power of the Church.

This is what HAPI is doing. Despite the fact millennial youth are more receptive and open to challenges against established religion and are even critical of some church leaders, they do not see a group directly promoting the denial of God at the expense of faith as a constructive force that deserves a permanent voice in public life.

In any case, with regard to the last part of this question, areas of religious privilege are public policies and legislation that favor the majority religion (declaration of holidays, limitations on

family planning, and traffic rerouting schemes to accommodate religious festivities), bloc voting (some sects, at least) on the national and local level, and tax exemptions for religious institutions.

Jacobsen: When in the Philippines, and looking at the political situation, how does religion influence politics?

Trinos: Bloc voting is the most potent and direct means in the context of political appointment and implementation of public policy.

While the Catholic Church is, to a significant degree, not involved in this regard, another sect is: The Iglesia Ni Cristo. This is an indigenous church that wields political power of a scale that disproportionately exceeds its members' representation in the general population.

Politicians, both Catholic and Protestant, openly court the leader of this religion during the election season. This is a very dangerous phenomenon that most people take lightly. In this liberal democratic country, the Iglesia Ni Cristo (INC) is, for good or ill, labeled as a "king-maker". Not even the president is principled enough to untangle its grip on power.

As things stand, in a democratic setting, a person's vote equals power. Therefore, more than mere endorsement, instructing members of a religion to cast their vote for a candidate endows the religious leader with political leverage by which to arrange deals and agreements.

Once the anointed candidates win, they will not abandon their benefactor. Debt of gratitude is deeply ingrained in our culture. This religion, in the process, is assured of undue privileges and benefits that non-partisan churches or interest groups do not enjoy.

On the whole, politicians see association with Roman Catholicism and other mainstream Christian denominations as a practical route to maintaining a likable public image. Support of religious institutions is an investment with desirable returns in one's political career.

Openly invoking God is a staple in congressional debates on legislations to be enacted. It is neither controversial nor shocking to see a senator or congressman quoting Scriptures to highlight his position. Separation of church and state is only embraced in legal theory; in practice, it is anything but.

Jacobsen: Why is religion such a large influence on the country? What are some of the main prejudices that the irreligious experience in the Philippines?

Trinos: Why is religion such a large influence in my country? Family. My country is blessed to have a family-centered social culture. It is not uncommon to see married children still living with their parents. Parents, regardless of social class or education, see raising their children strictly in the faith as their indispensable vocation and responsibility.

Freedom of religion seems to apply only when a person already has a job and is no longer too dependent on his parents for his financial needs. This socio-religious culture is further solidified by the tendency of Filipinos to remain in their "safe zone" or in areas where they are most comfortable or familiar with.

We are inherently not risk-takers or adventurers. Our curiosity geared towards the unknown is limited to just foreign food, more or less. Thus, Catholics remain Catholic, for the simple fact they were born in that religion.

The combination of this family culture and the general tendency to stay within the confines of what one is accustomed to strengthens the hold of religion in the mind. Once multiplied a million times over in many individuals, the result is a reliably irresistible force.

As for the prejudice, I have addressed that point in a previous question.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Trinos: While I support the humanist movement, of which I am a part, I feel a segment of this movement embraces radical feminism that promotes the pro-choice agenda in the name of “female empowerment”. I am convinced this is anti-humanism.

As a humanist, I believe every human being has a right to life, regardless of gender, race, and — yes — age (or phase in human life). I believe the unborn, in virtue of their human dignity, qualify as persons, and, therefore, have as much right to life as any human person living in the outside world.

To deprive the unborn of this right to life amounts to the denial of their personhood, which forms the basis of that right in the first place. No human is a non-person; every human is a person. Indeed, the being produced at conception is a human through and through.

This right to life is not predicated upon properties that are characteristic of — but not necessarily essential to — human nature in some of its phases. Consciousness, the sensation of pain, and physical autonomy are not determinants that indicate whether a subject is entitled to the right to life, the absence of which does not make a person less deserving of the right thereof.

As a humanist, I believe all human life must be equally protected in all of its stages. It is my hope that the humanist movement will come through as a unified force, someday, for the preservation of the human race and the creation of a living atmosphere that optimizes individual freedom within its moral limits.

Interview with Mark Wilson Janeo— Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family background in religion? What are your own story and educational background? How did you find humanism and HAPI?

Mark Wilson Janeo: I'm a graduate of bachelor science in information technology. I'm currently working as a lead generation specialist in a small outbound call center here in Bacolod and I'm also an online seller. I sell secondhand band merchandise.

I was baptized as a catholic. My parents are very religious and active in our local parish. I really can't remember how old I am when I started to doubt the existence of god. When I was kid I'm fond of watching science and history documentaries, I think that triggered my curiosity.

I found HAPI from a friend that was in manila back then. He told me about the group and what it does. I was very interested to join. Back then I was a member of Filipino Freethinkers and most of us HAPI Bacolod pioneers. Ms. M told us to create a local chapter here in Bacolod and the rest is history. And so far we are the most active chapter in the organization.

Jacobsen: How does the world see the Philippines from the outside under Duterte? How are humanists generally treated in the Philippines? How do Filipinos, in general, view humanists and the humanist community?

Janeo: They see the Philippines, a very bloody country under Duterte's administration. Duterte's drug war is like a double edge sword. Many criminals have been killed in the process and also innocent lives lost.

I think most of the Filipinos will probably believe about us (that are totally wrong):

- that we are devil worshippers
- we have no morals
- we are a bad influence to children
- miserable
- arrogant assholes

Some of us really face discrimination everyday. But as time goes by I think they will understand what we do and be more open minded.

Jacobsen: How can the non-religious overcome religious privilege, e.g., building a coalition and a solidarity movement? What are the areas of religious privilege in the Philippines?

Janeo: I think it's very hard to overcome religious privileges here. Because we have laws that at present support particular religions when this shouldn't be the situation. Also it's illegal to "offend religious feelings," which is what got Carlos Celdran in trouble.

Some companies here hire people within a specific sect/religion which the owner is part of. Even our government funds or practices religious activities and functions when it shouldn't.

Jacobsen: When in the Philippines, and looking at the political situation, how does religion influence politics?

Janeo: Religion plays a key role when election comes. Politicians always ask for endorsement to the religious leaders. To gain more votes or to secure victory. Because some religions practice bloc voting, just like the Iglesia ni Cristo.

Jacobsen: Why is religion such a large influence on the country? What are some of the main prejudices that the irreligious experience in the Philippines?

Janeo: I think because of the influence of the Spaniards. They brought Christianity here and until now we are still the number 1 Christian country here in Asia.

Personally I have dealt with discrimination, below the belt insults, rejections and criticisms about my disbelief. Even some of my friends unfriended me in Facebook because I'm an atheist.

I guess the main prejudice is they always link us with Satan. They think that we are immoral, miserable and most likely do bad things to people.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Janeo: Thank you for this opportunity. Let the sound of reason shine, godless.

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

Interview with Ceejay Deriada Pastrana — Lead Convener, Humanist Alliance, Philippines International (Jr.)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was family background in religion? What are your own story and educational background? How did you find humanism and HAPI?

Ceejay Pastrana: It's kind of expected to be inheriting the religion that your parents have by the time you are born and my parents happened to be Latter Day Saints, but that was until I was in first grade. We converted to Roman Catholicism and being a Mormon was never mentioned again.

I recently asked my mother why that happened and she said to me that they were obliged to do something that was "not right". (She did not go into details as I noticed that she did not want to talk about it.) So, my family left for good.

We were not really full-fledged Catholics either (religion was just not a topic in our house), or were against religion. We just realized the impracticality and illogicality of religion.

Since the beginning of my educational path, I attended a Catholic school and it was okay with me. As expected, we were made to recite prayers and sing chants. Again, it was okay with me. I was okay with everything as long as it does not affect or harm me in any way.

I only have one principle and that is to "Do good and avoid evil." As biblical as it sounds, we cannot deny that it applies in all situations.

I've always devoted to doing things to help others and for the sake of helping only. I wanted to step my game up and widen my exposure. That was when I met the current Executive Director of Humanist Alliance Philippines, International (HAPI), Alvin John Ballares.

He introduced "Humanism" to me and asked me to try out and attend a meeting of HAPI. I found my niche and I have been an active member of HAPI since then.

Jacobsen: How does the world see the Philippines from the outside under Duterte? How are humanists generally treated in the Philippines? How do Filipinos, in general, view humanists and the humanist community?

Pastrana: The world outside of the Philippines considers Duterte as the Filipino version of Trump. Should I be happy? Of course not. It is sad, but it's true. It is sad because not only that they consider him as Trump, but also the fact that he really is like Trump, a populist, saying only what the mass wants to hear (like some of the churches).

This affects how humanists are viewed in the country. We see and foresee the truths and realities of life and it is not something that most people want to hear. They like to be blinded, to see only what they want to see.

Most Filipinos merge "humanism", "atheism", and "secularism" into one concept and automatically regard it as "evil". That is why I have to lay low for a while, while I am still in a Catholic school.

People need to be enlightened about the terms mentioned earlier or just be taught not to be judgmental and not to assume stereotypes. You should not look at a person for what he or she is, but look at what he or she does.

Jacobsen: How can the non-religious overcome religious privilege, e.g., building a coalition and a solidarity movement? What are the areas of religious privilege within the Philippines?

Pastrana: I am handling the HAPI Jr. right now and we have projects such as conducting seminars to schools on education, leadership, environmental, etc. Whenever we try asking permission from the principal of the school, we usually don't mention "secularism".

We try to be on the safe side as some people don't like the idea of secularism and, again, they tend to associate it with atheism which is a different concept.

Religious privilege does not only affect the non-religious ones, but also the ones with religion as well. I go to a college wherein they offer working scholarships to people who are Catholics and strictly Catholics only.

It is sad to know that some students (with religion other than Catholic or none at all) who are less fortunate are doomed to suffer and embrace poverty because of this so-called "religious privilege".

Jacobsen: When in the Philippines, and looking at the political situation, how does religion influence politics?

Pastrana: Populism, an act of appealing to ordinary people. As I mentioned earlier, some politicians use this method to gain support as they try to say and promote what the people want to hear. Some, if not most, use religion in fishing out votes. They use this to their advantage knowing that the population of the Philippines comprise mostly of Roman Catholics.

Jacobsen: Why is religion such a large influence on the country? What are some of the main prejudices that the irreligious experience in the Philippines?

Pastrana: Even in the history of the country, religion is a major topic. The Spaniard used it to try and rule the Philippines. It contributed greatly to what the Philippines has become and that is why it is still a great influence on things today.

Some of the main prejudices that the irreligious experience in the Philippines is that they are called and assumed as a cult member or worst, a Satanist. People just want to believe what they want to believe and disregard anything that disturbs their comfort zone. We are all humans who are capable of feeling compassion.

"Not all believers are good; not all non-believers are evil." Simple as that. Just because we are more realistically attached to the concrete world, does not mean we are bad either. We cannot live a closed life believing things we want to believe. The world and the universe are too big for our little-sheltered eyes.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Pastrana: To conclude everything, just stick to the main principle — "Do good and avoid evil." Look at a person for what he or she does and not what he or she is. Do not cling on to the past; have a wondrous eye for the future. We, humans, are always hungry for answers. Question everything and don't let judgments cease your curiosity.

Being different doesn't mean drifting away. It is blending in while standing out.

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

Interview with Paterson Galupe — Member, Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: If you reflect on early life and upbringing, what was the pivot point into a non-religious worldview? What about a humanist view of the world?

Paterson Galupe: Although I was born, raised and indoctrinated into evangelical Christianity as a child, my parents were neglectful in their duty to nurture us and left us stumbling about and bought their accompaniment with money.

I felt that there was truly no external guiding force that led me to my eventual disenchantment from religion it was a slow process of denial, acknowledgement and acceptance and took 30 odd years! Humanism is the expression of my empathy and love for fellow humans as I see my firebrand atheism was not enough to change the minds of my facebook friends.

Jacobsen: How did you come to find the HAPI community?

Galupe: After learning about secular humanism, I wanted to somehow organize with likeminded atheists. Gladly, I met HAPI. I found HAPI through Facebook search as I felt the need to connect with humanist groups closest to me.

Jacobsen: What do you consider some of the better moments of the HAPI communal development, as it has grown more over the years?

Galupe: I am just new to HAPI, just over 4 months. The website provides a list of their activities that focused mainly on charity events and information outreach about humanism and very little about positive atheism in general. In my view, positive atheism is needed to become a true humanist.

Jacobsen: What does secular community look like to you? How can the non-religious communities flourish better?

Galupe: A secular community is where both the religious and atheists live together in harmony bereft of the enforcement of religious dogma in state affairs. As far as I know, there are no atheist alliances or groups in the nation today. Non-religious communities can flourish better by being able to support one another. HAPI would be an excellent group to establish the first nationwide humanist atheist alliance.

Jacobsen: What have been the benefits of being in the HAPI community for you?

Galupe: A clear line of communication with other HAPI members who are interested in promoting atheism and humanism.

Jacobsen: What are some of the main catalysts for the development of a humanist community? Is it encroachment of the religious into secular affairs? Is it the lack of community in some facets of the atheist population? And so on.

Galupe: It is both. Being the 4th most religious nation in the world, the average population has now degraded to engage in tribalism. As of today, there is no non-religious community in the country as organized as HAPI which is still in a barebones stage.

Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the HAPI community?

Galupe: I have always been enamoured by the methods of Mr. David Silverman, former head of American Atheists, and how he had always espoused Firebrand atheism. So, if I were to actually have the time or effort to lead, I would model HAPI to his methodology. I would promote an information drive using local regional dialects and the main language, in Filipino, on social media to espouse atheism and humanism that question religion as the sole worldview in the Philippines today.

So, as long as we stay in social media, we will remain an anonymous group which what I call, “the social media trap”, from which I believe is where HAPI is at now. With thousands of fake accounts trolling it’s “likers” and “followers” list.

To move forward, we need to establish the Filipino language (with the option to switch to local dialects) based online forum or website with regional hosts or moderators for the said website that contains current events from international humanist groups to let them know that this local humanist group has worldwide support.

Sadly, the lack of intelligence and the huge population of the religious masses means we definitely need to promote counter-apologetics, logical reasoning and centralize all the information revolving around philosophical or metaphysical naturalism and/or scientific materialism as the ideal worldview that promotes better wellbeing.

This, in turn, will promote humanist values as an exit to religious dogma with a call for action as the central message to spread enlightenment to the masses. And if possible, provide legal services to victims of abuses committed by clergymen.

This website must also contain Firebrand atheism and street epistemology so closeted and open atheists will also be able to enlighten close friends and family who are moderate or even fundamental theists with concise and precise fact-based answers and links to promote positive atheism.

Theists are also happily welcome to the said website to enlighten them as well with a Q&A introduction to the most common questions about atheism and humanism without any political biases yet promote nationalism and the need for a secular government.

Next step is media exposure. A figurehead/s is necessary for people to look up to.

The final step should be student secular humanist groups in secular universities. Forget about the universities controlled by the religious groups, they will automatically revoke the formation of such groups as they see it as a real threat to their supremacy.

In order to truly be able to increase the number of Filipino humanists, we should then focus on the younger generation who are empathic than their elder siblings as this society prioritizes in respecting elders and promotes ancestral worship and are forced into quasi-slavery conditions especially with children who suffer from elder members of the family who have sociopathic or narcissistic tendencies.

This, in turn, will serve as the entry point of atheism and humanism in every single religious Filipino household.

Based on my personal experience, the moderate population of the religious remain to be in a highly non-combative stance. But, it will be able to build stronger relationships with open humanists and invite other atheists into the fold who need to act to create change and be able to play an active part for humanism.

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

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