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The changing face of Australia: From secular to post-secular identity

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**THE CHANGING FACE OF AUSTRALIA:  
FROM SECULAR TO POST-SECULAR IDENTITY**

Saskia Ebejer

School of Philosophy and Theology

The University of Notre Dame Australia

A thesis submitted to the University of Notre Dame for the  
examination of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2018

## **DECLARATION**

I certify that this thesis which I now submit for examination for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

This thesis was prepared according to the regulations for postgraduate study by research of the University of Notre Dame Australia and has not been submitted in whole or in part for another award in any institution.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Angus Brook and Susanna Rizzo. Your support has been phenomenal over the extended period of time that this PhD took to complete. Angus, your patience has been extraordinary! From the start of our collaboration, I was utterly confident in your support and your words of advice. Susanna and Angus, you are wonderful academics and you have been such brilliant role models for me.

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who encouraged me along the way, especially my colleagues at the University of Wollongong, Batemans Bay Campus. Jaimey, Nicky, Troy, Kerryn and Maria, and so many others, you are the best! You have all been there for me over the years. You inspired me to keep going, especially during the tough times. My deepest thanks to you all. Thanks also to my many students who continue to inspire me every day.

During the years it has taken me to complete this PhD, so much happened. I think that's why PhDs are so tough; they span a huge amount of time in which so many life circumstances occur. Life is about joys and sorrows and moving between these times with patience and gratitude. I have become an Oma during this time and now have four wonderful grandchildren. Also, my sister passed away from cancer. This happened in 2016 and its impact is still felt in my life. Vikki, I dedicate this work to you.

I would also like to thank my parents, Hans and Coby, such special people. They have always believed in me and always encouraged me to do my best. Blessings to you both, you are beautiful people. Special thanks to my son and daughter, Ben and Annaliese, you have always been there for me. My biggest thanks, however, goes to David, my husband of 32 years. There are no words that can express my gratitude to you. You gave me strength when I was weak, courage when I was fearful, endurance when I was about to give up. Finally, a prayer of thanks to my heavenly family, my invisible supports who held me up me during this time, especially Edith Stein, a woman of grace and towering intellect.

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## ABSTRACT

The secularisation thesis, originally developed in the 1960s and touted as a seminal sociological theory, has over the last few decades been called into question. In particular, claims regarding the displacement of religion in the public square and, ultimately, the waning or disappearance *tout court* of religion from the lives of individuals have come under scrutiny. The advent of the secular paradigm has no doubt had lasting effects, both publicly and privately, but, far from consisting merely in the extinction of religion, theorists have been drawing attention to the recent proliferation, spawned by the crisis of or dissatisfaction with the ‘secular experience’, of new forms of spirituality or the persistence or revival or spread of traditional forms of religion in some areas of the world. Scholars such as Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor have been at the forefront of providing a critical academic response on the presumed revival of religion in the public sphere and in the private lives of individuals, alongside Peter Berger. Significantly Berger was one of the founding fathers of the secularisation thesis and his recantation of the theory in 1999 has had a substantial impact on the academic debate ever since.

The revision of the Secular paradigm and the consequent falsification of the Secularisation Thesis in light of the resurgence of religion have engendered a new paradigm conventionally referred to as the ‘Postsecular’. Because of the conflicting views in regard to the new paradigm, which has been described as inaugurating a new era by some theorists, and by others as an overstatement of current social change, it was deemed warranted that an investigation of the phenomenon be undertaken in order to determine whether and to which extent the postsecular paradigm is applicable to understanding the political and social reality of contemporary Australia. The catalyst for this research was that so few studies have been

undertaken in Australia regarding not only of the role of religion, but also of the secular and, more recently, of the postsecular in the lives of the Australians in particular, and in Australian society in general. The research methodology identified as being appropriate for the task is hermeneutic phenomenology. This methodology would in fact facilitate an approach that was simultaneously reflective and descriptive, opening up understandings that may have been previously hidden or merely overlooked. The methodology required the use of interviews in order to identify recurring understandings and it was decided that interviews with key academics in Australia would be useful in identifying emerging postsecular discourses and narratives concerning religion in Australia, in particular with those academics who have been at the forefront of discussions and publications on the state of religion in Australia over the last decade or so. Using a minimum of open-ended questions, the participants discussed significant areas of change that focused on the topics of the secular, the post-secular, the secularisation thesis, religion and spirituality. These themes are the focus of this research and are examined by using reflective techniques and theoretical analysis to construct their essence.

Some of the key research findings include the co-dependency of the secular and the post-secular and the demise of the secularisation thesis; and the changes to the experience of religion and spirituality in individuals' lives in contemporary Australia, as people develop new ways of expressing spiritual, emotional and experiential meanings in their lives. The research, in fact, indicates that a diverse field of religious and spiritual expressions has emerged to challenge traditional secular understandings. These findings do not signify that Australia has entered a post-secular era, but they do denote the existence of a growing awareness of a deep process of change affecting structures of meaning in Australian society. This research wishes to contribute to the understanding of this growing awareness from a

particular theoretical and methodological perspective and assess whether postsecular understandings of religion and society are an effective lens to cast light on the presence and experience of religion in Australia.