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Situating Religion within Justice

Podcast with **Joseph Bulbulia** (7 May 2018).

Interviewed by **Thomas White**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

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Thomas White **(TW)***: Kiaora! And, once again, a warm welcome from the Otago University recording studios, down here in New Zealand's South Island. Today, I'm joined by Professor Bulbulia, who yesterday evening delivered his Albert Moore Memorial Lecture, part of a series of lectures running this year to celebrate 50 Years of Religious Studies at Otago University. Professor Joseph Bulbulia is the Maclaurin Goodfellow Chair of Religious Studies at Auckland University, and has been a prominent figure in the study of Religion in New Zealand for the last 17 years. Joe received his PhD from Princeton, is widely regarded as one of the pioneers of the contemporary evolutionary study of religion, and has – what seems to me, at least – a vertiginous list of journal publications under his belt. He is also a co-editor for the journal* Religion, Brain and Behaviour*. A lot of Joe's research grapples with what we might call "big data". It often involves assembling teams that are interdisciplinary in nature and typically involves members who are highly skilled in quantitative methods and computer modelling. Joe's research has included work on the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study, which is a 20-year longitudinal study tracking over 15,000 New Zealanders each year, as well as the Pulotu Project which works from a purpose-built data base of 116 Pacific cultures designed to investigate the evolutionary dynamics of religion. Joe is also a damn-good long distance runner! Joe – thank you for agreeing to this interview, and welcome to the Religious Studies Project!*

Joseph Bulbulia (**JB**): Thanks, Tom. And thanks for the generous introduction. Really generous – especially when it comes to the running!

TW: *(Laughs). I've seen your times – they're terrifying! Now, Joe, the title of your Moore Memorial Lecture last night was "Religious Studies in New Zealand: The last 20 years" (Or, I should say: "The last 20 years?" because it's got a question mark on the end, hasn't it?) which reflected on the*

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trajectory and prospects of Religious Studies in New Zealand. But I was hoping we could begin with how you started the lecture, which was to cage your understanding of religion within a concept of justice. You said, and I quote: "I call religion and spirituality those features of nature," and we're talking about nature as a biology and culture criteria or definition, "that combine to cultivate a sense of justice in people." Can you please explain to our listeners what this means?

JB: Well every enquiry begins with a starting point, obviously. And I start with this question of how it is that we come to think about the debts we have to others, the obligations and duties we have to the people around us – friends, family, community members, colleagues, country, world, environment – and as well as the conceptions of what is owed to us as an individual as a citizen, as a parent, as a son, a husband or wife, a colleague. And I want to understand how it is that we have these capacities. All of us – or nearly all of us – have some sense of what we ought to do, and what we are owed. And when we look to the history of humans at any scale we see that there are institutions, beliefs, practices, texts, stories, habits which combine in ways we still don't really understand to cultivate these sensibilities. And this marks human beings from other species. It is a unique – at least at the level to which we express it – unique capacity in people. Also, when we look to history, we see that in the midst of these conceptions – or at the foundation of these conceptions – are beliefs about what we owe the gods, or a god, or the ancestors, or our traditions, and what we ought to do in the light of those obligations – and of course, also, what the gods owe us or give to us. And that's part of every culture, or nearly every culture. And it sits side by side with a whole lot else to cultivate a sense of obligation and respect. And I put those together into a larger concept that I call justice. (**5:00**) In the past there was a more sophisticated language involving virtue, which would decompose justice into elements. We've lost most of those elements of that older language. But I think most people can understand that justice sensibility. And I think what happens, if we don't start at that point, we can't even make sense of our commitments to the various projects and people and institutions that occupy so much of our efforts in life. So I begin there. And I think there are various advantages to beginning there, which we I imagine will talk about in the course of this interview.

TW: *Ok. So the idea, here, is that we need to embed our understanding of religion and religious practices within a foundation of this kind-of broader ethical environment that we all need to understand our cultural practices within.*

JB: That's right. Why is religion and spirituality interesting? And in my thinking, why is it just not optional as a topic to study? Why might it be among the very most important topics that we should be

investigating? Why are so many people around the world becoming interested in supporting research into this? Well it's because there is an emerging recognition that the element of belief and ritual which even to religious and ritual-practising people might seem strange – practices like piercing yourself; a ceremony venerating a god you don't believe in might look very strange; or a set of institutions that look to be completely inefficient and non-productive – churches and temples and mosques – they look to be marginal; and outside of those traditional institutions sports and music and perhaps entertainment, or the barbie – these kind of informal practices; the dawn celebration in New Zealand, where we recognise and reflect on an appalling defeat in which a generation of young men were lost, doesn't make any kind of sense unless we begin to see these practices as part of those elements which have combined to give us the kind of sensibilities that we have regarding our responsibilities and obligations to others. And once we begin to understand how those things come together . . . . They don't always come together in ways that are moral or ethical. So I might have a conception of justice or obligation or right that is morally vicious, that supports slavery, or supports genocide. But if that's so, I really want to begin to understand how it is that those beliefs, practices and vicious conceptions were propagated. Now, throughout the tradition of Western thought and Eastern thought there are philosophers, and theologians, and historians who are reflecting on these practices and beliefs, and presenting opinions and arguments about how we ought to reconfigure them, in our own day, to enable a virtuous society and community. And I think that it is important to begin the study of religion with that conception of justice. Because when we start with the concept of belief, which is certainly vital to understanding justice for so many people, it's because we have responsibilities and obligations to the god or a god that we are called upon to act in the way we do. If we begin with belief, initially it might seem as if there's some binary division of people: you believe or you don't. Well that doesn't make sense of these religious communities where there are debates about how we ought to respond in the light of our obligations to a god, or the gods, or the ancestors. And those debates are impossible to make sense of, with that kind of binary division. It makes it seem as if there's a great difference, and gap, between people who are not themselves committed to any god or don't believe in any god, or spirit, or ancestor, or tradition, and those who do. It makes it seem as if that gap is relevant to understanding people's sense of justice. A wonderful – and very influential on me – series of lectures were given by my former supervisor Jeffrey Stout at Princeton University. (**10:00**) He gave the 2007 Gifford lectures, where he goes into great detail documenting how it is that secular and religious people have stood hand-in-hand against secular and religious people on major issues of social justice. And his focus, throughout that lecture, is mostly on slavery. You can't even make sense of abolitionism without understanding how it is that conceptions of justice varied within secular and

religious communities. I'm very interested in that.

TW: *Yes. I mean when you presented this idea, the first thing I thought was: "Oh, Marx wouldn't like this," – obviously, seeing religion as the opium of the people and an ideology that keeps the poor people down.*

JB: Yes.

TW: *In terms of thinking about the way that religious and secular organisations sit on both sides of that fence, you've obviously got Liberation Theology, which obviously incorporates Marx and would very much present religion from that kind of ethical, social justice viewpoint.*

JB: Absolutely. And in Jeff's lectures, if I can make a plug for them – they aren't published yet, but when they are I hope that people look out for them – he looks at those examples, going back to Lucretius on *The Nature of Things*. So there's a long tradition of people who have argued that religion is inherently unethical; it's inherently enslaving of the mind; it's a coil around the mind that must be loosed. And there is a tradition of thought going through Nietzsche and Marx and Feuerbach that presents that view and, of course, may explain many features of religious culture of religious institutions. It might be enslaving of the mind. They can give rise to appalling forms of injustice around us. I don't want to exempt . . . I don't want to claim that religious people are just, and secular people are unjust – it's quite the opposite. It's really to focus on those histories and to understand, in my own work, scientifically, how it is that these – in local settings and global settings, there are various scales where the project remains the same – how is it that culture and biological nature…? How is it that nature gives rise to these different forms? And I begin with the concept of justice, also, because it makes sense of the commitments of scientists. Scientists aren't outside of this. We have our set of ideas about what ought to be done: what people deserve in the light of their dignity, in the light of their possibilities. We have conceptions of the relevance of science in the curriculum. We believe that it is enriching of people's lives; that they are owed that possibility. So without beginning there, we can't even make sense of ourselves, I think. And I think most people can have a very clear understanding of . . . any time someone hasn't returned an object they've borrowed, or has turned up late for an appointment, or hasn't responded to an email, we might have a sense of not receiving something we were owed. Any time we feel guilty for forgetting to do something – forgetting to return an email, or to arrive on time – we have an understanding of a relationship that's been breached. This emerges through a series of very natural experience: I owe you something because you've done something for me. And it's not magical. Our parents. . . . For many people, parents have given us a set

of conditions that we ought to respond to with a sense of acknowledgement. The people around us help us in ever so many ways. We should be grateful for that, because of the help. It's nothing magical, it's nothing . . . . And what are the differences within religious communities, and between religious communities? Well you have different conceptions of how the world is. I have an obligation to my ancestors and I imagine them as still present with me. Maybe they are still present? I don't know. We don't make those assumptions in the work I do. But nor do we merely discount them as superstition. We want to just see how it works, in the first instance.

TW: *OK. Great. I think we've covered some of the ground that was going to relate to my next question, but we've talked about how, perhaps with Religious Studies, we need to move from a framing context of belief to a framing context of justice. But maybe we could also talk about a little bit of the evolutionary study of religion – of which you are a pioneer, or founder . . .?*

JB: Well, that's nice! On the role of Religious Studies, I think it has been a place where many disciplines have come together, and organised their methods and capacities, to explain features of how religions work, what they do for people (**15:00**). Ranging from ethnography – highly local, interview-based qualitative research – to what we're beginning to see now: very broad-scale historical database projects that are looking at the level of societies. You can't even begin to think about the people in them. And Religious Studies is interesting because it's been interdisciplinary before that was fashionable, or before people understood why that was interesting. It's a nice model for work that can be done: the capacity for work of teams that are united by a set of questions, and have a different set of skills and capacities within the team, to address a specific question. You need to know what your question is first, then you assemble the team and address it. And, for most of history of the discipline of Religious Studies, those teams have been composed of Humanities folk, and Sociologists and some Psychologists. And we're beginning to see a shift into the natural sciences, the biological sciences, neuroscience, and very large environmental ecological databases combining with these sort of interests to address questions of how religious cultures have affected human history. But Religious Studies has been a place that's taken many disciplines together and I see that happening in the future. Whether we call it Religious Studies or something else is less interesting to me. The reason to keep the word religion and to include the word spirituality is because it acknowledges the role of beliefs and rituals respecting Gods. And that seems to be a part of the human condition. It's a part of New Zealand society. And I think it needs to be included in the conversation. So then, thinking about evolution, and the role of evolutionary biology within that interdisciplinary framework – the life sciences from the time of Darwin and after, with the great integration of population genetics and evolutionary dynamics,

and later the work of broad scale ecological studies – we see a unifying framework in which to place the work of people who are doing very different things. From describing the flora of a particular island environment – descriptivists – with population geneticists who are trying to work out the small scale phenomena that give rise to mechanisms and processes that kind of give rise to the diversity of life across regions, to, increasingly, neuroscientists and chemists. We have biophysicists, now, who are involved in this mix, looking at this emergence of life from physics. All of that has . . . all the great achievements in the biological sciences have taken place because there is a kind of unifying framework in which to place the different work. And that framework is beginning to be adopted within the human sciences, and within the study of humans. And the great challenge ahead is to integrate the work of historians and cultural scholars, anthropologists, into a framework that sees their work as contributing to a gradual cumulative understanding of how people are. So we've seen a gradual cumulative understanding of how cells work, for example, through the efforts of many people working over many decades. And they will be working over many centuries and probably still not get very far, but get somewhere! That hasn't happened in the study of humans. We have . . . some of the brightest people I know are in the Humanities; master many languages; understand a breadth of literature that takes decades, takes a lifetime to master; have these skills and contribute understanding – and then it's lost. It just is sitting there in some book. It hasn't figured in part of a larger organising framework of inference about how it is that people are (**20:00**). And so that's the kind-of great challenge of getting these people in . . . . Linking them with the scientists who are able to do inference but don't know anything about people, and to achieve some cumulative – or, I guess, framework for cumulative incremental improvement of understanding about people. That's the challenge that's ahead of us for the next several decades, and I'm very optimistic that those problems will be tackled. It's just the rate at which the achievements occur. I've been impressed by how fast things have changed. So, you describe me as pioneer – I think in graduate school I was a fairly average student and considered a bit weird and flaky. I was lucky to get a job here. And when I got here I was lucky to have colleagues who were tolerant of me just pursuing questions after my own fashion, but a bit ahead of others. And so that put me at an advantage when it came to the kind of broader global interest in religion, in linking science with the study of religion. I just happened to be kind-of doing that because of the freedoms afforded to me in Graduate School and then when I got to New Zealand.

TW: *Tying in with the use of scientific methods to study religion, and of course this other idea of religion being situated within a narrative of justice – or understanding the role of religion within narratives of justice – it very much reminded me of some of the studies that you mentioned in your*

lecture last night, exploring religion and altruism, and religion and empathy. Can you tell us a little bit about the work that you've done on those themes?

JB: Well, I guess I've used these words – altruism, sometimes the word pro-sociality is used, empathy is a word that comes up – when we're thinking about how people are bound together. But it's very important to remember that some of the tightest bonds that people experience are when they're combatting others. So I don't want to paint a picture of human history as one of a great emergence of impressive, empathetic response to other people. That melts down all the time. And we see history moving in cycles of achievement and then collapse. And with massive ambitiousness throughout, that is supported through religious cultures and institutions in various places. But why are humans interesting from a scientific point of view? Even abstracting from, maybe, an interest in justice, you might be interested in how it is that people work. What are the programming languages of culture? What are the programming languages that keep societies running? We just simply don't know. So when we begin to take an evolutionary framework we can then identify, in the first instance, what the problems are. Why is it that people would cooperate when it's so risky to do so? Why don't we see cooperation very generally, across the animal kingdoms, except among highly related species of insect – you know, evolutionary time-depth of hundreds of millions of years. Well it's because very specific problems need to be solved: problems about predicting what others are going to do; problems about figuring out the what the motivations of other people are; problems about co-ordinating those motivations at scale, so that people become predictable at scale, at the kind of scales we see where you don't know others – you might not even see the partners that are responsible for the world around you, but you have to kind of trust in them. How does that all get co-ordinated? Then, how does that co-ordination remain robust when it gets perturbed . . . when there is a breakdown of social order? When there a collapse of society, how does it rebuild? Those are the kinds of questions that we can address, very narrowly and specifically, through evolutionary dynamics. First we can characterise the problem. And my early work was mainly theoretical. We characterised the problem – predictive confidence: how can I get predictive confidence from others?

TW: *So what would the actual experiment look like? I mean, what would be the process for testing these kind of questions of thinking?*

JB: Well, once we began . . . Darwin has a great sentence from his autobiography when he's describing walking with naturalist Sedgwick – Darwin was a great . . . Darwin studied theology as an undergraduate, but he loved nature and hung out with biologists (**25:00**). And they were in Cwm

Idwal, and they were walking along the banks of these hills and looking for fossils. And Darwin ignored the great evidence of geological change around him, the boulders that were strewn across the landscape, the terminal and lateral moraines. And he said, "Had the glacier been present, these features would be less obvious," you know?! He used the metaphor of, "A house burned by fire did not tell its story as plainly as did this valley." Had the glaciers been present, it would have been less obvious that they were there. And to make the point that we don't know even what to look for when we begin describing the patterns of cultural and human variation – both historically and culturally, across cultures over history and within cultures, within individuals: so, patterns of variation. We don't even really know what to look for in that variation until we begin to think about . . . Well, in my own work, I became interested in very specific patterns of variation within humans because of a theory about human cooperativeness, by which I mean predicting what others are going to do. So you can co-ordinate your activities to get work done that you could never do alone. That's what we see in people around us. Again, some of that work is quite vicious. It could be war, or it could be murder, and others. How does that happen? Well very specific problems need to be solved. So, evolutionary dynamics for me at least, in the first instance, we're focussing on . . . I've talked in large and perhaps general terms about: how is it that people come together? How do we cooperate? How do we have a sense of justice? Those are very vaguely formulated questions. In science, "how do we fix your teeth?" is a very vaguely formulated question. What it amounts to (and I don't know anything about dental science and I probably shouldn't . . .) but I think it amounts to a very specific set of ideas about how it is that tooth decay . . . . How do teeth work? What are the physical properties? What are the kind of sensitivities to disease, to damage, to breakdown? How do you repair those? What kinds of materials are available? All sorts of very, very . . . . Does this material work better than gold, or lead, or whatever it is that they used to put . . . ceramic materials? You get these kind of very, very narrow questions when you start doing science. In fact, science becomes laser-like in its focus. So we had these questions about cooperation. How is it that people can predict others? And that led to a series of questions about specific ritual behaviour. So, does moving together in synchrony – in coordinated body responses – which we see across many rituals, for example, military marching . . . ? We see patterns of highly coordinated activity, and we see descriptive responses of people feeling more at one with each other. We have whole ethnographies written and devoted to these topics. Emile Durkheim, the founder of modern anthropology and sociology, is arguing that people come together in rituals to become united. So we began to look at these features of body movement. And then, when you begin to test them in very first experimental conditions – moving together, or moving randomly, or moving in anti-coordinated patterns – you begin to see, through a series of interventions, do people become more

cooperative? Do they tend to volunteer more with each other? Do they become more cooperative in their predictions of what others are going to do? And through a series of efforts, again led by my PhD students, we began to try to break those features down. And we could see a synchronous movement, in combination with goal structures, and in actual human ecologies in New Zealand – we were looking at religious groups. They tend . . . people who do that kind of thing tend to be more cooperative with each other. That gives us a sense of: "Wow! This stuff that looks to be completely incidental and marginal has a utility in solving some of these key questions that need to get solved for people to become cooperative!" Well, why is that important? Because what's the first budget to get cut when a budget comes under pressure. It the budget for those things that look marginal. You know, you cut the mid-morning run, or the tea, or the kind of community-making efforts because they look to be fringe, you know: "We still have to meet our targets." What's the consequence of that? Can you begin to see the gradual erosion of social order when you begin to perturb these things that look to be completely incidental and marginal? (**30:00**) So that was some of the work we were doing at the level of individuals. In other work, I think you've mentioned both New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study and the Pulotu Dastabase. I'll talk about the Values Study later, but Pulotu – a Royal Society of New Zealand supported project and also the Templeton Foundation – the Pulotu database was created led by Russell Gray and Joseph Watts and Oliver Sheehan who were all at Auckland at that time. And it was a purpose-built database of Pacific religious diversity, to try to develop a capacity for testing questions about how the cultural variation of the Pacific, which emerged very recently over 6000 years, came together to . . . . Are the patterns of variation across the Pacific consistent with specific models of what religion is doing for people? So that's what we did.

TW: *OK. Great. And you also mentioned the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study. So it seems that you've kind of got this double prong. You've got the kind of laboratory analysis of how synchronised movements can feed into greater levels of altruism, or cooperative cooperation, between groups. But you're also doing big data work. You've talked about the Pulotu, but the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Survey: I'm very interested to hear about the problems of big data research, or kind-of . . . what new light is that shedding on the study of religion, when we use these big data sets?*

JB: So, this was a project that was started by my collaborator, Chris Sibley, in 2009. And it's a project that was not created to study religion and is not primarily about religion. It's a general, broad, social-psychological and health survey of New Zealanders that is given to the same New Zealanders each year, over time. And Chris started it to better understand how it is that changes in attitudes and values, and stability in those patterns, affect employment, health, community growth, prejudice: those

standard social-psychological issues. And I do some work in that study related to religion: how do beliefs, and how do practices, affect people over time? And we say "big data", but each one of the individuals there is a human being that's donating some time to kind-of tell us about themselves each year. And when I think about this subject, I just think about the amazing number of individual human beings that are willing to tell us about themselves. And through that capacity we are able to understand how, for example, how natural disasters affect people. And how do people become resilient after them? What are the factors that drive that? The most important limitation of large studies, or scientific studies at any scale, is that it gives us inference. It gives us some scope of improved understanding with error bars around it: this might be happening, it might not be happening. We're trying to kind-of shrink the error bars and improve our ideas about these parameters, or these questions that we'll never really get at. So science does something. I think that's a really important think to know about it. Even in big data we get lots of information about people. We're understanding history now like it's never been understood before, by tracking it, by recording it at the level of individuals. It couldn't happen before very recently. We're giving them the questions and still we're having a hard time figuring out how it is that . . . . So, for example, why is it that the country is becoming more nationalistic? Why is it, at the same time, becoming more committed to equality for women? These kinds of questions have some explanation. But we don't get that from the data. We still have to use our minds to think of theories, we still need to talk to people. And it's highly limited. For all the money, and effort, and time, we get some improved understanding – but not a lot! But it's better than nothing. So I think cumulative understanding in science is worthwhile. It's a frustrating and slow process. In longitudinal data the changes that take place in your life can change – and this is really decade-long stuff, you know? It takes a while: you have a kid, the kid grows up, you get married, you get divorced. Those sorts of things happen to people over a very long time. And you need a lot of people to really get an understanding of how that works. (**35:00**) So I feel like, although we've been going nine years now, that project, really . . . the big benefits of that project will be maybe a decade away.

TW: *OK. So we've talked about the more kind-of laboratory psychology of religion and the way that religion can inculcate cooperation; we've talked about religion within the narrative of justice; and we've spoken briefly about the big data, kind-of large quantitative analysis that can feed a more society-wide understanding of religious trends in New Zealand. The Study of Religion in the next 20 years? How would you try and distil those experiences of research . . .?*

JB: Well, our crystal balls are a bit dirty! There've been wonderful opportunities to conduct natural science and scientific psychological research in this country – a lot of it happening at Otago. I see

more of that in the years ahead. I see a tighter integration of this research with the work of historians here, and of humanities scholars – mostly younger, I suspect: the rising generation as they get curious and have questions that they see they can contribute to. I see more collaborative work that characterises the study in the sciences and less individual-type emphasis in the Study of Religion. And more teamwork, and increasingly across universities. So it won't be just Otago that's doing it, or Victoria, or Auckland. We'll begin to see these institutions appear that sit between these universities. I think that would be very healthy for New Zealand. And hopefully, also, with some more applied work of the kind you're doing. We need to get the message out, we need to clarify what that message is, and we need to inform people about questions they might find interesting, like: how is it that you get resilient after an earthquake? That's maybe something that people would want to know. How do you overcome? What are the strategies and affordances of community for overcoming personal disasters and tragedies, losses, and so forth? Those are questions people have. How do you have a good life? That's what we want to begin to understand, and then convey.

TW: *And perhaps a very good question to finish on as well. Thank you very much for your time Professor Bulbulia.*

JB: Thank you. It's been lovely to be here.

TW: *Thank you.*

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