

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 29 March 2018



Myth, Solidarity and Post-Liberalism

Podcast with **Timothy Stacey** (2 April 2018).

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/myth-solidarity-and-post-liberalism/>

Christopher Cotter (CC): *Welcome to another episode of the Religious Studies Project. It's the start of 2018 as I'm recording – although who knows when this is actually going to go out, because we've got such a backlog! I am here in Reading, on my way to Oxford. And I'm joined by [Dr Tim Stacey](#). Hi Tim!*

Timothy Stacey (TS): Hi.

CC: *Welcome to the Religious Studies Project. Tim is currently a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Ottawa, but has been in the UK for the festive period and our diaries and travel schedules managed to collide nicely! We'll be hearing about Tim's research during the course of the interview, but the primary trigger for the interview is the forthcoming publication of his first monograph, with Routledge, later this year. That's called, [Myth and Solidarity in the Modern World: Beyond Religious and Political Division](#). And today we're going to be talking a little bit about these notions of myth and solidarity, but also this key concept of post-liberalism. So, first of all, I've given a very brief introduction to you, Tim. But tell us, who are you? How have you got here?*

TS: How have I . . . ?

CC: How have you got here? Why are you speaking to me?!

TS: Well, I guess I started off . . . I did my Masters at Nottingham, in Theology. And it was there – as I was listening to some really interesting arguments about [virtue ethics](#), primarily from people like [Alasdair MacIntyre](#) and [Charles Taylor](#) – that I felt very inspired by the stuff they were saying. But also, as an atheist myself, I kept asking, “How do I actually make this relevant to me, somebody who’s

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not actually a Christian?” And that was what triggered me moving from Theology into social scientific research. And so that triggered the PhD, which was about exploring possibilities for virtue ethics and notions of transcendence in a religiously plural society. And more recently the interest has turned to secular subjects, so that's what I'm now in Vancouver exploring: what are the potentials for transcendence and solidarity amongst secular subjects?

CC: *Fantastic! And we'll be hearing more about that as this conversation ensues. So, set the scene for us then. The first couple of chapters of this book are exploring this notion of post-liberalism. But I don't know that many of our listeners necessarily know what-on-earth that means! So perhaps you could, just for the sake . . . ? We know that we are in turbulent political times. There is a sort of reactionary politics happening all over the place. We've got these notions that there's the political elites versus the ordinary masses, and everything. So, maybe, just take us through a chronological How have we got to this state? What is liberalism? And then, what is post-liberalism?*

TS: Yes. Well, basically, the basic premise of the book is to follow this post-liberal argument. And the primary argument there is that, in a liberal secular society, we've lost a sense of the role of transcendence in forming social identity. So instead, we treat people as basically . . . both ideally, and also primarily motivated by rationality. And I suggest that we also tend to castigate those who appear to be irrational, whether that's because of religion, ideology, parochialism, or simply a lack of education. And I think that comes up during the Brexit debate a lot as well. And the result, according to post-liberals, is two-fold. First: politics becomes technocratic and economics becomes instrumental. So, politics is less about building belonging and empowering people than it is about a university educated elite, delivering to social-scientifically construed need. And then, economics is less about reciprocity than it is about GDP. And then second: because of this, we increasingly see people retrenching in communities that they feel provide them with a sense of belonging and empowerment – communities of faith, race, nation, economic status. But then, kind of the **(5:00)** What inspired this book for me was that although post-liberalism gives, for me, a really exciting analysis of our current political problems, post-liberalism is itself as much a symptom of that as it is an analysis. By which I mean that it represents a retrenching in Christian notions of transcendence. And that simply doesn't work for a society that is simultaneously – as I put it in the book – post-Christian, post-secular and religiously plural.

CC: *Hmm.*

TS: So that very long premise is actually the basis of this exploration, namely: to explore the relevance

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and role of transcendence in developing solidarity in the messy religious and non-religious landscape that we see before us, primarily in the western world. And I explored this by undertaking two years of ethnographic research with groups seeking to develop solidarity in London – which I kind-of identify as one of the most socially and economically liberal cities in the world, as well as being one of the most religiously and non-religiously diverse cities in the world. So, despite all that complexity, the actual answers the book provides I feel are quite simple. First, it says that despite the assumptions of liberal secularism and the dominance of this system within London for almost 300 years, the majority of people – both religious and non-religious – still do draw on transcendence in forming their social identity. In particular – and this is where I get to the notion of myth – they do this through myths. And that's what I call stories of great events and characters that exemplify people's ideals. And while for Christians that might be like the story of Christ or of the great Flood, for atheists that might be about, sometimes, Ghandi or Martin Luther King – figures who actually have some sort of religious background themselves – but also, just stories of their mum, or their dad, or their best friend, or a great heroic colleague that for them exemplified a virtuous way of living. And then the second point is that again – despite the assumptions of secular liberalism – actually, the role of the state doesn't need to be this kind of principled distance from religion, or principled distance from ideology. Instead, we can actually imagine the role of the state less as an enforcer of a particular ideology – or else perhaps, in a liberal society, an enforcer of a lack of ideology – and instead we can think about it as a curator of the sharing of different ideologies. So that people can explore the virtues inherent in very different ways of living and see that, for instance, I might be somebody who is quite critical of Islam, but then I spend time trying to develop solidarity in a local setting with a Muslim. And it's something as simple as seeing that they are good people that makes you realise, “Well, maybe Islam's not so bad, either.” And then I began to see some really interesting processes of bricolage, like out-and-out atheists talking about how they were inspired by the story of Mohammed. And they would even talk about him as the “first community organiser”, for instance. So I found that really interesting. And then I get onto this idea of solidarity centres. So it's actually the notion that the state will create these liberal spaces in which people of very different backgrounds come together to intentionally explore their ideas of how the world should be. And then, acting on that together: “Right. Ok, this is how the world should be. What are some policies, or things going on in our community that are stopping that from happening?” And that might be something like low wages, high house prices, or whatever, and then working together to solve those problems.

CC: Excellent. Well thanks for that fantastic introduction to the topic and, indeed, overview of the book. It really resonates with me, I can remember sitting with . . . you know there is this really

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common idea, particularly in the UK, that politics and religion don't go together, you know. What was it? [Alastair Campbell: "We don't do God"](#). (10:00) And I can remember last semester, at Edinburgh, in a course on Religion in Modern Britain, sitting with my students in a tutorial and they were talking about whether a Muslim politician should be expected to act as a Muslim or to represent their constituents. And they all seemed to think that they shouldn't be bringing religion into it, at all. And I tried to push and push: "But what other normative ways do we allow politicians to act" And they were: "gender", "race", "political party", right? We have this conceit that they represent their whole constituency but they also have the sacred ideals of their political party that they hold higher than everything else. (Laughs).

TS: Absolutely.

CC: *So, that's just a little riff! So going right back to the beginning, then – in the book it was, maybe, 2011 when your research process was starting. How did you get into this massive area of research? And what pushed you?*

TS: Well, yes. It was actually an incredibly strange and exciting journey for me. So, going back to Nottingham – I don't know how well you know that university, but we'd have a lot of theological seminars in the staff club lounge, around leather armchairs. And that was my introduction to academia – talking about Alisdair Macintyre, and virtue ethics, and [John Milbank](#), and theses radical critiques of modernity. And I was very excited by them. But as I said, I was troubled. And I wanted to work out, "Ok, is this relevant?" And I thought social science was the best way of working that out. But I was a theologian. So I arrived in London and my supervisor starts talking to me about this thing called "data".

CC: (Laughs)

TS: "You need to go out and get data." "Hmm, what is data, exactly?" And I spent a lot of time reading different kind of research methods books, and trying to understand exactly how I was going to explore this question of the link between transcendence and solidarity in a religiously plural society. But then, while that was happening – and this is a bit weird now! It kind-of matches with the personal: I've grown up all around the world, and I've never had any particular home. So when I was living in London for the first time, being in a place for more than a few years, I was thinking very hard to myself about what does it mean to be a part of my local community? And as I was simultaneously thinking about those two things – on the one hand data, and on the other my own desire to be involved in the community – the London riots happened. And I thought, "You know what? This is amazing.

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This is a great opportunity for me to be involved in the process of rebuilding Tottenham”, which is sort of where I was living – in response to this. So I came across this group called [London Citizens](#), who wanted to do a citizens enquiry into the Tottenham riots. They basically do these things called “listening campaigns”, where they go out and basically ask members of the public: what is the main problem that you and your family face? That’s the first question. And the second question is always, what can you . . . and us – what can we together do about this? So it’s not like, “Ok what are your problems and shall we write to the local politician and tell them about it?” It’s “Let’s do something together. Let’s take direct action.” And it just suddenly clicked in my head. I was thinking about this word solidarity so theoretically. And then here were some people actually living it out, developing solidarity in a very real way, in my local area. And my first thought, really, when that happened was to say to myself, “Why am I even bothering to study this? I should just be doing it!”

CC: *Yes.*

TS: “I might as well just quit the PhD!” Then it occurred to me that actually taking action in this way could be my data. And I’d been reading stuff about post-secularity. And I realised London Citizens really is a kind of post-secular group. They’re a group that recognised the important role of religion in the public sphere. They, themselves, are somewhat inspired by a faith narrative, but the majority of the key organisers were non-religious. And so the way that they were able to so openly navigate faith and non-faith, and bring people together, was really exciting to me. (15:00) And then I thought, “You know what? The best way to explore the possibility for solidarity in this society that’s simultaneously Christian and secular and post-secular, is to work with a group that indicatively represents each one of those paradigms.” So then I started thinking, “OK, what are the key post-War paradigms for developing a sense of solidarity?” And you have, initially, the very strong connection between Christianity and the setting up of the welfare state. So I took one group that I felt represented that, which was at the time called the [Christian Socialist Movement](#), but now is called [Christians on the Left](#). Then I thought the next phase was secular ways of doing this, and in particular, a lot of money was being pumped into councils for voluntary service. So I started working with them, representing my secular organisation. Then in the ‘90s and early 2000s you had the multi-faith policy paradigm. So I thought, “OK, I need a group that represents that.” And then, going back to the start, London Citizens became my post-secular organisation. And that’s the story of how I got there.

CC: *Excellent. And on the notion of post-secular, listeners, do check out our [previous interview](#) with [Kevin Gray](#) about that. I mean I think that you would agree with me as well, Tim, that it’s a problematic notion – the concept of post-secular.*

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TS: Absolutely, and indeed my current supervisor [Lori Beaman](#) insists that I stop using it! So . . .

CC: *Well, it's here to stay, perhaps! OK. And you organise the book then along these . . . you've got these three sections really, I guess, looking at pluralistic contexts, and then the state, these organisations, and then also capitalism. And any of those would be interesting to expand upon, but perhaps let's think about this place of the notion of myth and transcendence. And then, maybe sort-of weave in these three strands.*

TS: Mmm.

CC: *So basically, one of your arguments is that these organisations all have varying relationships with the idea of transcendence and the construction of myth. So maybe you could just introduce the organisations there, to tell us about them and their relationship to this?*

TS: Yes, OK. I mean the word myth, I primarily introduce – and I don't know how helpful it really is . . . What I was ultimately critiquing there was the sort of [Habermasian](#) notion that we are primarily motivated rationally. And, by introducing the term myth, I was trying to demonstrate the parity between religious and non-religious ways of relating to the world. So in doing that I then felt that I was able – by cutting through this kind of religious/secular binary – I was then able to start thinking about the role of the state as something very different: as not something that has to separate religion from politics, but instead can relate more reflexively towards the notion of myth.

CC: *Yes. Throughout you use this phrase, “religious/secular, mythic/rational binary”. That's your thing. So, yes, what's going on there?*

TS: Yes. So what I'm trying to say, basically, is that we end up having this notion that the religious is primarily mythic and the secular is primarily rational. And what I was trying to say is that both the religious and secular have very strong mythic elements to them. Primarily, I was not doing that as a means of . . . There's a lot of research trying to demonstrate that religious belief can in fact be far more rational than we realise. I was, actually, trying to go the other way round and say that secularity can be a lot more mythic than we realise. And I wasn't doing that in any way to put down secular people or secularity, but rather to say, “Well if we are primarily motivated through myth then we're really missing a trick in how we motivate secular people.” (20:00) If we simply assume that they're motivated by rationality alone, then we miss out on one of the most powerful ways of making people act in the world. And then you get back to the whole argument about Brexit and Trump and so on, which is that if we forget the role of mythic narrative in motivating people, then they become very

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vulnerable to just anyone who's able to spin a good myth.

CC: *And all you end up with is talking about economics and security, as you argue. Could give an example, maybe, of the kind of . . . So we can all think of, I guess, a religion-related myth, perhaps. But what sort of – for want of a better word – secular myths are people motivated by?*

TS: Well, one of these myths is actually the notion of the self-independent rational actor itself, right? Because that is a story that people are living by, primarily. It's not actually this . . . In some sense, there's this kind-of subtraction narrative to the understanding of secular identity that says: it's an identity that is short of religious elements. But instead, what I'm trying to suggest is that secular people do live by myths, and rationality itself is one of those. And another one, for instance, is that of capitalism: the idea that says people are primarily motivated by financial incentive. So, basically, what the research seems to suggest is that there are clear secular myths, but these are primarily ones I feel that aren't intentionally constructed by secular people. So they might be myths of rationality or myths of capitalism. And what I'm trying to explore now is: OK - but what are those deep, more intentionally constructed myths that can challenge a purely instrumental notion of politics or economics? In Vancouver it's really interesting, because that's coming from a lot of different places. So there's myths of earth-based spirituality – the sense that I, as a person, am intimately related to the world in the same way . . . there. This stuff wouldn't necessarily work in London at all, but it's very much derived from indigenous mythology as well. So the people don't see themselves as any more important than the orca in the Pacific Ocean, for instance, or the salmon. So those myths – the telling of the stories of the orca and the salmon – actually become really important ways of challenging an instrumental approach to the land and the environment. So you have otherwise entirely secular people arguing against the construction of a pipeline, for instance, because of salmon. And at first, I have to say, I actually giggled a bit when I started getting these findings. Because it was just so out of context for what I'd grown up around in London and for what had come out of my previous research. But as I've been doing this ethnographic research there – and it's always, as in this this book, very auto-ethnographic as well – I try and really immerse myself in the stories of people I'm studying. And, yes. Now I've come to be inspired by these stories of whales and salmon, and how they might be transformative in challenging a particular idea of, say, growth.

CC: *Yes. And I imagine one could also, you know, even just thinking of what you get in the Marvel films – there's a lot of myth in popular culture, as well, that you probably might easily and interestingly excavate.*

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TS: Absolutely. And people really do integrate that into their stories. It's absolutely not out of place that people will talk to me about a Batman film, or something, when they're trying to explain their belief in . . . I mean, one that comes up quite a lot in Spiderman is that: "With great power comes great responsibility". And it seems almost laughable, in a way. But I think, the way that people sort-of suspend their disbelief in the cinema can be very similar to the way they might do in a church. **(25:00)** And those myths really do have power for people.

CC: *And we're already almost at the end of our time, which is excellent. I mean, not excellent – I just mean we've already covered a lot of ground! So, just to push on this – one of the key arguments I would see from your book is that rather than perhaps trying to find – you know, sitting people down and going "OK, you're a Christian, you're a Muslim, you're an atheist, you're a Buddhist. You're never going to agree on these things, so it's all pointless." So, is the idea that everyone is constructing myths about, I don't know, the better society, the greater good, the way they want things to progress and that by focussing on those, rather than the specifics, it might be a constructive way forward? Or . . . ?*

TS: Yes, that's true. But also there's a very real sense in which I think, those settings need to be intentionally constructed in secular society. That's a part of where my critique comes from. So you look at my analysis of [Hackney CVS](#), for instance, I was suggesting that the secular people there had strong myths based on their parents who might be their heroes, or their colleagues. So their myths, in fact, were just telling the stories of their friends and family. And they were really inspiring and transformative for them. But what I noticed, what there was . . . there were a lack of intentional rituals within that organisation, for bringing those to the surface. And so they failed to really integrate them into their practice, and therefore failed to inspire much enthusiasm. And so, my feeling is that we need to actually deliberately create spaces where people can discuss these things. And so my example, when you talk about bringing Muslims and Jews and atheists together in a room, the best example I came across was the London Citizens. They would ask this very simple question: "We live in the world as it is – but there is a world as it *should* be. Please tell me some words that you associate with the world as it should be."

CC: *Mmm.*

TS: So, that's the first step – that you get people from these very different backgrounds together in a room, recognising: "Oh wow! That guy looks very different to me but, in fact, he seems to want the same idea of the perfect world that I want." So that's the first step. But then – once you've done that –

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you actually encourage people to draw on their own very different, idiosyncratic stories. So once they all recognise that this is the world as it should be, then they can, again, start talking about their particular myths – whether of Islam, or Christianity or of the more secular ones such as of a Socialist utopia, or

CC: *Yes. And I've always found it I remember [Craig Martin](#) made this point in his [Masking Hegemony](#), in 2010, I've always found it very strange that, yes – why would you expect people to be able to bracket off these aspects of their identity? Why not . . . we have this myth of the secular space that people enter and they bracket off . . . but, why not just everyone talk about it, talk about your myths, and talk about where you're coming from? And then we can, maybe, move forward.*

TR: Yes – the thing is though, it's actually a much more honest way of being. Because if I understand where you're coming from, I can actually hold you to account on the basis of that story that you're telling.

CC: *Yes. Just to indulge my curiosity here, listeners, this might go on slightly longer than usual. I've got three more questions I want to ask Tim.*

TS: I'll try and be brief in my answers.

CC: *No, it's good. First, the notion of the sacred here. So I know [Gordon Lynch](#) – in fact we [spoke to Gordon Lynch](#) a number of years ago about this concept – and [Kim Knott](#) and others have developed this notion of like the secular sacred, and things. So where does the role of the sacred – maybe it's a non-ontological, non-religion inflected sacred – fit into the myths and into solidarity?*

TS: Well, for one thing, I totally would have been happy to use the term sacred. (30:00) But I had two issues with that. One was that there was a lot of talk about it being non-negotiable. And I thought, “That's exactly what I want to avoid with transcendence.” Because the very point is that we need people to negotiate. And the other issue is, I felt that a lot of that research was around what's *already* sacred. It would be around pointing out some certain category had become a sacred one. Whereas, I was trying – rather than move backwards in that way – move forwards. So I got into discussions with people doing research around that, including Gordon Lynch and saying, “Well, actually, what I'm thinking about is: how do we develop a new sacred?” And I didn't feel like people were all that interested in that, in those circles. And in that sense, alone, that word became tainted for me. And I wanted to try and think about it slightly differently. But otherwise, yes, it is very, very similar.

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CC: *Yes. They're related. You can see clear overlaps. But clearly again, you're stepping out into uncharted territory. On that note, then: "here at the Religious Studies Project", our sort-of approach would probably map more onto the Critical Study of Religion, and when normativity comes up we tend to bristle a little bit. So, as we've been hearing there, you're an engaged scholar. So, how do you personally navigate that sort of: "I'm doing this work which is – I guess – objective, but also trying to" You know.*

TS: Well, yes. I think, the thing is that I have no qualms about saying that I am personally, and academically, fighting for a world in which there is more solidarity, in which people are willing to do things for one another without necessarily expecting something in return. I'm also quite happy to say that I was saddened by the rise of neoliberalism. And I saw that Christianity was very instrumental to the setting up of the welfare state, initially. And I was asking myself that question: what is that new metanarrative going to be, around which we can create more solidarity, and renew interest in social welfare? But the research itself is objective, in that sense that I'm totally open to what the answer to that may be. And that's constantly evolving. And I think, in my current research, I would slightly challenge some of the assumptions that I had in the previous. But it's all this objective, social scientific, critical research that interested me in religion in the first place. Because I'm only interested in religion incidentally. Because a lot of research seems to be demonstrating that something like religion, or the sacred, or whatever you want to call it, has a powerful effect on a sense of solidarity. So, for me, that's my only very incidental interest in religion. It's: "OK, if that's true, then what does that look like in a society where none of us believe the same things anymore?"

CC: *And my final question was going to be, what was the broader relevance of this to the academic study of religion? But I think you've just actually summarised that quite neatly in your final statement there. Unless you want to have a final push?*

TS: Well the only thing I would say, without wanting to be preachy, is that I think there is a real danger that we can get stuck behind this social scientific lens that says, "I'm not allowed to be normative" when, in reality, we have to recognise the very things we choose to research are guided by our own normative principals. So I think, in the dangerous world that we currently live in, it's time for academics to step up and say, "This is what I believe in, and I'm willing to work towards bringing it about."

CC: *Exactly. And in your own work as well, what you're doing is not proposing a definitive: "This is the objective reality." It's: "We're building" And you've expanded upon your own research. And*
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you've changed your ideas. And we're all part of a process, moving towards whatever . . . perfection – let's say it!

TS: (Laughs)

CC: *Well it's been a pleasure speaking to you, Tim. Thanks, so much.*

TS: (35:00) Thanks, so much, for having me on.

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

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