

# Humanism in Canada: Personal, Professional, and Institutional Histories (Part One)

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**Interviewer: Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

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## Abstract

**Cameron Dunkin is the Acting CEO of Dying With Dignity Canada. Dr. Gus Lyn-Piluso is the President of Center for Inquiry-Canada. Doug Thomas is the President of Secular Connexion Séculière. Greg Oliver is the President of Canadian Secular Alliance. Michel Virard is the President of Association humaniste du Québec. Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson is the Vice-President of Humanist Canada. Seanna Watson is the Vice-President of Center for Inquiry-Canada. They discuss: finding the life stance and worldview of humanism; finding the formal institutions and earning leadership positions; backstory of the organizations; important evolutions and individuals of the organizations; and targeted objectives and overall visions entering into the leadership positions.**

*Keywords:* Association humaniste du Québec, Cameron Dunkin, Canadian Secular Alliance, Center for Inquiry-Canada, Doug Thomas, Dying With Dignity Canada, Greg Oliver, Dr. Gus

Lyn-Piluso, Humanist Canada, Michel Virard, Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, Seanna Watson, Secular Connexion Séculière.

## **Humanism in Canada: Personal, Professional, and Institutional Histories (Part One)[1][2]**

*\*Please see the footnotes, bibliography, and citation style listing after the interview.\**

*\*If no answer existent in the particular question, of the 5 total questions, for the particular leader/interviewee representative of the hierarchs of the humanist or humanistic organization in Canada, then the name does not become included in the responses for the question. Interviews based on open invitations to the leadership for interviews. If not appearing, then the others did not respond to request for interviews. If no appearance in future parts, then no responses provided by interviewees who accepted within the first part, i.e., conflicting demands on attention and time, or organizational resources. All responses in alphabetical order by the first-name first portion or institutional title (in one case).\**

**1. Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start from the top on a brief personal note. How did you find and come to orient personal life stance and worldview to humanist, or at least humanistic, values in personal and professional life?**

**Cameron Dunkin, Acting CEO, Dying With Dignity Canada:** I have always been passionate about social justice and the pursuit of a more equal society. To me, humanism is embodied by working to ease the suffering of others. This entails creating the circumstances for them to not only survive and meet their needs, but also to walk alongside people as they thrive. This is a thread that's woven through my work for different human rights causes and continues at Dying With Dignity Canada (DWDC), fostering empowerment for people across the country at end of life.

**Doug Thomas, President, Secular Connexion Séculière:** As a lifelong agnostic, I began to realize that this philosophy, while it clearly defined the path to truth for me, did not address matters of ethics and dealing with human problems. At the same time, I was looking for people with similar ideals and made the connection with humanist philosophers (Epicurus, Russel, etc.). I realized that there was a fit between my ethical thinking and the International Humanist and Ethical Union's (now Humanists International's) humanist principles as set out in the Hague document of 1952. From then on, I began to refer to those principles as a guideline for ethical principles when the answer was not obvious from my own ethical ideas.

**Greg Oliver, President, Canadian Secular Alliance:** I grew up non-religious. I'm actually 4th generation atheist on my father's side, though my maternal grandparents were devout Catholics so I had some exposure to religious life. As I grew older and learned more about the world, I very quickly grew skeptical of religious metaphysical claims and the institutions that promoted them. Humanist values took precedence before I even knew what the term meant.

**Dr. Gus Lyn-Piluso:** I grew up in a Southern Italian family that had experienced fascism and WWII. There was always talk about politics, injustice and religious hypocrisy. Critique of the church (and religion in general) was fair game and I found myself doing the same. When the

time came for my confirmation I refused and created a bit of an uproar in my school. My grandfather supported me saying that if they gave me any trouble “there would be hell to pay”. He survived Mussolini’s Blackshirts and was not afraid to take on a local priest in suburban Toronto. So, my first anti-religious action was really just standard operating procedures for my family and I was adhering to my family’s ethos.

As an undergrad, I was exposed to the writing of John Dewey – one of the signatures of the first Humanist Manifesto. His work gave me the foundation to understand the rebelliousness of my family. Their refusal to sit by as passive onlooker of the public sphere was what Dewey thought real citizenship was about. Democracy for Dewey required informed citizens, who were actively engaged in the decision-making process. True democracy required a skeptical attitude, and a thoughtful process of discovery. This “method of intelligence” is the scientific process democratized, allowing all citizens to engage in an on-going educational process that saw knowledge, personal reflection, and political action all part of the democratic citizen’s role.

So, my education, from early childhood on, lead me to a humanist worldview.

**Michel Virard, President, Association humaniste du Québec:** Two events oriented me. First, In 1980, out of necessity, I co-created a kindergarten together with about a dozen concerned parents. We all had small children (2 to 5) and it was obvious the offering at the time was for «Baby parking lots» and nothing more. This was at a time the Quebec government became open to NFP kindergartens staffed with trained childcare professionals and draw the framework to create them. We were among the very firsts to take advantage of this opportunity. Our Kindergarten was “Les Copains d’abord” (Chums First, if you will) and has evolved into a famed CPE (Centre de la petite enfance) and is still operating, 39 years later, still with a long waiting list. It was with a legitimate pride the original pioneers feted the 25<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Les Copains d’abord in 2005.

Since my landing in Montréal, in 1966, I had been puzzled by the apparent credulity of many Quebecers and was set to do something about it. I was dreaming of creating a real science museum in Montréal but that didn’t materialize. Thus the second event was the discovery in 1992 of a skeptic group, Les Sceptiques du Québec, founded barely four years before. This is where I learn the ropes of an NFP. I became administrator, played the evening show host and lent my business office to the board up until 2002, I think.

Parallel to this, the remnants of my Catholic upbringing had essentially evaporated by 1990. I had become an atheist many years before, since age 14, in fact, but I continued to pay lip service to my parents’ religion until their death. By 2003, both my parents were deceased and I felt free to do what I now wanted to do: create the first truly atheist francophone association in Québec.

**Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, Vice-President, Humanist Canada:** I owe it all to fundamentalist Christianity, the U.S.-Vietnam War, and my mother. You see, after living a somewhat wildlife in young adulthood (during which time I was conceived) my mother decided to convert to the Church of Christ (Christian). She became very devout. We prayed without ceasing, and on our knees. We had to memorize bible scriptures and successfully recite them, chapter and verse, before our evening meal. She accepted my stepfather’s proposal for marriage

only on the condition that he become a Christian. He had been a member of the United Church of Canada, but apparently, that did not count. In fact, the only other Christians on the planet were the Disciples of Christ and they were “fallen away” because they allowed instrumental music in their church services. I determined to wash away my sins through baptism at the age of 12, and found, afterward, that I had higher status in the church than my mother. I could lead the congregation in prayer, lead the singing and even preach from the pulpit, but my mother could not because she was a woman. My stepfather became secretary of the church elders, but my mother could never become an elder. I thought this odd because she was the most devout of all of us.

The congregation of which we were members was sustained by missionary activity from a church in Abilene, Texas. Half the Church of Christ Christians in the world hailed from Texas, and as a boy I considered it odd that half of the saved in heaven would speak with a Texas drawl. Then one day, a new missionary came to minister to our congregation and he had a bumper sticker that read “Kill a Commie for Christ.” I had already taken a somewhat different position on both the U.S. invasion in Vietnam and the morality of killing.

Years later my daughter, then age 6 or 7, told me she liked watching “the Simpsons” because they taught her how not to be. I guess you could say that the Church did the same for me. In searching for a higher and more universal morality I began espousing humanist values before I became acquainted with the concept in university. A few years after graduation I was invited to join the board of the Saskatchewan Association on Human Rights and I remained on that board for nearly 20 years, much of that time as its president.

**Seanna Watson, CFI-Canada:** My family background is Jewish, but mostly tending towards a humanistic/social justice approach to life. As a teenager, I was interested in figuring out how to answer the questions of life. As a girl geek interested in math and science, I was very unpopular at school. I encountered a group of evangelical Christians who welcomed me despite my background and inclinations, which convinced me that there must be something to the claims of Christianity.

Over the subsequent decades, conflict between the tenets of my religion vs my commitment to evidence and rationalism resulted in me becoming increasingly more liberal in my approach to Christianity, focusing on community building and social justice. As I continued readings in philosophy and cognitive neuroscience, I finally came to the point where there was an irresolvable conflict between my religious faith and rationalism, so I had to accept the fact that I had become an atheist.

**2. Jacobsen: Following from the previous question, how did you find your organization, become involved, and earn your way to the highest levels of leadership in it?**

**Cameron Dunkin, Acting CEO, Dying With Dignity Canada:** When I was in grade 9, I worked in a seniors’ home assisting residents and keeping them company. It was a formative experience for a young person, and I learned a lot while serving coffee and tea and helping people with their walkers. It was transformative to understand, at a young age, how the ever-present possibility of death affects people’s lives. In my 20s, I became a caregiver for a

family member who had experienced a decline in health. Although her eventual passing was difficult for her family and friends, it was a “good death.” This person had access to treatment, was surrounded by people who advocated for her, and retained a certain amount of control over the circumstances of her death. That kind of peace is what I want for everyone.

The opportunity to contribute to Dying With Dignity Canada’s work is exciting, as the organization has been so instrumental in fighting for human rights and shaping the discourse around end-of-life choice in this country. After the 2016 passage of Bill C-14, Canada’s assisted dying law, DWDC’s work continues to fight for equal access to medical assistance in dying (MAID), eligibility for the procedure, support for patients, clinicians, and their families, and education for communities across the country. We are working to ensure that every person in Canada has access to a “good death” as they define it.

**Doug Thomas, President, Secular Connexion Séculière:** As a part of my internet research regarding the IHEU, I discovered the Humanist Association of Canada (now Humanist Canada) and its local affiliate The Kitchener, Waterloo, Guelph, Cambridge Humanist Association (now the Society of Freethinkers) and joined in order to have a community. Subsequently, I became involved in the leadership of both organizations. Earning one’s way to leadership was not difficult since, unfortunately, most secular humanists, like other human beings, seem reluctant to take on responsibility so it is a matter of stepping up to do jobs most people don’t seem to want. Once I took on the responsibility, I discovered that the membership of Humanist Canada did not have the same vision for promoting the rights of secular humanists as I did. This led to my leaving the organization to form Secular Connexion Séculière with Barrie Webster.

**Greg Oliver, President, Canadian Secular Alliance:** It was 2008, and at that point, I had become quite interested in religion and politics. I’ve always had a particularly strong contempt for illegitimate authority, and found theocracy quite odious. To me, it was obvious that while individuals should be free to worship as they please (provided of course that they don’t harm others), that government institutions should be strictly neutral with respect to religion. As I began to learn more and more about Canada’s political landscape, I realized it wasn’t the perfect secular liberal democracy I had hoped for. While the challenges we face are minuscule in comparison to many countries around the world, there was still much room for improvement. This prompted me to reach out to Justin Trottier, who at the time was running the Centre for Inquiry Canada. At the time CFI was pursuing charitable status, so their capacity to engage in political advocacy was restrained. So along with several others, we founded the Canadian Secular Alliance, an organization whose sole purpose was to advocate for the separation of religion and state in Canada. By 2011, I was the President of the organization.

**Michel Virard, President, Association humaniste du Québec:** I didn’t “find” an organization because there was none. I created it. Actually, by 2003, I was in touch with Bernard Cloutier and Pierre Cloutier (no relation), I knew both of them from the Skeptic Association. We had regular meetings in a restaurant on St-Denis street when we discovered a new movement started in California: the Brights. It defined itself as “a constituency” and nothing more. Pierre Cloutier created the Bright web site and it is still online. I managed it for a time. But it was not going anywhere so we looked at something else.

**Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, Vice-President, Humanist Canada:** The idea of universal human rights flowed from secular understandings of the nature of humanity grounded in the Enlightenment, but the human rights movement has evolved to largely rely on simplistic heuristics rather than deeper understandings. Let me give you an example. Affirmative action, as originally implemented in my province, was centred on applied scientific research into every situation where an identified minority was underrepresented in an occupational group. If the problem involved discrimination, then that would be demonstrated in the affirmative action study and remedial action would be taken ensuring equality of opportunity. If the problem was a lack of educational attainment, then affirmative action would be focused on increasing educational skills so that more members of the targeted group would be qualified for the occupation in question. If the problem was a lack of interest because of a lack of role models, then appropriate role models would be brought to targeted communities to alert students to potentialities. If the problem was that graduates were choosing other options not available to other workers in the occupational group, as indeed happened with respect to graduating indigenous teachers in my province, then nothing needed to be done. We must respect the right of the individual to make their own best choices.

The heuristic that was applied by human rights tribunals was that such studies were not needed because whenever a group was underrepresented this indicated discrimination. To justify this heuristic the concept of systemic discrimination was broadened to include invisible discrimination that we cannot actually measure but is assumed. This has led to the establishment of quotas based on ascribed group membership irrespective of educational, aspirational and motivational variables. Equality of opportunity has been replaced with equality of results.

Humanism was attractive to me because it had not, philosophically, lost sight of the nature of the human person as a unique and volitional individual. I have argued that the self that embodies that ideal pre-dates the Axial Age of the first century B.C.E. (see: [Free Will](#)). I was influenced by Dr. Pat Duffy Hutcheon who had simultaneously won Humanist of the Year awards in both Canada and the United States. Pat and I had many conversations about the philosophy of humanism, and she also mentored me with respect to my first published academic journal articles. I was also interested in developing the humanist community, and I was trained as an officiant in 2002. I was content to provide weddings, conduct research and publish the occasional article from my base in northern Saskatchewan, but then in 2014 then-president Eric Thomas invited me to run for the HC board. It so happened I had recently finished a decades-long stint as a director of our local Indian and Metis Friendship Center and was open to a new volunteer experience. I became vice-president two years later.

**Seanna Watson, Vice-President, CFI-Canada:** I should perhaps note that my education and my entire work career has been as an electrical engineer (I am now retired) and almost all of my involvement both with religious groups and with humanist/atheist/secular groups has included some aspect of serving as a lay leader and/or volunteer. My personal inclination has always to become involved in the operations (and sometimes leadership) of groups in which I am a member.

In any case, having embraced my loss of faith, I was now faced with irreconcilable philosophical differences with a community that I (and in fact my entire family) had been an integral member

of. Looking for a group that I hoped would offer community support as well as the opportunity to be involved in social justice locally, nationally, and globally, I came upon the Humanist Association of Ottawa (at the time part of Humanist Canada). I was encouraged to discover that this was a place where I could find common ground with people who shared my love of rationalism, skepticism, and philosophy, but also were interested in working towards building a better world – not because God said so, but just because they thought it was the right thing to do

### **3. Jacobsen: What is the backstory of the organization – its history, the rationale for its title and existence, and its original leadership?**

**Cameron Dunkin, Acting CEO, Dying With Dignity Canada:** This interview comes at an exciting time, as 2020 marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dying With Dignity Canada. The organization started at a grassroots level, with a small number of dedicated volunteers banding together in a basement to fight an injustice they saw in society. They stood up for those who were suffering across Canada, even when the discourse around medically assisted death was cloaked in fear, secrecy, and stigma. The right to die movement has also influenced and intersected with other critical moments in the history of human rights. After returning from working in Kenya, I transitioned into work in HIV/AIDS advocacy in Canada. I began to understand the history of the AIDS crisis and that period in history's role in increasing people's awareness of suffering.

Our co-founder, Marilynne Seguin, worked with patients who did not yet have the legal access to a medically assisted death (including those suffering from HIV/AIDS) over her career as a nurse. She was dedicated to what have emerged as the pillars of our work: education, access, support, and eligibility at the end of life. She was guided by people's experiences with suffering and lack of control over their deaths. In her book *A Gentle Death*, written in 1994, she wrote, "It is perhaps ironic that, through thinking about death, both patients and health-care professionals have acquired increased respect for human life." Though that passage was written 25 years ago, we still find that to be the case today. Increasing options at the end of life only means more opportunities for quality treatment, palliative care, and the choice to access medical assistance in dying (MAID), if a patient chooses it.

**Center for Inquiry-Canada as an Organization (Seanna Watson and Dr. Gus Lyn-Piluso):** CFI Canada was initially started in 2006 as a branch of the US-based Center for Inquiry, in cooperation with members of two Toronto groups, the Toronto Secular Alliance (initially started as a University of Toronto student group), as well as the Toronto Humanist Association (part of the Humanist Association of Canada). Justin Trottier was CFI Canada's first executive director. Subsequent Executive Directors leading CFIC include Michael Payton, Derek Pert, and Eric Adriaans.

**Doug Thomas, President, Secular Connexion Séculière:** Barrie Webster and I had the same discomfort with the lack of political action in Humanist Canada up to 2011. That year, we formed Secular Connexion Séculière<sup>1</sup> specifically to engage in political action and lobbying. Our three goals were:

1. to lobby government to eliminate systemic discrimination against atheists in Canada,

2. to act as a communications hub for atheists in Canada, and
3. to represent Canadian secular humanists to the world.

We spend most of our efforts on goal number 1, lobbying governments to eliminate systemic discrimination against Canadian atheists. Goal number 2 – acting as a communication hub or nexus for atheists in Canada is still a work in progress. We have left Goal number 3 “on the books, but since Humanist Canada is already doing this, we have not been active on it.

From the beginning, we wanted the organization to be national and felt that it should communicate as much as possible in both official languages, hence the bilingual title. We are particularly pleased with “Connexion” since it is a legitimate word in both languages. In English, it means the same as the modern spelling – a connection; in French, it means a nexus or place for many connections.

SCS has always had a small footprint, in terms of leadership – the bare minimum for legal purposes. This is partly by design, but also a result of reality. The number of non-believers who feel comfortable committing publicly is pretty small.

<sup>1</sup> *Originally Secular Connexion Séculaire until a retired government translator pointed out the Séculaire was French for something happening every hundred years and suggested Séculière.*

**Michel Virard, President, Association humaniste du Québec:** At about the same time, two Quebec organizations, the Mouvement laïque québécois and Les Sceptiques du Québec, attempted to redefine themselves as atheist organizations. Following internal opposition, both failed in their attempt and had to revert to a non-committed religious status. They could not officially become atheist organizations.

This is when Bernard Cloutier and I decided to “do something about it”: a truly atheist organization. Bernard, being fairly wealthy, had in mind a “Foundation” where voting rights would be proportional to the sums invested in it but I had in mind an «Association» of equal members. We ended up by having both. Both of us were professional engineers and seasoned businessmen retired or on the verge of retiring. We hesitated on the name we should select for our two organizations. The first idea was to call our organizations «libres-penseurs» (Free-Thinkers) but the name was already squatted in Quebec by one website (wo)manned by Danielle Soulière. Although she would later join us and is the current proof-reader of our magazine, Québec humaniste, at the time, this was perceived as an unnecessary obstacle. We looked farther. From the American Brights forum, we received one suggestion: why not «humanist»? At the time, we were completely ignorant about what was a modern «humanist» so it was quite a discovery for us. We found the term was used mainly within Northern Europe, the British Commonwealth and the USA and in no Latin country. There was already a Humanist Association of Canada but it was purely an English speaking organization with essentially no members in Quebec. We looked at what Humanist associations were doing elsewhere and we liked it, so Humanist imposed itself without much further thinking. Still, we flirted for a while with the Center For Inquiry of Paul Kurtz but CFI insistence on having a French-speaking Quebec affiliate with an English name (no translation was allowed) killed the deal right from the start.

**Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, Vice-President, Humanist Canada:** Our first president was Dr. Henry Morgentaler who is widely credited for being the man who almost single-handedly overturned Canada's abortion laws. This tradition of social activism within a human rights framework has continued to this day with recent campaigns to legalize doctor-assisted suicide, outlaw so-called "conversion therapy, and to defend humanists who have been jailed for their activism in other countries. The organization has concurrently maintained a focus on separating church and state. Unlike the United States, Canada has not had such a tradition as can be seen by extensive public funding accorded to Roman Catholic schools, hospitals and social services. A historical review of our magazines and newsletters would reveal a decidedly anti-clerical stance.

The philosophy of humanism is centred in a belief that there is a reality that exists outside of ourselves and that human perception and reason is capable of discerning that reality without reliance on supernatural means. Thus our support for science and our challenging of religion flows from a desire to debunk ignorance and superstition. The philosophy of humanism assumes human agency emphasizing critical thinking and evidence as necessary to exercise agency. Unfortunately, this anti-dogmatic stance leads to a plethora of different possibilities. A former president, Dr. Robert Buckman, once despaired that organizing humanists are a lot like herding cats.

#### **4. Jacobsen: What have been pivotal moments – and who have been seminal individuals – in the – ahem – evolution of the organization?**

**Cameron Dunkin, Acting CEO, Dying With Dignity Canada:** After 40 years, Dying With Dignity Canada has seen enormous gains in the right to die movement. We've been involved in ground-breaking court cases with the aim of increasing access to the right to MAID, including the Truchon and Gladu case in Quebec that ruled criteria in the provincial and federal laws were too restrictive in September 2019. Pivotal moments in the right to die movement in Canada include Sue Rodriguez's 1993 challenge to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the 2015 Carter decision, and subsequent 2016 passage of Bill C-14.

2020 will also mark the mandatory Parliamentary review of Bill C-14, Canada's assisted dying law, and we hope Parliamentarians of all stripes will step up to ensure the law is amended to ensure equal access for all. There are still hurdles to overcome in access and eligibility, and in the way, the law is being interpreted across the country. We're fighting for the rights of those in the Assessed and Approved category, as well as the right to advance requests for people suffering from dementia, Alzheimer's, and other degenerative conditions. All through our organizational history, we have been supporting people through navigating their legal options and providing education on what they can control and understand about their deaths.

So many people have contributed to where DWDC is today — it's the volunteers and supporters who have made our work, and our successes, possible throughout our history. I am inspired by the passion of our volunteers across Canada, as well as the staff, board, and partners who are dedicated to making the end of life a less fraught and dehumanizing experience.

**Center for Inquiry-Canada as an Organization (Seanna Watson and Dr. Gus Lyn-Piluso):** Dr. Robert Buckman and Dr. Henry Morgentaler, both deeply respected and valued for their

contributions to healthcare (particularly women's health and rights), humanism and human rights, worked with local humanists Don Cullen, Ron Burns, Jim Cranwell and George Baker to lay the essential foundation of this new group. Other individuals in leadership positions in CFIC include Nate Phelps, son of anti-gay activist Fred Phelps.

Eric Adriaans joined the organization as Executive Director in 2014. During Eric's tenure, CFIC sponsored Bangladeshi refugee Raihan Abir, who had been part of the Mukto Mona blog network <https://www.macleans.ca/news/world/in-toronto-a-bangladeshi-editor-pays-tribute-to-his-murdered-colleagues/>. CFIC also became the only secular group working with the Conservative government's "Office of Religious Freedom" (this work continues as CFIC representatives have been consulting with the current government's "Office of Human Rights, Freedoms, and Inclusion").

Sandra Dunham joined CFIC as Executive Director of Development in 2017. CFIC currently has 10 branches across Canada, from Victoria, BC to St John's, NL, as well as an online "Virtual Branch" connecting members of the secular community who do not have physical access to attend branch events.

### **Doug Thomas, President, Secular Connexion Séculière:**

May 2011 – Secular Connexion Séculière formed – somewhat based on the ideas of Freedom From Religion Foundation in the US.

February 2016 – SCS registered as a Lobbyist with the Government of Canada. This legitimizes our contacts with Parliamentary Committees, Ministers of the Crown and MPs.

April, 2017 – SCS added advocates in each region of Canada: BC and The Yukon,

Alberta and The Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Nunavut, Ontario and Québec, Maritimes.

April, 2019 – SCS registered as a lobbyist with the Province of Ontario to legitimize our lobbying efforts with the Ontario Provincial Government. This is intended to be the first province/territory to be so registered with others to follow.

**Greg Oliver, President, Canadian Secular Alliance:** In the early years, we focused much of our efforts into researching violations of religion and state separation and developing sensible and morally coherent policy positions. There were many significant contributors, but extra acknowledgement is due to Leslie Rosenblood, whose contributions have been indispensable since our founding. Since then we've met with dozens of politicians across the political spectrum to promote our ideas (with varying degrees of success). More recently, we've focused on legal challenges. We have intervened on two successful cases at the Supreme Court of Canada (with more on the horizon). And we also led a coalition of organizations in a successful campaign to repeal blasphemy law from the Canadian Criminal Code in 2018.

**Michel Virard, President, Association humaniste du Québec:** Bernard created the Fondation humaniste du Québec in December 2004. In June 2005, Bernard Cloutier, Normand Baillargeon and I signed the Letters Patent of the Association humaniste du Québec (AHQ). We were the three original administrators of the AHQ. After a year or so, Normand and Bernard disagreed on a side point: whether or not we should have our own publishing house. Normand, a famed philosopher, left and no longer participated in the administration of the Association but I remained in good terms with Normand up until now: I republish all his articles on education on our Facebook page and he invited me once on a Radio-Canada talk show he was co-animating.

**Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, Vice-President, Humanist Canada:** In the mid-1990s Hutcheon warned us of the dark side of multiculturalism leading to tribalism and societal fragmentation. This was pivotal in that humanists were being warned to look deeper into concepts we have traditionally supported, that cultural evolution can bring about unexpected consequences. Later in that decade, the Ottawa Humanists led by Simon Parcher won the legal right to solemnize marriages in the province of Ontario, and this program was transferred to the Humanist Association of Canada. This pivotal development placed an emphasis on servicing the humanist community. Although humanist organizations have not yet won the right to solemnize marriage outside of Ontario, humanists in some provinces provide other ceremonies and in at least one other province in-house marriage commissioners perform weddings. Humanists have increasingly developed as a sense community through hospice care, mutual support, social opportunities, and in-house education.

**5. Jacobsen: As one of the leaders in the national freethought community, what were the targeted objectives, and overall vision, for the organization entering into its leadership role?**

**Cameron Dunkin, Acting CEO, Dying With Dignity Canada:** I see Dying With Dignity Canada at the forefront of revolutionizing healthcare in Canada. We are expanding end-of-life options that include but extend beyond MAID. This includes palliative care, advance care planning, and ensuring equitable access to assisted dying. I want to prioritize open communication and education that addresses fears and worries about what the choice to access to MAID means for people across Canada. We're taking stock of the Canadian healthcare landscape and the ways that judgement and misinformation can have very serious consequences for people's lives, and are also working towards improved legislation, education for patients and providers, and support for patients and their loved ones. Ultimately, opening up conversations around death and grief, and doing so with compassion, will empower people to live their lives to the fullest.

**Center for Inquiry-Canada as an Organization (Seanna Watson and Dr. Gus Lyn-Piluso):** **CFIC's Vision** is to build a world where people value evidence and critical thinking, where superstition and prejudice are eliminated, and where science and compassion guide public policy.

**CFIC's Values:**

- CFIC was founded by Humanists and continues to follow the principles of Humanism, as outlined in the International Humanist and Ethical Union's Amsterdam Declaration of 2002.
- CFIC is committed to a just society and supports opportunities to improve social justice
- CFIC believes that all humans have a right to be treated fairly. We will defend the human rights of all persons, especially those protected by the Canadian Human Rights Act.
- CFIC promotes diversity, as a means of achieving more interesting conversations and more inclusive outcomes.
- CFIC is committed to active citizenship with a process based on robust dialogue rooted in sound evidence.
- CFIC believes that rationalism (critical thinking) is the basis for all good policy and decision making.

### **CFIC's Mission:**

Centre for Inquiry Canada fosters a secular society based on reason, science, freedom of inquiry, and humanist values

### **CFIC has 4 main areas of focus:**

Secularism, Scientific Skepticism, Critical Thinking, and Building Community

### **CFIC's Goals:**

*Critical Thinking:* Educate members, the public and the government to interpret information effectively.

*Scientific Skepticism:* Improve science literacy in the public and government in order to promote decision making based on good science.

*Building Community:* Improve members' access to the community through "on the ground" and virtual branches.

*Secularism:* Promote neutrality on matters of religious belief.

### **Enabling Activities:**

*Communications:* Create a coordinated communications strategy that raises our public profile and engages our members.

*Fund Development:* Raise sufficient funds to stabilize and expand CFIC.

*Partnerships:* Develop mutually beneficial partnerships that increase our membership; benefit our members and further our mission.

*Administration:* Create processes which allow for the seamless transfer of key tasks and timing as a volunteer and paid personnel transition between role

(CFIC's complete strategic plan is available here: <http://centreforinquiry.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/CFIC-Strategic-plan-final.pdf>)

**Doug Thomas, President, Secular Connexion Séculière:**

SCS has always focused on eliminating systemic discrimination against atheists in Canada. We specialize in lobbying MPs, MPPs, and bureaucrats to change laws that perpetuate that discrimination.

That means we tend to work in the background, cultivating allies and contacts at all levels of government. Since 2011 we have learned a great deal about how to do this and how to develop contacts and allies.

We also attempt to promote conversations among secular humanist leaders, with limited success. That said, the national organizations seem to fly in a sort of loose, informal formation, supporting each other when they take any kind of action. For example, the elimination of Section 296 (anti-blasphemy) of the Criminal Code of Canada was a shared cause among all the national and some local organizations. There was no particular co-ordination; we just seem to put pressure on different parts of the government at the same time.

When Le Mouvement Laïque Québécois was successful in supporting Alain Simoneau in his court challenges to opening prayers at the City of Saguenay council meetings, SCS not only recognized the achievement, but made sure that our regional advocates understood the nationwide implications of the Supreme Court decision and that they confronted any local councils that were engaged in the practice.

We think it important that organizations like SCS work in concert with other organizations and we are always open to co-ordinating efforts. We may be a leader in one area while other organizations are leaders in others.

**Greg Oliver, President, Canadian Secular Alliance:** We have an intentionally narrow mandate. We are non-partisan and separation of religion and state is our sole objective. We've always felt this approach would build the largest number of supporters and maximize the probability of achieving our objectives. Though we have come to appreciate that progress can be frustratingly slow in politics, we are committed to continuing this fight over the long-term to make Canada a better place for all, regardless of religious (or non-religious) worldview.

**Michel Virard, President, Association humaniste du Québec:** After September 11th, 2001, it became apparent that religious fanaticism could be much more than annoying: it could be lethal on a large scale. I think I was not alone in thinking that, unless we take religious threats seriously we, Free-Thinkers, may not survive for long. As Voltaire put it: "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." But the enemy was not circumscribed to Saudi Arabia, it was everywhere and took multiple forms. The roots of fanaticism is mostly

ignorance, not only ignorance of facts but more importantly, ignorance of proper thinking, what we call «critical thinking». So, our endeavour would be an attempt at increasing the level of critical thinking in our society, which, for us, meant the French speakers within Quebec.

We have been doing that for the last 14 years, mostly with movie screenings and lectures, but also through our magazine, webpages, youtube sites and Facebook page. But that's not all, we have been actively pursuing three other goals either directly or through sisters' organizations: the separation of state and churches in our institutions, the right to die with dignity and the removal of discrimination against atheists in Quebec, especially in the Quebec Civil Code but also within the Criminal Code of Canada.

**Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, Vice-President, Humanist Canada:** It is the mandate of Humanist Canada to provide a unifying forum to like-minded secularists across the country, but that has proven difficult. Let me give you an example. Humanist Canada is a national organization that has been legally solemnizing marriages in our largest province for over two decades. Humanists in two other provinces have applied to solemnize marriages in those jurisdictions, but have been turned down on the grounds that they are not religions. Yet the regulations in those, and other, jurisdictions hold that where a national organization solemnizes marriages in at least one other province, and has local adherents, that organization can solemnize marriages locally. One would think that the national and local organizations could work together on this issue, but the local organizations are jealous of their independence. One is reminded of Buckman's cats.

In my opinion, it is vital that humanists, secularists, freethinkers, atheists and agnostics unite to save our civilization. There is a threat to our existence that is greater than global warming, it is the abandonment of science and reason. First, let us take some credit. We are part of a tradition that largely shook off the shackles of superstition permitting us to discover more closely how the universe actually works, and this has permitted technological advance that has, as Steven Pinker meticulously documents, give us a civilization that is healthier, more long-lived, more peaceful and law-abiding, with greater literacy and democracy than any prior civilization. We have even confounded Malthus. In our wake, we have dragged religious fundamentalists, such as those of my childhood, into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Faith healing and prayer are no longer considered to be the equivalent of medicine and surgery. We have become proficient at debunking creationists, but the threat has been joined from two new directions.

In 2012 a toddler, Ezekiel Stephan died of bacterial meningitis. His parents believed in naturopathy and tried to treat him with garlic, onion and horseradish. They called an ambulance only after he had stopped breathing. A jury of their peers convicted them of child neglect, but they won a new trial on appeal. For the re-trial, they chose a judge without a jury. Amazingly, the judge ruled that reasonable parents could attempt alternate therapies. If you believe that there is a thing called "western medicine" and that there are alternative therapies, then your mind has been colonized by pseudoscience. In reality, there is only medicine and some therapies have been proven to work and some have not. But pseudoscientific anti-vaccination belief is so prevalent that diseases such as whooping cough and measles are making a comeback in many areas and some parents are even afraid to protect their children from the flu. This is not just an attack on medicine, it is an attack on science and reason.

Science has been undermined even in our universities where the philosophy of postmodernism, which holds that there is no “reality” that is not socially constructed, predominates. Since science is a “white male way of knowing” and that truth is arrived at “through the discourse of knowledgeable people (Strong, 2002, p. 221), science cannot be used to settle disagreements and who is knowledgeable will be determined by the acceptance of their conclusions. Hence censorship, rebranded as “de-platforming” becomes essential in establishing and maintaining a coherent canon. This begins to sound a lot like a religion with tenured professors who are dismissed for being politically incorrect, in effect, suffering ex-communication.

We humanists have a long history of being outsiders to the formal operations of power, but nonetheless, we have had a gradual and profound influence on the public discourse through perseverance. We will need all of that to withstand the renewed attacks on science and reason, and it is essential that we do so, because the challenges facing humanity are immense.

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

### **Appendix I: Footnotes**

[1] Cameron Dunkin, Acting CEO, Dying With Dignity Canada; Dr. Gus Lyn-Piluso – President, Center for Inquiry-Canada; Doug Thomas – President, Secular Connexion Séculière; Greg Oliver – President, Canadian Secular Alliance; Michel Virard – President, Association humaniste du Québec; Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson – Vice-President, Humanist Canada; Seanna Watson – Vice-President, Center for Inquiry-Canada.

[2] Individual Publication Date: January 1, 2020: <http://www.in-sightjournal.com/humanism-one>; Full Issue Publication Date: May 1, 2020: <https://in-sightjournal.com/insight-issues/>.

### **Appendix II: Citation Style Listing**

**American Medical Association (AMA):** Jacobsen S. *Humanism in Canada: Personal, Professional, and Institutional Histories (Part One)* [Online]. January 2020; 22(A). Available from: <http://www.in-sightjournal.com/humanism-one>.

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**Chicago/Turabian, Author-Date (16<sup>th</sup> Edition):** Jacobsen, Scott. 2019. “*Humanism in Canada: Personal, Professional, and Institutional Histories (Part One)*.” *In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal*. 22.A. <http://www.in-sightjournal.com/humanism-one>.

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