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

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Chapter 8. Critical Reflections on the Post-Secular

Introduction

REFLECTION

Religion is more deeply connected to the individual than the secular perspective assumes or recognises. The term post-secular holds an in-built recognition of this relationship.

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This chapter will explore the claims made of the post-secular in the literature and the interviews. It will draw on the most commonly held definitions and statements, critically analysing them in the light of my research question – What is the nature and extent of post-secular changes in Australia? In particular, I will investigate the claims of Habermas, including the three defining features of religious resurgence that he sees as significant to the post-secular era.

Above all, three overlapping phenomena converge to create the impression of a worldwide ‘resurgence of religion’: the missionary expansion (a), a fundamentalist radicalisation (b), and the political instrumentalisation of the potential for violence innate in many of the world religions (c).⁷⁰⁹

Habermas sees the post-secular as indicating a remedy for contemporary challenges, including religious unrest. In essence, he argues that economic and social decisions need to account for religious perspectives, and incorporate this awareness into political and public decision making. Over the last decade or so, his articulation of a post-secular society has been a valuable response to the challenges of the contemporary moment, as it is a catalyst for opening up public discussion about the role of religion in society. Although much of this

⁷⁰⁹Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', (pp. 17-29).

discussion has been on the academic front, there has also been increased media attention on religion in the public square.

THE PROBLEM OF 'POST'

The association of the post-secular with postmodernism, postcolonial and other 'post' terms positions is problematic, in that definitions are multifarious. Yet it also creates an association with certain timeframes and ways of thinking.⁷¹⁰ It suggests there are other ways of living and thinking that need to be reconsidered. I gained insight into the contemporary challenges faced on a global scale, including inequality, environmental and moral dilemmas, during the interviews. The participants, in particular Clive Hamilton, pointed to the complexity of many of these issues, for which solutions are not simple or easily implemented. For Hamilton, the secular, liberal, Enlightenment project has run its course and needs a significant rethink in order to grapple with these contemporary issues. Religion and religious perspectives have something relevant and necessary to offer the discussion. Complex problems require a range of positions and alternatives that break free from dominant thought, which is often dictated by economic principles. The potential for alternative solutions, influenced by religious thought, that break through dominant market and material values, is significant.

At the very least, use of the term post-secular has aroused conversation about the secular, and has given the impetus for a rethinking of this to occur. For Habermas, it is necessary to review old paradigms, as to him the Enlightenment project has been disrupted – if not altered – by some crucial factors, including economic and social changes.⁷¹¹ The secularisation of society relied on the Enlightenment project for its foundation, as reason subsumed all other

⁷¹⁰A. L. Molendijk, 'In Pursuit of the Postsecular', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 76/2 (03 / 15 / 2015), 100-15.p. 100.

⁷¹¹Dillon, '2009 Association for the Sociology of Religion Presidential Address: Can Post-Secular Society Tolerate Religious Differences?*', (, p. 147.

ways of thinking. The Enlightenment agenda centred secular thinking, even though much of the world may have remained religious. For Habermas, the world was secular because of the placement of Enlightenment values at the heart of progressive agendas.⁷¹² Religion could not contribute to these same ideals of progress in the way that secular Enlightenment thought could. The solutions to social, economic and political problems could be found without recourse to religion and this paved the way for other values to be promoted, including new economic and political ideas that could dismiss religious paradigms as regressive.

According to Habermas, there is a post-secular because there was a secular, one enshrined in political and public thought that disregarded the religious yearnings of the majority of the world's population. Even though the secular continues to be reconceptualised through Charles Taylor's work, this is also a symptom of the post-secular; the secular can no longer be viewed as a natural and necessary precondition of modernity. In the ferment of social change experienced over the last 50 years, it is evident that secular understandings of the world do not give a full account of the challenges experienced by many individuals and societies, nor do they provide solutions to these challenges. The post-secular offers a position from which to reconsider the secular, while proposing a critique of its claims.

Habermas is not the only academic to use the term post-secular, with the academic popularity of the term paralleling the use of such terms as postmodern and postcolonial. However, it is also just as problematic as these terms, and just as vigorously debated.⁷¹³ The scholars who argue for the applicability of the notion of the post-secular note that the cultural, social and political differences that have emerged over the last half a century are historically unique. On the opposing side, however, some note strong evidence that, in some societies, the

⁷¹²Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', (p. 22).

⁷¹³Molendijk, 'In Pursuit of the Postsecular', (p. 100).

secularisation thesis remains relevant.⁷¹⁴ Many also suggest that, given to the challenges of conceptualising the secular, it is not yet appropriate to claim a movement to the post-secular.⁷¹⁵ They note that it is premature to argue for the post-secular, as it has not yet been fully determined what the secular is. For Habermas, this is not a barrier, insofar as he argues that the post-secular is an agenda that allows for a more effective analysis of contemporary issues.⁷¹⁶

As the secular has contributed to contemporary problems through its support of values of progress and economic development, it is essential to view the post-secular as a critical lens that interrogates the secular while seeking solutions beyond it. Although Habermas does not refer to environmental and social justice issues in his post-secular discussions, it is possible to apply his thinking to these issues. His dialogical approach requires openness to the other – an acceptance of another’s perspective and of the value of that perspective for that person. Surely this is one of the ways in which current global crises can be approached, with respectful and open discussion incorporating a range of perspectives and possible solutions that do not disregard the religious and spiritual, but are also open to these values.

Jürgen Habermas

This section will return to discussion on Habermas’ reasons for applying the term post-secular to some areas of the world, including Australia. He discusses three key characteristics, missionary expansion, fundamentalist radicalisation and political instrumentalisation. I respond with some thoughts regarding each of those three characteristics and their relevance to Australia.

⁷¹⁴Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', (p. 18).

⁷¹⁵Paul Corrigan, 'The Postsecular and Literature', (2015).

⁷¹⁶Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', (p. 19).

MISSIONARY EXPANSION

Habermas points out the rise of conservative groups within established organisations and churches, referring to both western and eastern religions. He particularly notes the growing influence of the Christian churches in Africa and Asia, and the Evangelical presence in South America.⁷¹⁷

For Australia, missionary expansion has occurred in waves over the entire history since settlement. This often follows European or US Evangelical/Pentecostal movements. The current movement in Australia runs along the lines of revivalism rather than establishment of new missions. Historically, missions in Australia have been linked to social policy and programming. This has often led to a negative response to contemporary missionary movements.

FUNDAMENTALIST RADICALISATION

In this section Habermas refers to radical Muslims and Pentecostals. Their ‘rigid moral conceptions’ are of concern, alongside their growing global influence. This is also apparent in Asia, with religious sects combining Buddhism with esoteric New Age elements.⁷¹⁸

These fundamentalist groups are also present in Australia. Over recent years they have come to the fore due to Lindt Café siege in 2015 and other incidents. The media play a large and problematic role in the identification and labelling of these groups and individuals.

POLITICAL INSTRUMENTALISATION

Here Habermas makes reference to ongoing problems of violence in Iran, Islamic terrorism, the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan, and the religious right in the US.⁷¹⁹

⁷¹⁷Ibid. p. 18.

⁷¹⁸Ibid. pp. 18–19.

⁷¹⁹Ibid. p. 19.

Although very little religious violence occurs in Australia, it is often spoken of by media and political commentators for social programming reasons.⁷²⁰ The threat of religious violence has created an atmosphere of fear of ‘the other’, and the potential for this violence is ever-present. This threat may be largely imagined, but is made real to the public through these political and media organisations.

The interviews touched on these three aspects under the umbrella term of religious resurgence. Gary Bouma, in particular, notes that there is no question we are experiencing a resurgence, but he questions whether this can be understood as denoting a post-secular age. For him, there have been resurgences throughout history and to call these movements post-secular is too strong a line to take. So the question remains – does the contemporary religious resurgence equate to a post-secular era? For the interview participants, the answer is no. Here there is a lack of consensus between the literature and the interviews. Religious resurgence is of interest, not because it heralds a post-secular era, but because it is an indicator of elements of social and cultural change.

Habermas views a number of western societies as post-secular.⁷²¹ This is a notable position, as it concerns the nature of those societies and the changing conditions of belief in them. He enters this discussion from the position that religion has not died out but is as visible as in previous eras. Instead of seeing social change as a process outside religion, he sees religion as tied to social and political realities.⁷²² It may be helpful at this stage to understand the post-secular as a process, not a destination. David Tacey reflected on this in the interviews by making the proviso that Australia is not post-secular – yet. The post-secular is not a final destination, and can emerge in some places and not others, existing alongside the secular.

⁷²⁰ Simon Tatz, 'The Anti-Muslim Sentiment Is Sadly Familiar for Many Australian Jews', (2015).

⁷²¹ Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', (p. 17.

⁷²² Ibid. pp. 19–20.

Habermas argues that Australia is post-secular, but what that entails for Australia is not fully analysed. Dealing with the presence of both the secular and the post-secular, it can be argued that Australia has entered a time in which a range of viewpoints are discussed and accepted in the public arena. Around the world many people still hesitate to declare their faith position for various reasons, not least the fear of persecution and ridicule. In the western countries referred to by Habermas, public declarations may not be quite as problematic, but discomfort at professing a personal faith perspective publicly is something many people grapple with due to prevailing social norms. This is a very evident way of covertly stifling public religious discussion.

Some change can be noted in the public sphere in the form of social media and internet sites. Blogs, forums, chatrooms, websites, Facebook and a range of other digital spaces are devoted to the religious question and are a platform for discussion of religious identity.⁷²³ In contrast to previous eras, this is one of the most significant changes that may be symptomatic of the post-secular era. Individuals and groups are actively asserting their right to exist and expressing themselves in this digital space and social media, while often gaining significant followings. Whether this space is now too saturated to be an effective tool for the dissemination of ideas is one possible concern; nevertheless, many people see it as a place where they can express their religious viewpoints with conviction.

POST-SECULAR IS AN AGE WHERE RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR WORLDVIEWS COEXIST⁷²⁴

Habermas ignited significant debate when he expressed his ideas of the post-secular in public forums. Since then, the term has gained increasing visibility in academic and social debates.

⁷²³ A Google search of religious blogs and chat rooms returned over six million hits.

⁷²⁴ A. Altinordu and P. S. Gorski, 'After Secularization?', *ANNUAL REVIEW OF SOCIOLOGY*, 34/Journal Article (2008), 55-85.p. 56.

Although he viewed post-secular as an indicator of religious resurgence, there are a number of further claims recognised in this research and these will be discussed in this section.

One area not often discussed in post-secular discussions is the existence and rise of non-belief perspectives such as atheism. Rather than analysing only the presence of believers as an indication of the decline or increase of religion, it is also important to reflect on non-believers as a group, as well as people who may inhabit more marginal positions between belief and unbelief. These liminal positions on the belief/non-belief spectrum are often ignored in statistical analysis. Additionally, the rise of atheism, and what is referred to in my interview with David Tacey as celebrity atheists, was a topic discussed by all participants. This rise was viewed by all participants as significant to this time. Tacey, in particular, sees this not simply as the rise of atheism, but the rise of an aggressive anti-religious stance. Also acknowledged by all participants was a universal frustration with this type of response to the secular, as it positions religious worldviews as simplistic, and even in some ways as destructive to the progress of humankind. Equally as important in discussions was the nominal belief or middle position occupied by many – Gary Bouma, Scott Stephens and Carole Cusack stated that many in Australia are nominally religious. Though the post-secular has connotations of the coexistence of religious and secular worldviews, belief and unbelief, it is not simply that these worldviews coexist in a post-secular age, but rather about the changing character of each of these positions.

For Gorski and Altinordu, the discussion of the coexistence of religious and secular worldviews initially proposed by Habermas is one, not of opposition, but of ‘transformative interaction’.⁷²⁵ Post-secular societies can be seen as fertile ground for explorations of the relationship between the secular and religion and a cross-fertilisation between them. The co-

⁷²⁵Ibid. p. 74.

dependency of the secular and religion is key to understanding the post-secular. Ingolf Dalferth discusses the idea of the post-secular as harbouring oppositional forces, not between believers and non-believers, but rather between the secular state and society itself.⁷²⁶ From the range of perspectives of the post-secular, it can be understood that the application of the term is context and time specific and cannot suggest social uniformity in our understanding of what the post-secular is.

An interesting point expressed by Dalferth is that while it is recognised that religion can decline, for some reason there is less notice taken of the fact that non-religion cannot.⁷²⁷ For Dalferth, if society is deemed as secular, there can be no shift from non-religious to religious, there can only be a shift from religious to non-religious.⁷²⁸ This is an oversight on the part of sociologists insisting on the decline of belief as irreversible, with a concomitant rise in non-belief not considered reversible. Dalferth's assertion that post-secular societies are neither religious nor secular is based on the differentiation he places between the secular state and society itself. In discussions raised in the interviews, the consensus and the overriding concern was not with the determinations of the state, although significant, but with the idea that society is both religious and secular and that historically these two streams of thought have continued to ebb and flow. As raised elsewhere in this research, if this is viewed as the norm in society then to use the term post-secular is inappropriate, as society merely continues to fluctuate as it always has. This is too simplistic a conclusion and disregards the overriding theme of Taylor's work about changes to the conditions of belief at this time. For him, there is something very significant and different to being a believer (and alternately a non-believer) at this time than in previous eras.

⁷²⁶I. U. Dalferth, 'Post-Secular Society: Christianity and the Dialectics of the Secular', *JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION*, 78/2 (2010), 317-45.p. 321.

⁷²⁷Ibid. p. 319.

⁷²⁸Ibid. p. 320.

WE ARE IN A POST-SECULAR AGE⁷²⁹

As none of the participants considered that we were in a post-secular age in Australia, it is interesting to review what has been said about this outside Australia. While Habermas included Australia in his discussions, the interviews did not correlate with or support his claims.

Habermas's original discussions on the post-secular were centred on a number of western countries, including the 'affluent societies of Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand'.⁷³⁰ Habermas argues that these societies are post-secular as they displayed a 'spreading awareness that their citizens were living in a secularised society'.⁷³¹ Although he uses the term in this context to denote a movement beyond the secular, the application of this term is explained by him as

the expression 'postsecular' is not a genealogical but a sociological predicate. I use this expression to describe modern societies that have to reckon with the continuing existence of religious groups and the continuing relevance of the different religious traditions, even if the societies themselves are largely secularized. Insofar as I describe as 'postsecular', not society itself, but a corresponding change of consciousness in it, the predicate can also be used to refer to an altered self-understanding of the largely secularized societies of Western Europe, Canada, or Australia.⁷³²

It would appear from the above quote that Habermas still acknowledges the existence of the secular, but notes the change of consciousness that, for him, is captured by the post-secular. Habermas's definition of secularisation appears to be the process by which religion is excluded from the functioning and operations of governance and public life. The post-secular to him then seems to be a kind of self-awareness in public discourse that even though religion

⁷²⁹Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', (p. 20).

⁷³⁰Ibid. p.17.

⁷³¹Ibid.

⁷³²Jürgen Habermas, 'A Postsecular World Society?: An Interview with Jürgen Habermas', in Eduardo Mendieta (ed.), (2010).

has been excluded formally from certain public spaces, it nonetheless remains a feature of the lives of a majority of the citizens of the country. Even so, there are a number of key interpretations of Habermas's use of the term that are outlined here and discussed by their authors.

Michele Dillon views Habermas's post-secular as

religions potential for remedial cultural resource for contemporary societal ills...an analytic device for acknowledging not so much the persistence of religion as the partial failure (derailing) of the Enlightenment, a failure that by default brings religion back and into the secular.⁷³³

For Dillon, secularisation has occurred but the post-secular acts as an indicator to demonstrate the persistence of religion. In this response, the ambiguous nature of the term is highlighted, as Habermas applies it to secularised societies that nonetheless are experiencing a 'change of consciousness'. This is similar to David Tacey's response in the interviews; he also noted the coexistence of the secular with a more recent change in society that parallels a questioning of its dominance. Habermas's view is that the secular and post-secular coexist.

Hent De Vries also speculates about the meaning of Habermas's words.

Among other things, this would mean that the post-secular invites the secular to historicize and contextualize itself, and, where at all possible, to venture beyond its narrowest formulation and its juridical confines. As a matter of fact and compromise, a relaxed and cool – or, as Jürgen Habermas might say, detranscendentalized and fallible – secularism, one that rids itself once and for all of its reductionist and 'fundamentalist' assumptions, might well be the most and best we can aim and hope for at the present juncture in time... Habermas teaches us, nothing short of a 'new orientation', perhaps even a 'new form of consciousness', is called for.⁷³⁴

⁷³³Dillon, 'Jurgen Habermas and the Post-Secular Appropriation of Religion: A Sociological Critique'.p. 256.

⁷³⁴H. De Vries, 'Global Religion and Postsecular Challenge', in Craig Calhoun, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Eduardo Mendieta (eds.), *Habermas and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013). p. 204.

The new form of consciousness suggested here is aligned with Charles Taylor's discussion of the changes to the conditions of belief that set apart his definition of the secular. Taylor sees beyond those who posit the separation of religion from the public square and the decline of religion as secular indicators, to a change in the conditions of religious belief that mark the secular age. In a sense, Habermas takes up where Taylor leaves off. At this stage, it appears Habermas is indicating social change – something going on within society and individuals. The post-secular here is an adjustment within society to the continued presence of religion.

For Mark Redhead, this adjustment problematises the post-secular encounter with political systems. These systems, in many cases, have been set up and developed over time with the view to an exclusion of religion. Religion, however, has once again manifested itself as a problem in seeking legitimacy in the public square, a place that has for some time normalised its absence.

So far [Habermas] has developed two dimensions to his analysis; a focus on the post-secular as the site of the inter-relationship of religion and democratic politics and a focus on the post-secular as the problem of how to include members of various religious faiths within necessarily secular acts of public reasoning.⁷³⁵

Habermas is certainly concerned with how the presence of the post-secular manifests itself in democratic society but, as noted by Hovdelien, this also can be seen as the comingling of co-dependent worldviews in what is the reality of contemporary life. Hovdelien argues:

Habermas employs the term 'post-secular society' to describe contemporary societies. This implies an understanding of religiously based descriptions of reality as present and existing alongside secular descriptions of reality. Indeed this is how it should be in today's multicultural society.⁷³⁶

⁷³⁵Mark Redhead, 'What's So Post About the Post-Secular?', (California State University, Fullerton, 2012b). p. 1.

⁷³⁶Olav Hovdelien, 'Post-Secular Consensus? On the Munich-Dialogue between Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas', *Australian eJournal of Theology*, 18/2 (2011). p. 111.

Barbato and Kratochwil view the Habermasian turn as one in which the post-secular emerges as a way of speaking and understanding religious perspectives and religiosity.

Habermas proposes the concept of a post-secular society for the project of preserving the semantic potential of religion through a procedure of translation; it has three identifiable dimensions: one moral, one political, and one philosophical.⁷³⁷

From the above authors, it can be understood that Habermas is concerned with political and other related changes, but that he also sees the post-secular as capturing a current trend that forces us to deal with the changes to religion evident in the public square. Operating as both a critique and an indicator of change, for Habermas the post-secular encapsulates a current need to dialogue with religion.

Although Habermas entertains these post-secular changes, he does not abandon secular sensitivities; he acknowledges that secular society continues to exist, but also recognises that predictions of the disappearance of religion were misplaced and, indeed, erroneous.⁷³⁸ Citing a number of contemporary examples, Habermas's revisiting of the secular and his movement towards the post-secular is a timely and necessary reminder that individuals and society continue to evolve. His call for a dialogue between religious and secular viewpoints is particularly apposite in the light of recent events that have often been described using religious dimensions and understandings. At the very least, religious understandings are needed to avoid one-sided discussion of topics that require input from both sides of the secular/religious divide.

In order to further theorise the post-secular, I have reconfigured Taylor's understandings of the secular to three understandings of the post-secular (Figure 7, below). I also draw on Horujy's post-secular self, which represents a 'dual anthropological dimension' in which the

⁷³⁷Mariano Barbato and Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Towards a Post-Secular Political Order?', *European Political Science Review*, 1/03 (2009), 317-40.p. 331.

⁷³⁸Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', (p. 20).

‘religious man and the secular man develop a dialogical partnership’.⁷³⁹ This reconfiguration highlights the coexistence of, and even the co-dependent relationship between, the secular and post-secular. Essentially, Figure 5 reveals the relationship between the secular and post-secular in which the human person is the exemplar of the breaking down of the boundaries that have surrounded discussions on religion and the secular, religion and spirituality, and religion and tradition.

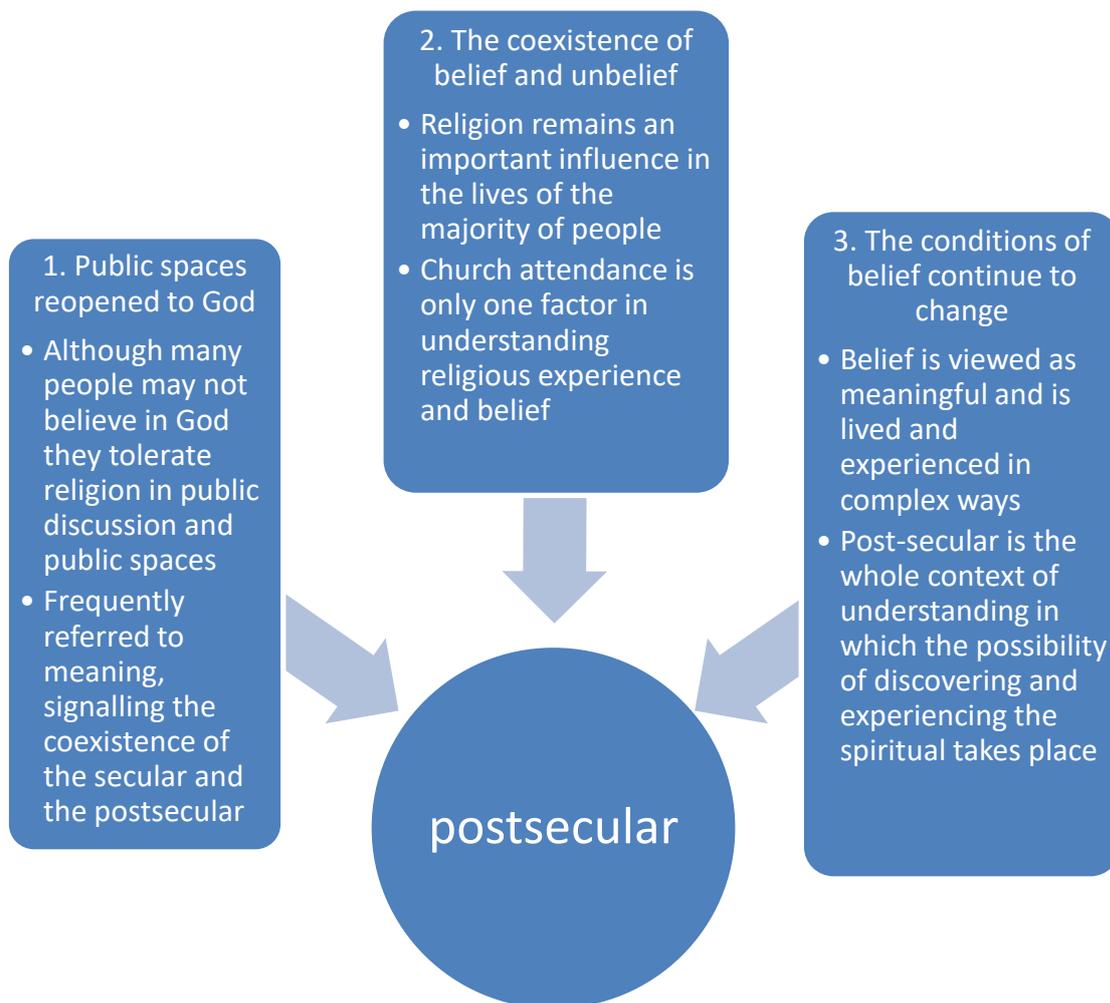


Figure 7: The post-secular reconfigured.

⁷³⁹ Horujy, 'Anthropological Dimensions of the Postsecular Paradigm'. p. 4.

REFLECTION SUMMARY: THE ESSENCE OF THE POST-SECULAR

- The term post-secular has been used by Habermas to represent the awareness expressed in public and academic discourse that the secularisation thesis failed in a number of key ways, including the extinction of religion from the public sphere and the transformation of religion for the individual.
- To Taylor the post-secular refers not only to this historical, political and sociological change, but also to the anthropological vision of the human person and how this has evolved under the presence of the secular.
- The divide between religion and the secular in the public sphere also led to a new way of thinking within individuals, and their relationship to religion.
- Secularisation processes remain present in contemporary public and private spaces but this has not eliminated the function of religion in them, instead it has transformed this function.