S1E5: Transcript

The fourth in a special, 5-part Covid 19 conversation series

with Joseph Bulbulia

Spirituality, Belonging, & the Pandemic Response

Tava Gilbert: Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm producer Tavia Gilbert. In every episode of this podcast, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you a conversation about the newest scientific research on human flourishing, and how what those studies uncover is translated into practical tools.

This episode is the fourth in our five-part special series focusing on Covid-19. Today Richard is talking with Professor Joseph Bulbulia about the role of religion and spirituality during the pandemic, and the deep importance of a sense of worth and belonging in living a healthy and meaningful life, not only, but especially, during times of crisis.

Joseph Bulbulia: I'm Joseph Bulbulia, and I'm a professor at the University of Auckland, and I hold the McLaurin Goodfellow chair there in the School of Humanities in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. I'm affiliated to the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History in Germany, which is about as far as you can go from New Zealand.

Richard Sergay: So our topic today for Stories of Impact is cooperation during and in the pandemic. First of all, tell us about your studies of cooperation and what you're finding in terms of cooperation during Covid-19.

Joseph Bulbulia: Well, my interest in cooperation has been related to my interest in religion. Religion is an ancient and enduring dimension of the human condition. And I'm interested in how it is that religious modes of existence, modes of interaction and worship and teaching come together in different ways to facilitate within group cooperation. And that can be for the purposes of all sorts of things, charity and mutual assistance, and also for the purposes of war and, you know, intergroup violence. So religion is never one thing, it's never good or bad in its effects, never one thing in its effects, but very often religious cultures can bind people together into larger cooperative

units, internally cooperative units. So that's been my interest in, I guess, cooperation. And of course, because it is so variable, that takes me into history to understand the conditions in which it supports generally beneficial outcomes and the conditions in which it supports outcomes that we would think of as immoral or disastrous in some cases.

Richard Sergay: So before we turn to the pandemic, help me understand that connection between cooperation and religion. One may not immediately connect the two, but you have and have studied it for decades. So help me understand that connection.

Joseph Bulbulia: I think when I first started out in the biological study of religion, people were thinking of religious beliefs as the totality of kind of how we are religious. And they tended to think of these beliefs, as some people call them viruses of the mind, they're just replicating ideas. They have certain appeal and certain properties, which make them transmit. And that never, that was never very plausible for me, because I came at religion from the vantage point of someone who had grown up in a very religious community. I'm Roman Catholic, and I always had looked at the example of my parents and had seen wow, they're really doing quite a lot of work with other people in the community. And a lot of that work wouldn't get done otherwise. My mother was out there helping out people who were sick, uh, and had no one to visit them, and people who were poor and had no mode of even feeding their families at different times. This was the 1970s in Buffalo, New York, which was encountering a very severe recession.

That didn't resonate with me at all. And as I began to study biology and psychology in more detail, I began to understand that what gets conserved within a lineage or species tends to have functional properties. You know, sometimes we conserve things that are just accidental, but when we look at religion and the long duration of human existence, so we're not thinking about even the history of Christianity or Buddhism. Human beings have been around in their modern anatomical form for at least say 200,000 years. When we go back into the archeological records, at no point do we find evidence of humans without some kind of evidence of symbolic, imaginative, other-worldly culture. Well, that suggests a very strong conservation. It suggests it's doing something for us. And so my interest then became to understand, well, what could it be doing?

And I began to focus on, you know, the different theories and the theories that were most plausible to me were theories related to how religion affects behavior, how it helps us to become more predictable and more cooperative, and also more focused on a wider perspective than the here and now. So for example, when we're dealing with pandemics and immediate emergency, the natural response is to think about my own interest here and now, and to lose sight of a bigger picture. But when we have a bigger picture in mind, we can understand that pandemics come and go. They have throughout the course of human history. Now, what can help us get through it so that we recover in a way that will prepare us to move on and to rebuild? Well, that kind of perspective is very much this worldly and religion combines those two elements—an other-worldly element, which is a transcendent perspective with a whole lot of this-worldly focus.

And when I began to look at the mechanisms of religious culture, we begin to understand, well there are ritual elements, there are elements of mythology, there's authority, there are symbolic elements that enable people to recognize each other's commitments. And all of that has come together in a way that just isn't random, that isn't accidental. And so that led me to build a set of projects or to work on a set of projects, to systematically organize evidence at different scales, ranging from the Pacific—we have a database of Pacific religious cultures, historical database—to really, most of my focus now is on building a data set that encompasses all of my own country of New Zealand and to follow a national sample of people around over the course of their lives and to understand how different aspects of social connection, belief, attitude, personality come together to enable people to be resilient.

And so that, you know, that's a kind of long story, but it began with an interest in religion and that connection to cooperation, and what it's then taken me to is a whole set of activities to collect data and to systematically organize it so that we can apply the methods and tools of the natural biological and social sciences to really understand how those elements come together to affect people.

Richard Sergay: So we're now a number of months into this global pandemic. Tell me, first of all, what cooperation means in the pandemic, and perhaps how your understanding of it has changed over the last number of months.

Joseph Bulbulia: Well, I haven't looked directly at religion in my data sets yet, because we are just collecting data on the fly, through the pandemic. The way in which our national study has been set up to understand attitudes and values and beliefs, it's to take data at the end of the year, systematically organize it, link it to pass data sets so that we can really sure that everything is organized and in place, but because the pandemic creates, I guess, a demand for understanding, "Hey, what's working for people now? What's stressing people out? What's enabling their adaptation?," we've been busy at work, looking at just our online sample and then trying to determine how the online sample might be biased in different ways and to adjust for that. And during that process, we've been investigating real basic questions. You know, how is it that people are adjusting in their own levels of stress to the pandemic in my country?

So New Zealand right now, and we are into middle June, is doing pretty well on the pandemic front. We managed to for 24 days, eliminate the virus. It's now back with us, but it's transmitting at a very low rate. And it's back through external travel, you know, travelers coming back, and most of them are in quarantine. So we have a kind of grip on it, but that wasn't the, at the beginning of March. New Zealand was experiencing an attack of the virus that was similar to the early attack that we were seeing overseas. In the United States at the beginning of March, there were a handful of cases. And similarly, we had our first case at the end of February. So we began to see the beginnings of what was the geometric growth in the infection rate in the beginning of March into the middle of March. And what we responded very early and rapidly with was a very severe lockdown.

So New Zealand, you know, was combining the health uncertainty of a pandemic with the economic uncertainty of a total lockdown and you know, desisting of all but essential economic activities in a situation where the country is very precariously located, is an Island in the Pacific that relies intimately on trade with other countries, in particular, you know, Asian countries—China, Singapore, also Australia, our major trading partner, the United States, the UK. All of that was becoming highly destabilized. So we were in a freakout mode that was, you know, pretty substantial at the beginning of our very strenuous social and economic lockdown. But we had one key difference, that we have a huge amount of institutional trust in our country. And related to this was a high level of

compliance and cooperative willingness on the part of citizens to help government and government to help citizens to get through this.

Richard Sergay: So practically, what did that look like?

Joseph Bulbulia: Well, what it looked like in terms of our behaviors, um, I was completely isolated with my nine year old daughter. I share custody of her in Wellington, and that meant for me seeing her and no one else in person for, I think it was eight weeks altogether. So that was practically speaking, a very different existence. As I mentioned, I'd been interacting with people throughout the year, getting on airplanes in a state of motion to manage these very large projects, that just stopped. Practically speaking, of course, I think this might be hard to remember for all of us, but we don't even know whether supplies, like toilet paper are going to exist, right? We don't know our food supplies our, you know, people were making a run on all of them. There was a constant need to replace stock it supermarkets. So people were definitely in a panic mode here.

And in other respects it was, well, it was easier. It was just getting up and working as I could and interacting with people like I am now on Zoom. So basically that took me into a set of interests about, well, what were the parameters of stress within the country during this time? And very fortunately we had ongoing data collection with the New Zealand attitudes and values study. So during the first three weeks of lockdown, we collected about a thousand responses from people and we had these responses during the lockdown, but we also had them from the year previous that established a set of baselines. You know, memories can be corrupted in all sorts of ways. We can be nostalgic, and we have a hard time representing in clear detail what the pain of suffering is as we're going through it and the stress of it. But here we had a snapshot of people as they're going through this stressful event.

Richard Sergay: And what did you learn?

Joseph Bulbulia: The key lessons were that there was moderate increases in nervousness, fidgetiness, which is sort of related, a sense of hopelessness was up. Surprisingly, well, except when we think about the details, there was a reduction in feelings that everything is an effort, which was quite interesting. So although we were getting movement upwards in nervousness, fidgetiness, hopelessness, there was a reduction in a sense of effort. Nervousness was not up that much. It was more hopelessness

and fidgetiness, that was up. Depression didn't change—well, this is "so depressed nothing could cheer me up." That was encouraging, that we didn't see movement there. But what we did find, and this was absolutely a very, very strong signal. We found a huge, nearly a fourfold increase in feelings of worthlessness.

And so how do I interpret this? Well, we have very strong protections in place from the government and assurances. So immediately people who became unemployed had access to a wage, and they were given a bulk payment for two months immediately. So there were really substantial movements to encourage, you know, banks were allowing mortgage holidays, utility companies were allowing people to defer payments, there were a set of protections in place for those who were renting. And so the financial pressures were off. The virus was increasing geometrically through the end of March and April. So we're seeing numbers of 80, 90, a hundred a day, which for this country, were very large. That's occurring during the context of lockdown. We're getting new cases, right? That is still perpetuating a sense of health uncertainty. But people were in their own homes. They weren't moving, they weren't required to go to work on the whole except for essential workers. And so for the majority of the population that diminished the health uncertainty. But that feeling of worthlessness grew, and it was a very substantial stressor in this country. So we want to know, we have an idea of why that took place.

I did a comparative analysis then with the distress after the Christchurch earthquake. So in 2011, there was a terrible destructive sequence of earthquakes that knocked out nearly half of the city of Christchurch, and it was at that time, the second largest city in New Zealand, was destroyed, leveled, it killed o ver 200 people. And that was in absolute terms, more distressful, but distress increased in every dimension of distress, you know, nervousness, depression, fidgetiness hopelessness, worthlessness, and effort, all of that went up. Okay? But we don't see a huge elevation of worthlessness, as we do during the pandemic. The pandemic here, we find very small increases across the board and then this blast in worthlessness, and also an easing in a sense of effort. So we find a bittersweet dynamic of an easing of mental distress or psychological distress, and then a real attack in this feeling of worthlessness.

So we think that this is related to, well, the two forms of activity that were removed from people's lives. The one is just ordinary employment. So

people were locked in at home and then they weren't working. They didn't have work, well, many didn't. And so we get a sense of worth from, you know, from our work activities, our economic activities. We also get a sense of worth from our social activities, our connections to others. So people who are grandparents, for example, get a sense of value by being able to look after their grandchildren and help out with their families. Well, that was taken away from people. We were just isolated and when we become isolated, but protected, it's very easy to experience a feeling of worthlessness, we discovered. And I began thinking about worthlessness in the connection of, of course, religious organizations. That was taken away, too. All, any form of collective worship, out the window. All you could get, and many churches responded very quickly, were online services. But that's different to being connected with people, that feeling, that buzz of being with people in a social setting was gone. And so that feeling of worth and that feeling of having something to offer, well, isn't that like an essential part of who we are? Isn't it really important to give people that sense that they're valuable, that they have significance? That was something that the government can't give us. You know, they can give us food, they can give us a sense that our bills will be paid. They can give us a sense of health security, but they can't give us a sense of worth and value.

Richard Sergay: I'm curious, did this surprise you in that we know as humans, we are prosocial animals, right?

Joseph Bulbulia: Yeah.

Richard Sergay: And the sense of hopelessness and worthlessness that you're describing reflects an imposed isolation that was quite unique. Yes, there've been pandemics over the centuries, but who would have thunk that we in the 21st century would be going through something like this? So help me understand this sense of social beings and the reintroduction of hope and worth, and perhaps even cooperation.

Joseph Bulbulia: Well, Richard, I think you really put your finger right on something very important, and it's that, when we think of cooperation, we're often thinking about services done for other people. You give me something, I give you something. But here, but we have an insight into is a fundamental need within people to be helpful to others, to be, you know, worthy, you know, to have a sense of worth and value. So part of what it is to have a good culture, a culture in which people are flourishing is to afford others the

opportunity to have worth, to be important, to have a significance for other people. We don't think of that. I don't certainly think of that initially, when I think of cooperation, when I think of cooperation from a biological standpoint, I think of people sacrificing some of their own fitness, you know, for others. But here in the pandemic, we realized that part of what it is to enable a good life for people is to enable them to have a sense of worth, to enable them to be able to give to others and to be productive and to have a sense of importance. That sense of importance is really fundamental to having a good life.

And that's something that we just, you know, we can't count on government for automatically. I don't think that New Zealand's pandemic response could have been better, in the sense that the government really was looking after the people, and the people believed that. I, you know, maybe other governments are trying their best—I think most people are trying best with the pandemic, after their own fashion—but the people in this country were on side. And that kind of cooperative compliance with government was absolutely critical to this suppressing that attack of that first wave. And yet it wasn't enough to give people a sense of worth, and that worthlessness grew. And I have to say, you said, you know what surprised me the magnitude of that growth was very large as well. I wouldn't have picked that. Normally, when we have very large data sets, we get something called regression to the mean. So that means that when you see effects in small studies that occur, these get washed out when you get a lot of data. And to see, you know, over a threefold, almost a fourfold increase in worthlessness, well, that's a very large effect. That's a signal that we want to then begin looking at, because we want to understand, well, what are the long term implications of this for, you know, persistent unemployment that might follow in the wake of the pandemic? Will people be challenged? What are the institutions and relationships that are going to bring people back to having a sense of worth?

Well, we actually did investigate that in the study, so we want to look at, what are the buffers, what are the moderators of that kind of distress? And the business confidence did not moderate that distress flat—whether you were low or high on business confidence, you still experienced a sense of worthlessness. Even people that really thought the economy was going to be okay, they were feeling worthless. At about the level of the people that thought it wasn't going to be okay, right? Psychologists have theorized that having a sense of neighborhood community is a kind of thing that will

get us through and make us feel, you know, less distress. No, even people who had a very high sense of neighborhood community felt similar levels of worthlessness to those who had a very low sense of neighborhood community. That wasn't buffering people from this distress. The two key factors that were important: One was having a satisfaction with health. This health satisfaction tends to be closely related to distress in non-pandemic times. The more satisfied you are with your health, the less distressed you are, it tends to be. So improving health, physical health, is really important. But much more strong than that, in its relationship to buffering feelings of worthlessness, is a sense of social belonging. So this is different from a sense of neighborhood community. That's just like, oh, my neighbors out there, and I feel a sense of community with them. A sense of social belonging is that there are others out there that I can count on. You know, there are others out there who care about me, in a much more intimate sense of connection with other people. Fostering social belonging would be the most important thing you can do in a pandemic response.

Although the feelings of worthlessness were present in people who had the absolute maximum amount of social belonging, they went from nearly a zero probability of saying they're never feeling a sense of worthlessness to about a 50% probability of saying that. At that end of the scale, it's, you're tossing a coin of whether they're saying I'm never feeling worthless, so they're feeling worthless at least a little of the time or some of the time. Very rarely are they feeling it most of the time. We don't find that at the other end of the scale, people who have a low sense of social belonging were feeling much more worthless and they were much more likely to say that they were feeling that some of the time. Okay? So social belonging is very different to business satisfaction, you know, we think of the economy as really fundamental to mental health. That's not what the data suggest. It's that real interpersonal connection—there are people out there that I can count on, there are people that care about me—that kind of sensibility is what we want to foster to help on that front of worthlessness. But that, again, just takes us into a whole set of questions about what does that? What are the institutions and the relationships and forms of economy and social organization that enable people to have belonging? Real belonging, not just this abstract, yeah, I like my country, my neighborhood's okay, but real belonging—there are others out there that care about me.

Richard Sergay: In terms of social belonging, are you finding that those who are more resilient have that connection and cooperation and a better sense of social belonging who are more spiritual and religious than those who, for lack of a better word, are agnostic? I'm curious.

Joseph Bulbulia: Well, no, in New Zealand, we have about 50/50 people who are affiliated with a religion or not affiliated, but that division doesn't carve people at a clear joint. We have people that are highly religiously identified and people who are highly religiously identified tend to be different from others. They tend to be more involved in charitable giving—about five times more giving of their money and over twice as likely to engage in charitable activities. A lot of that is related to church tithing and those kinds of practices and also church activities. But of course, churches can be very efficient charities. Even those churches that I feel ideologically quite opposed to at the level of ideology, those that are not really in favor, I'm very committed to equality for women and for people who are marginal, some of the churches that are really not favorable to that perspective at all are nevertheless most active in charity in my own communities.

So we don't have the data yet on religious commitment and church attendance and those relationships to the various forms of distress that we're measuring, but almost 70% of New Zealanders believe in a spirit or life force. And many New Zealanders are out there practicing a kind of religion after their own fashion. In a separate set of studies that I'm conducting with my colleague, Geoffrey Troughton at Victoria University, we're looking at Christians who declare no faith, right? Who aren't part of a church. We see that this is really the next wave of Christianity in New Zealand, that's a growing percentage of Christians are declaring no faith, and they tend to be some of the most highly identified Christians out there. But they're not saying I'm connected to any church. So we have to, you know, when we're thinking about religion, we're thinking again about a complex of activities, beliefs, and practices, and we'll understand the role of these institutions in adjusting people to the immediate onset of the pandemic only after we have all the data for the whole year, and we've been able to carefully pull out those columns and do the proper analysis.

We hope that New Zealand can offer a few examples of proofs of concept that you can do this, and people can get through, you know, a very severe socially restrictive and economically restrictive lockdown. But in terms of the role of religion in helping people to deal with the magnitude of

suffering that arises from a pandemic—and by the way, this is not the first pandemic, and it won't be the last unfortunately—well, this has been a key role of religion in societies since the beginnings of the Pleistocene, when people have had organized, larger urban forms of life, which have led to crowd diseases. This is, you know, crowd diseases come up, and they kill, and then they go away. So we might, hopefully don't, have information that would be relevant to addressing some of those really important questions that are going to be part of the experience in other countries.

Richard Sergay: Well, we will come back and talk to you in a while and see what the data reveals. And we thank you for your time. That was superb.

Joseph Bulbulia: Thank you, Richard. It's been a pleasure to be here, and I look forward to speaking with you again.

Tavia Gilbert: I hope this conversation leaves you encouraged. Professor Bulbulia's research and New Zealand's proofs of concept are encouraging to me. I find it meaningful to think that as we seek answers during this difficult time, we can look to science and to religion and to non-religious spirituality to help us find a path forward, out of the darkness of crisis.

We'll be back in our final episode, and the last episode of our first season, with an exploration of the core principles of human groups that allow successful cooperation.

David Sloan Wilson: It is possible to be authentically optimistic. And I think that part of an evolutionary worldview is there when you look at the broad spans of history, twenty, fifty thousand years, what you find is, now we have societies of hundreds of millions and even billions of individuals which cooperate at a scale that would have been totally beyond the imagination of anyone even a few hundred years ago, not to speak of a few thousand years ago. And so if you, if you take that time span, what you find is we're actually only a step away from global cooperation.

Tavia Gilbert: That was David Sloan Wilson, professor of biological sciences at Binghamton University and president of the Evolution Institute. In that final, Covid-focused conversation, Professor Wilson discusses how we can implement the core cooperation principles he has identified in order to alleviate the negative effects of the current pandemic and stop its spread.

We hope you and yours are keeping well during this very trying time. If you're enjoying the Stories of Impact podcast, please share it with the people in your life who you feel can benefit from it.

For more stories and videos, please visit storiesofimpact.org.

This has been the Stories of Impact podcast, with Richard Sergay and Tavia Gilbert. This episode produced by Talkbox and Tavia Gilbert. Assistant producer Katie Flood. Music by Aleksander Filipiak. Mix and master by Kayla Elrod.

The Stories of Impact podcast is supported by Templeton World Charity Foundation.