



## Programme for the 2025 New Zealand Association for the Study of Religion Conference

*29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> November - University of Otago, Dunedin*

Kia ora koutou, we are pleased to welcome you to the 2025 NZASR Conference, hosted at Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka, the University of Otago, in Ōtepoti, Dunedin. This year we have 17 talks, split across four sessions. Reflecting the diversity of religious studies in Aotearoa New Zealand, these talks cover topics as diverse as evaluating the evidence for a monotheistic god in te ao Māori, examining the belief systems of Flat Earth adherents, and exploring the relationship between the physical forms of Buddha statues and their conceptualisation.

We are also delighted to have a plenary lecture from [Kim Sterelny](#). Kim is a professor of philosophy at ANU whose work focuses on evolutionary biology, with a particular interest in human social cognition. In recent years, he has published a series of papers on the evolution of religious systems. In the plenary lecture on Saturday afternoon, Kim will present an evolutionary explanation for the cross-cultural prevalence of witchcraft and sorcery.

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## **1. Conference Information and Logistics**

### **Format of Presentations**

Unless otherwise agreed, there are 30 minutes assigned for each presenter. These 30 minutes should consist of a 20-minute presentation and allow for 10 minutes for questions and discussion.

### **Slides**

To ensure that all sessions run smoothly, please email us through a .pdf or .pptx at least 24 hours before your presentation. Our email address is [contact@nzasr.org](mailto:contact@nzasr.org).

### **Key Contacts**

General enquiries [contact@nzasr.org](mailto:contact@nzasr.org)

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### **Transport**

There are a number of shuttle companies operating between the airport and city centre. One option is [Super Shuttle](#).

Dunedin is a compact city, and the university campus is located reasonably centrally. There are also many taxi options, as well as Uber.

### **Venue**

All conference sessions will take place in Castle C Seminar room on the main University of Otago campus.

Castle C is located on the ground floor on the east side of the Castle Theatre Complex, adjacent to the Water of Leith.

This venue contains a PC and a projector. Technical information on the venue is [available here](#).



Link to Google Map Pin: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/nz8QKZfm9dyfqM259>

### **Conference Dinner**

Our conference dinner will be at Plato, which is a seafood restaurant. If you have any dietary requirement or preferences, please email [contact@nzasr.org](mailto:contact@nzasr.org) as soon as possible. Please also email if you have not registered for the dinner but wish to attend.

## **2. Schedule Overview**

*All sessions will take place in Castle C. Drinks and Lunch will be served in the main concourse of the Castle Lecture theatres complex*

### **Saturday**

10:00 to 10:30	Tea and coffee
10:30 to 12:30	Welcome and Session 1 Will Sweetman, Amy Whitehead, Elizabeth Guthrie
12:30 to 13:30	Lunch
13:30 to 15:40	Session 2 Joseph Watts and Joseph Bulbulia, Usman Afzali, Tom White, Benjamin Schonthal
15:40 to 16:00	Tea and coffee break
16:00 to 17:30	Plenary – Kim Sterelny
7:00pm	Dinner at Plato

### **Sunday**

09:15 to 10:00	NZASR Annual General Meeting
10:00 to 10:30	Tea and coffee
10:30 to 12:30	Session 3 Deane Galbraith, Geoff Troughton, Anna Nicholls, April Boland
12:30 to 13:30	Lunch
13:30 to 15:30	Session 4 Navdeep Kaur, Mahfudzah Ulfa, Ryan Hartman, Peter Dann, Jane Hooton

### **3. Full Schedule with Abstracts**

*All sessions are in Castle C Seminar room on the main University of Otago campus.*

#### **Saturday**

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<b>10:00 to 10:30</b>	<b>Tea and coffee</b>
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*Tea and coffee will be served in the main concourse of the Castle Lecture theatres complex*

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<b>10:30 to 12:30</b>	<b>Welcome and Session 1 (Chaired by Will Sweetman)</b>
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#### **The Ends of the Study of Religion in New Zealand**

*Will Sweetman*

*Religious Studies, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka – University of Otago, Dunedin*

Much has changed since Majella Franzmann's 2008 survey of Religious Studies in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific—and mostly not for the better. In New Zealand, three departments have closed, beginning with Canterbury in 2008, and followed by Massey and Waikato. Two remain, at Otago and Victoria, with some scholars and courses elsewhere, notably Auckland, where the Bachelor of Theology was replaced by a new major in Theological and Religious Studies from 2016. Creating and maintaining a distinctive space for the academic study of religion in New Zealand remains difficult. A range of institutional structures, from Auckland's degree title to international ranking agencies, continue to place the Religious Studies with Theology. Franzmann wrote that "Much of what is done both in teaching and in research in New Zealand in religious studies departments or programs has been and continues to be coloured by Christian theology." In a 2010 chapter which can be read as a detailed response to Franzmann, Paul Morris argued that there is "a distinctive phenomenologically-oriented, non-confessional approach to the subject matter of religion(s) that separates Religious Studies [both] from Theology [but also] from units in History or Philosophy that treat religious subjects, such as the Reformation or the classical proofs for the existence of God." This paper will provide an update and response to Franzmann and Morris. It will argue contra both that a future for the critical academic study of religion lies in Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu depends on closer integration with other disciplines in the university. Such a future depends on cultivating a distinctive identity for the field, which must include a clear distinction from theological approaches to the study of religion.

#### **Unruly Objects: A Decolonial Critique of the “Factish” Language of Representation in the Study of Religion**

*Amy Whitehead*

*School of People, Environment and Planning, Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa – Massey University, Auckland*

Highlighting the significance of Bruno Latour's *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (2010), this paper offers a decolonial critique that challenges the commonly used, epistemologically dualistic 'factish' language of representation (the status to which 'dangerous' and unruly objects are often relegated) in relation to how we approach, and articulate, the sometimes powerful roles of 'things' (images, statues, devotionals, offerings) we encounter in the study of religions. Drawing on two case study sites in Cuba and Spain, the paper critically re-animates the language of the fetish and advances Latour's notion of 'factish' as a more accurate tool for attending to the often ambiguous relationships that take place between humans and the non-human religious actors that make up the architecture of living religious worlds.

## **Cold War Buddhism in the Mekong Delta: the biography of Venerable Thach Pich**

*Elizabeth Guthrie*

*Religious Studies, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka – University of Otago, Dunedin*

This paper is about the life and career of Venerable Thach Pich (1916-1976), who was born, raised and ordained in the ethnic Khmer province of Khleang (today Sóc Trăng) in French Indochina. Venerable Thach Pich studied Pāli at the Ecole Supérieure du Pali at Wat Unnaloum, in Phnom Penh and in 1950 was one of two delegates selected by the French colonial authorities to represent Vietnamese Buddhism at the inaugural congress of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Colombo in 1950. In addition to his participation in global Buddhist activities, Venerable Thach Pich took part in the Buddhist uprisings in South Vietnam during the 1960s, and assisted in the recruitment of Khmer Krom soldiers to fight Communism for the Khmer Republic in Cambodia. In May 1975 he was arrested by the Vietnamese authorities and turned over to the Khmer Rouge. He was imprisoned and interrogated in S-21/Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh and died there in 1976. Thach Pich's life was exemplary not only because of his knowledge of Buddhism, and his influence on his many students, but also because he actively participated in the social and political upheaval inflicted by the Cold War on twentieth century Southeast Asian Buddhism.

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### **12:30 to 13:30      Lunch**

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*Lunch will be served in the main concourse of the Castle Lecture theatres complex*

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### **13:30 to 15:40      Session 2 (Chaired by Amy Whitehead)**

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#### **Like and unlike Law: Making a Monastic Judiciary**

*Benjamin Schonthal*

*Religious Studies, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka – University of Otago, Dunedin*

How is monastic law practised in modern-day Sri Lanka? How do contemporary monastic jurists reckon with multi-legality? This talk draws on archival and ethnographic research with Sri Lanka's third-largest monastic community, the Rāmañña Nikāya, to answer these questions and explore the operation of monastic law today. It introduces readers to the Rāmañña constitution, court system, judicial training materials, jurisprudential texts and other features of monastic legal practice. It argues that monastic judges practise legal pluralism in ways that both resist and embrace the parallels between monastic and state law, engaging in a form of 'double speak' that, on the one hand, places monastic law 'on the scale' of Sri Lankan law while, at the same time, highlighting its superior, more-than-human status.

#### **Mapping Places of Worship: A preliminary exploration of religious infrastructure globally and within Aotearoa New Zealand**

*Joseph Watts<sup>1</sup> and Joseph Bulbulia<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>*Psychology, Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha – University of Canterbury, Christchurch*

<sup>2</sup>*School of Psychological Sciences, Te Herenga Waka Victoria – Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington*

Places of worship, including churches, mosques, and temples, serve as the central physical hubs of religious communities. As such, they facilitate the social and cultural effects of religious systems and provide insights into the dynamics and diversity of religions within human society. Here, we present an ongoing project aimed at building a dynamic, global database of places of worship. Currently, this database draws on data from OpenStreetMap and contains approximately 1.46 million places of worship worldwide. In the first half of this presentation, we will demonstrate an online interactive world map featuring over one million tagged and

classified places of worship. We are also working to integrate this database with longitudinal data on demographic, social, and ecological variables. This integration will enable us to model, in a causal framework, the dynamics and effects of religious institutions within society. In the second part of this presentation, we focus on Aotearoa New Zealand as a case study, evaluating the quality of OpenStreetMap data and examining how the density of places of worship corresponds to census data on religious affiliation. We will also discuss planned projects and share preliminary visualisations that explore the relationship between institutional religious diversity and secularisation across New Zealand's 87 territorial regions. This is an ongoing project, and we welcome suggestions, comments, and ideas for further development.

## Faith, Discrimination, and Wellbeing: Muslim Coping Responses After the Christchurch Attacks

*Usman Afzali*

*Religious Studies, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka – University of Otago, Dunedin*

Religious prejudice leads to negative psychological wellbeing outcomes and low self-esteem in affected populations. Scholars of religion suggest that religious rituals and practices may help individuals cope with some of these consequences. In line with this, the present talk examines anti-Muslim prejudice from the perspectives of both New Zealand Muslims and non-Muslim communities.

I begin by highlighting four publications from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study that investigate anti-Muslim prejudice from a non-Muslim perspective, documenting its presence and the changes observed following the Christchurch Terror Attacks of 2019. I then introduce the rationale and conception of the Muslim Diversity Study, designed as a booster to the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study to address the experiences of Muslims more comprehensively.

Finally, I present recent findings from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study/Muslim Diversity Study that explore self-reported religious discrimination among Muslims compared with other forms of discrimination (age, gender, ethnicity) and with other religious groups in New Zealand. Results indicate that Muslims report high levels of religious discrimination. However, their psychological wellbeing profile remains comparable to other groups, with notably high self-esteem and strong sense of meaning and purpose. Preliminary data on religious rituals and practices suggest these may function as coping mechanisms that help sustain positive self-regard and wellbeing despite discrimination. These findings carry implications for policy and intervention aimed at fostering resilience and inclusion.

## Fiji as the Promised (is)Land: Cults and Commerce in the Pacific Islands' secular state

*Tom White*

*Religious Studies, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka – University of Otago, Dunedin*

What do you do when a foreign, “doomsday cult”—charged by the UN Special Rapporteur with labour rights abuses, tied to the former military regime, and subject to Interpol extradition requests—also happens to provide the best-value, high quality cuisine in an island micro-economy built on tourism?

In 2014, Rev. Ok-Joo Shin and some 400 followers of the Korean Grace Roads Church relocated to Fiji, declaring the Islands as the biblical Promised Land in which to await the End Times. Funded by members' savings, vocational labour, and loans from Fiji's military government, the group quickly built a business empire of farms, restaurants, supermarkets, beauty salons, dental clinics and construction services. Among Fijians with disposable incomes, it is widely agreed that the food and service at Grace Road restaurants is a major improvement on the usual fare.

Allegations of draconian working conditions, ritual beatings, and passport confiscation by ex-members led to Shin's 2018 eventual arrest and imprisonment in Korea, although the Church's operations in Fiji persisted under the leadership of Shin's son, Daniel Kim, and the protection of Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama's coup-installed government.

Following Bainimarama's 2022 electoral defeat, Fiji's new leadership moved to deport Grace Road's remaining leaders, including Kim, and publicly branded the group a “doomsday cult.” The Church, in turn,

invoked the constitutional rights enshrined by Bainimarama's newly constituted 'secular state' reforms, demanding religious freedom, framing itself as a legitimate business collective "believing only in God."

Drawing on media reports, public statements, court records, and church publications, this paper uses a critical religion approach to examine how Fijians' most recent politics of naming—*cult, church, business?*—continues the same repressive colonial discourses around cargo cults into Fiji's much-heralded post-2013 era of religious freedom and constitutional secularism.

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**15:40 to 16:00      Tea and coffee break**

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*Tea and coffee will be served in the main concourse of the Castle Lecture theatres complex*

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**16:00 to 17:30      Plenary**

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**The Rise of the Dark Shaman**

*Kim Sterelny<sup>1,2</sup> and Ron Planer<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>*School of Philosophy, Australian National University, Canberra*

<sup>2</sup>*Philosophy, Te Herenga Waka Victoria – Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington*

<sup>3</sup>*Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Wollongong, Wollongong*

In our "The Agential View of Misfortune", Ron Planer and I argued that the widespread belief in witchcraft/sorcery was a serious and unsolved problem confronting the evolutionary human sciences. This family of beliefs is widespread, persistent, and in many social contexts, very expensive. The conflict costs can be extreme (generating persisting blood feuds) and the economic costs are far from trivial. We argued that none of the standard explanations resist sceptical analysis. At the end of the paper, we floated a few speculative suggestions that might do better.

In this paper, we develop one of those. We suggest that the agential view of misfortune — the belief that, for the most part, shit does not just happen; it is caused to happen by other humans by occult means — emerges by evolutionary bait-and-switch. We see a bait-and-switch dynamic when a social institution establishes, with robust mechanisms of intergenerational transmission, when that institution, with its intergenerational mechanics, is broadly adaptive for all parties. A paradigm is where individuals with exceptional expertise in socially valuable skills play a central role in the intergenerational transfer of those skills: they are accorded respect and deference in return for social access to their skill basis. That is the bait phase. The switch phase involves an incremental, generation by generation bias in the lore flowing across generations in ways that favour those playing a central role in this information flow, but to the detriment of others. In many traditional Australian Indigenous societies, Elders play a central role in the social transmission of the norms and lore of their community. We think it is no surprise that this lore came include norms of special sexual access for older males to young women.

We suggest a model with a similar dynamic for shamanism; shamanistic practices establish (with early shamans becoming social learning beacons) when their practice and ideology was largely benign, but gradually their lore and practice comes to emphasise the danger of hostile occult practices, and the indispensable role of shamans in shielding individuals from those dangers, and reducing their impact. Some elements of this model are undeniably speculative, so we present it as a "how-plausibly" explanation of the establishment and stability of belief in occult danger. But we argue that each element in the model is independently plausible. A "how-plausibly" explanation is worth having (we say), given the puzzling character of this phenomenon.

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**07:00pm      Dinner at Plato**

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Address: 2 Birch Street, Central Dunedin, Dunedin 9016

## Sunday

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**09:15 to 10:00      NZASR Annual General Meeting**

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*This is an optional meeting for those that want to attend. This meeting will take place in the same location as the conference sessions (Castle C) and will distribute an agenda nearer the time.*

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**10:00 to 10:30      Tea and coffee**

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*Tea and coffee will be served in the main concourse of the Castle Lecture theatres complex*

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**10:30 to 12:30      Session 3 (Chaired by Ben Schonthal)**

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**J.Z. Smith on the Māori ‘Supreme god’ Io**

*Deane Galbraith*

*Religious Studies, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka – University of Otago, Dunedin*

When Jonathan Z. Smith reflected in 2013 on his four decades of work in religious studies, he claimed that the essay that “remains my favourite” was “The Unknown God: Myth in History” (1982). Smith’s essay deals with what by then was a contested topic in the study of Māori religion: whether, prior to European contact, the Māori cosmos included a ‘Supreme god’ named Io. Smith’s essay was highly influential within religious studies, and to a lesser extent in the ongoing academic debate concerning Io. In this paper, I reassess Smith’s influential essay in the light of his methodological approach to comparative religion. I find the emphasis Smith places on Tiwai Paraone’s “Maori Cosmogony” (published 1907), for Smith’s assessment of the Io debate, to be disproportionate, unduly influenced by that text’s prominence in the history of religious scholarship. In addition, Smith’s analysis of the text is deficient on multiple grounds: he misunderstands key elements, misjudges the character and abilities of the main actors involved (the author, the translator, the editor), exhibits confusion about historical contexts, makes racist assumptions, and has no understanding of the Māori language. Yet these particular shortcomings are symptomatic of a more fundamental methodological flaw. Smith’s excessive emphasis on what he views as the ultimate goal of comparative religion—the reframing of critical questions brought to substantive texts and traditions—has the effect of forgoing the necessary examination of the pertinent Māori texts, and so determining whether Io is an exemplary comparandum in the critique of primitive monotheism. Whether or not a high god named Io was in fact present in pre-contact Māori religion, Smith’s one-sided comparative method *a priori* excludes the possibility of anything analogous to a high god in te ao Māori tawhito (the traditional Māori world).

**Wesleyan Colonialism Down Under**

*Geoff Troughton*

*Religious Studies, Te Herenga Waka Victoria – Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington*

New Zealand Wesleyanism began with mission to Māori through the agency of the Wesleyan Missionary Society – an organisation that promoted peace and non-violence and explicitly prohibited land purchasing by its members. By the start of the New Zealand Wars of the 1860s, Wesleyans were fervent advocates of land sales and the imposition of Crown authority by force. This paper examines the story, explaining the apparent contradictions entailed.

## **Manipulating the Image of a Religious Figure**

*Anna Nicholls*

*Religious Studies, Te Herenga Waka Victoria – Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington*

Although Catherine McAuley—the Irish foundress of the Sisters of Mercy—never set foot in Aotearoa New Zealand and had passed away prior to the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, her image has become a powerful conduit in the chain of memory within the contemporary Mercy organisation. This paper explores how her representation has been shaped and reshaped across time to serve evolving institutional and cultural narratives.

The first section examines the formation of the collective memory in the nineteenth century Ireland - an era marked by hagiographic storytelling, misogynistic discourse, anti-Protestant sentiment, and Irish nationalist rhetoric. The second section explores the transformative impact of the Second Vatican Council, which significantly altered the trajectory of McAuley's image. This shift is considered in view of the dynamics of the contemporary Mercy organisation in Aotearoa New Zealand and its engagement with identity, mission, and memory.

## **Belief Perseverance and Identity Protection among Flat Earth Adherents in Aotearoa**

*April Boland*

*Religious Studies, Te Herenga Waka Victoria – University of Wellington, Wellington*

Flat Earth theory and its adherents are often dismissed as trivial, unintellectual, or foolish. This talk challenges these perceptions as incomplete, over-simplifications of a poignant issue: the need to protect one's sense of identity. I interviewed ten Flat Earthers, many of whom became Flat Earth adherents in response to feeling isolated, or disenfranchised by mainstream institutions. These interviewees expressed that their beliefs were symptomatic of self-reinforcing, extensive, monological belief systems, which shielded the adherents' identities and worldviews from outside criticism, from these mainstream adversaries. For Flat Earth theory to be sustained, nearly all mainstream knowledge must be rejected, necessitating such extensive and robust alternative belief systems. Among the interviewees, these included Nazi survival mythologies; alternative biblical interpretations and apocryphal texts; and other conspiratorial frameworks that collectively supported their belief, despite overwhelming contrary evidence. This is cause for a reflection on the nature of belief, and belief perseverance, especially among individuals who adhere to unconventional beliefs, for which they face ridicule. Ultimately, this talk argues that the perseverance of nonmainstream beliefs like Flat Earth theory stems less from ignorance, and more from a psychological need for identity protection. As such, engaging these individuals requires more than fact correction; it calls for recognising the psychological and social functions their nonmainstream beliefs serve, such as constructing and defending a coherent sense of self.

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**12:30 to 13:30      Lunch**

*Lunch will be served in the main concourse of the Castle Lecture theatres complex*

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**13:30 to 15:30**

**Session 4 (Chaired by Joseph Watts)**

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*This session is a panel on the Cognitive Science of Religion submitted by the [Society for the Psychology of Religion in Australia and New Zealand \(SPRANZ\)](#).*

**Associations Between Material, Form and Religious Perception: Evidence from Buddhist Art**

*Navdeep Kaur*

*Department of Psychology, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka – University of Otago, Dunedin*

For thousands of years, people have used religious objects like statues and temples to connect with something greater than themselves. But are these objects simply tools of our religious expression, or do they shape what we believe and how we practice religion? In the present study, we investigate the role of material and form in shaping people's perceptions of the Buddha's attributes. In Study 1, participants viewed Buddha images that varied in their degree of roundedness or pointedness. Results showed that rounded images were linked to positive attributes, while angular forms were associated with negative attributes. Study 2 examined historical Buddha statues from museum collections in India and the United Kingdom, revealing consistent associations between the statues' material, form, and the personality attributes. Study 3 extended this investigation through direct physical interaction with statues made of different materials. Taken together, the findings suggest that form mediates the relationship between material and perception, indicating that artistic depictions of the Buddha are not passive reflections of belief but may shape how individuals conceptualize the supernatural.

**Teaching Human Evolutionary Theory in Indonesian State Universities: Cognitive Biases and Pedagogical Strategies**

*Mahfudzah Ulfah (Pooja)*

*Department of Psychology, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka – University of Otago, Dunedin*

Teaching human evolutionary theory in Muslim-majority contexts such as Indonesia presents unique challenges due to potential tensions between scientific explanations and religious beliefs. Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, encompasses diverse interpretations of Islam, which influence science education and the acceptance of evolutionary theory. Despite global scientific consensus, resistance to teaching human evolution often stems from religious doctrine and cognitive biases, including teleological and essentialist thinking, which make evolutionary concepts counterintuitive. Drawing on the cognitive science of religion, this study examines how these cognitive tendencies, combined with religious teachings, shape educators' approaches to teaching human evolution. Specifically, it investigates how Muslim educators in Indonesian state universities reconcile their religious beliefs with scientific principles, manage cognitive dissonance, and navigate ideological tensions in their pedagogy. By exploring their strategies and perceptions, the research aims to identify the cognitive and pedagogical challenges inherent in teaching human evolution within a Muslim-majority cultural and religious context, where Islamic beliefs significantly shape educational practices.

**Metaphysical Beliefs and Lifestyle Health Outcomes**

*Ryan Hartman*

*Department of Psychology, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka – University of Otago, Dunedin*

This research investigates the independent and covarying effects of belief-level predictors on health behaviour, specifically examining Cartesian substance dualism and religiosity. Prior work by Forstmann et al. (2012) demonstrated a negative correlation between dualistic beliefs and self-reported lifestyle health behaviours, hypothesizing that dualists' perception of mind-body separation facilitates bodily neglect. However, this finding

requires direct replication and methodological refinement. Critically, dualism's association with health outcomes may be confounded by participant religiosity, a construct that shares conceptual overlap with dualism yet demonstrates independent, conditionally robust associations with health through belief-level pathways. The relationship between dualism, religiosity, and health remains unclear: these beliefs may exert opposing effects, demonstrate spurious associations, or have covarying effects on lifestyle health behaviours. No comprehensive investigation has examined these independent and interactive relationships, as far as we have found. This research addresses this gap by accomplishing two objectives: (1) addressing methodological limitations in existing dualism literature through independent and direct replication of Forstmann et al (2012), and (2) expanding the theoretical understanding of belief-level health influences by examining how dualistic and religious beliefs jointly predict health outcomes.

## **Sense or Sensibility? Discrepant Reasoning About Perceptual States in the Afterlife**

*Peter Dann*

*Department of Psychology, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka – University of Otago, Dunedin*

Afterlife beliefs are psychologically unique in being both intuitive and counter-intuitive: minds are naturally conceived as persisting beyond death, yet are often thought to possess lived qualities without the biological body from which they arise. This exploratory study examined both aspects of this tension: whether perceptual capacities (seeing, hearing, etc.) are intuitively attributed to deceased agents in the afterlife; and whether explicitly highlighting biological cessation (non-functional sensory organs) elicits cognitive dissonance. Fifty-eight afterlife believers who had experienced recent bereavement completed semi-structured interviews in which they reasoned about either their deceased loved one or a hypothetical stranger in the afterlife. Participants indicated whether the deceased retained each of the five sensory capacities, then whether the associated sensory organs were retained. Sense and organ responses were paired and coded as discrepant (sensory capacities retained but not the associated organs) or non-discrepant (both sensory capacities and organs retained). A post-interview measure evaluated cognitive dissonance to examine whether this epistemic conflict elicits discomfort. Results showed no significant difference in sensory capacities between conditions (loved one vs. stranger). Participants who provided discrepant responses (attributing senses but not organs) did not report higher dissonance than those providing non-discrepant responses, and no significant differences emerged between loved-one and stranger conditions within the discrepant-response group. While the absence of dissonance suggests cognitive structures that allow intuitive and biological reasoning to coexist without overt conflict, these interpretations remain tentative, as a post hoc sensitivity analysis indicated that the study was underpowered.

## **Confronting Death—Preserving Consciousness: Cognitive Cues Fail to Reduce Post-Mortem Mental State Attributions**

*Jane Hooton*

*Department of Psychology, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka – University of Otago, Dunedin*

Past research shows that most people intuit some form of post-mortem consciousness. Two competing mechanisms have been proposed: cognitive constraints (e.g., the simulation-constraint hypothesis, which holds that people cannot imagine the absence of mental states) and motivational factors (e.g., existential anxiety buffering via afterlife beliefs). If cognitive constraints dominate, cues that facilitate the visualisation of death—such as seeing a corpse—should reduce such attributions. Three studies tested this prediction with increasingly vivid portrayals of death: retrospective reports of exposure to a loved one's corpse, exposure to an actor portraying a recently deceased individual, and exposure to an image of a real corpse. In all studies, consistent with previous research, participants were more likely to attribute emotional and knowledge based states to the deceased, relative to biological and psychobiological states. However, exposure to corpses did not moderate these effects, suggesting that such attributions do not reflect a failure of cognition or imagery.