

Theses

2018

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

Saskia Ebejer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

Chapter 10. Reconsidering Pre-Understandings

Understanding of myself and my research has intensified with distance and time, particularly when I consider how I initially reflected on my pre-understandings. As Gadamer states, understanding is ultimately self-understanding, with any unchallenged pre-understandings impacting this process.⁸²² The search for understanding required the awareness of my own bias and preconceptions affecting my projection of meaning onto the text. In order to undertake this research, I had to have an understanding of my own expectations about some foundational ideas, in relation to both the parts and the whole of the meaning. The constant task of understanding is being aware of preconceptions. A search for understanding is, therefore, the working out of pre-understandings and the openness of the hermeneutic process to overcome the limitations of them. This chapter returns to my pre-understandings to reflect on changes to my understandings throughout the process of research and that part of hermeneutic phenomenology that is self-focused.

Gadamer's call for a return to the text provides me with the imperative to return to my pre-understandings. There are a number of reasons this return is included in the final part of this thesis. First, I have travelled a considerable distance in my research from my opening thoughts. Second, these pre-understandings are ultimately self-understandings and undergo interpretative changes over time to continue to challenge my own awareness and presuppositions. My understandings emerge side by side with my bias and, in this process, the text becomes a conversation between the researcher and the author. Third, self-understanding and my expectations have been central to this work and are bound up with the drive to find meaning from the text.

⁸²²Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.p. 97.

As discussed in Chapter 2, my pre-understandings have influenced my approach to this research as well as the knowledge examined in the research. That my pre-understandings be made explicit formed part of the methodology and contributed to the development of my understandings. This chapter will reconsider these pre-understandings and explore the changes I experienced throughout this research journey. The assumptions I held needed to be questioned in order to consider their legitimacy and adequacy. Much of the basis for these early reflections was a negative conception of the secular and a lack of understanding of the phenomena, and these obscured my vision, leading me to over-simplified conclusions.

Exposing pre-understandings is vital to hermeneutic phenomenological methods as it situates the researcher as integral to the interpretative process. It acknowledges that I am immersed in the world and its relationships and that I have a personal position on the phenomena under investigation. It makes explicit my perspective, influenced as it is by my background and faith life, in a world that often views faith as a negative belief system. Even though I have experienced some difficulties living out this life, I have also experienced many graces that continue to punctuate my life; at the same time, I could not let either overpower my research. I needed to confront these pre-understandings and make myself aware of the implications of them. As Gadamer states,

It is always part of understanding that the view that has to be understood must assert itself against the power of those tendencies of meaning that dominate the interpreter.⁸²³

In regard to my pre-understandings, two aspects are important. Throughout this research, I have considered myself as an interpreter under an obligation to address preconceptions and move through the research process with openness to what would be revealed. Additionally,

⁸²³Ibid. p. 501.

failing to address these pre-understandings would place this research at risk of simply confirming my own bias rather than revealing the phenomena being investigated.⁸²⁴

These were the pre-understandings I outlined in the introduction:

1. A secular worldview has a negative effect on the relationship between religion and the individual.
2. A secular worldview creates conflict for the believing individual, who must live and function within a society that does not accept their belief system.
3. A secular worldview dictates the relationship of the individual to religion.
4. The secular worldview relegates religion to the private sphere.
5. Religion is more deeply connected to the individual than the secular worldview acknowledges.
6. The secular worldview has provoked powerful counter-movements.
7. A post-secular worldview fosters the validity of individual religious expressions.
8. The post-secular worldview collapses the boundaries between public and private displays of religious belief.

Pre-understandings of the secular

Undertaking this research and exploring the phenomena has led to questions regarding my pre-understandings. It has challenged me to adopt new understandings about the reality (or truth) of the phenomena under investigation in this thesis and influenced many of my pre-understandings. My pre-understandings involving my attitude toward the secular (1–6) have changed considerably. Although I still consider there to be tension between secular and religious worldviews, I also now see the secular in a closer relationship to religion than I previously acknowledged. There is now no doubt to me that the secular influence is far more

⁸²⁴R. Geanellos, 'Hermeneutic Philosophy. Part Ii: A Nursing Research Example of the Hermeneutic Imperative to Address Forestructures/Pre-Understandings', *Nursing Inquiry*, 5/4 (1998), 238-47.p. 238.

complex, and less dichotomous, than I first understood. Yes, it does exist in oppositional status, but it has also influenced the rise of alternative worldviews, as well as religious and pseudo-religious practices. The connection between secular and religious worldviews is far more intimate than I originally considered. This aligns with Casanova's discussion in *Post-secular Society*, in which he suggests that we must avoid the binary categories of religion and secular and be more critically reflective on this relationship.⁸²⁵ So, in effect, pre-understanding 1 has now changed, allowing me to incorporate this perspective.

The secular worldview has a negative impact on the relationship between religion and the individual, but it also has an enabling relationship, one in which the individual can actively consider a range of positions and seek out faith opportunities. This translates into more meaningful individual experiences of religion than considered previously.

As for pre-understandings 2 and 3, there was much to reconsider. That the individual is set against a secular society and must navigate this relationship cautiously recalls to my mind a number of my own negative experiences, but must now also encompass a number of very positive experiences where my religious standpoint was welcomed and even viewed as beneficial. This was contrary to my expectations. As for the secular dictating how the individual relates to religion, I now see this relationship as one in which the secular has come to mean far more than a one-dimensional perspective. It offers me a way of understanding that sees secular perspectives as often facilitating the relationship with religion rather than disabling it.

My pre-understanding of religion being relegated to the private sphere (4) has also undergone some transformation. Although I still view the public/private divide as influential, I can also see that religion is more of a public discourse than it has been for quite a while – even though

⁸²⁵Casanova, 'Are We Still Secular?'., p. 44.

many of the things spoken of place religion in a negative position. It is interesting that the idea intrinsic to the secularisation thesis, that religion should be relegated to the private sphere, has not occurred. Much of the public discourse on religion happens through media channels, but more and more it is emerging through academic and social discourse as well. This was unexpected to me and shows the ongoing relevance and role of religion in all spheres of life.

In terms of pre-understanding 5, I still think it true, on the basis of this research, that religion is an important part of individual's lives, and that a failure to recognise this fact is a blind spot in the secular worldview. The secular position has to acknowledge religious perspectives and dialogue with them in a way that is respectful and meaningful. For a secular ideology to be assumed as normative is a false assumption that ignores the role religion continues to play in many people's lives at both an individual and social level.

For pre-understanding 6 – the secular worldview has provoked powerful counter-movements – I think the extent to which these are linked continues to be debated in academic circles. There would appear to be some merit in this statement, as a number of analysts link the rise of fundamentalism to the marginalisation of religion under secular influences. Although I understand there is likely to be a link here, I also now consider the secular worldview as a catalyst for counter-movements both religious and non-religious. So, even though the link tends towards one powerful extreme, I would suggest it also goes all the other way to the other extreme – the rise of atheistic fundamentalism.

Many people may consider my use of the term 'atheistic fundamentalism' controversial, but if the same contemporary measures are used as for religious fundamentalism it will be seen that these are more alike than unlike. Wrongly or rightly, religious fundamentalists are seen as irrational, lacking reason, ideological individuals who exist in a world where only one

perspective exists – theirs. This can equally be said of atheistic fundamentalism. On that score, I agree that a secular worldview has contributed to, but is not the sole factor in, the rise of these counter-movements. There are also political and social factors that have contributed but that are outside the scope of this thesis.⁸²⁶

Pre-understandings of the post-secular

For pre-understanding 7, my original reflections on a post-secular worldview fostering the validity of individual religious expressions is still true to me to some extent. Although individualised expressions of religion are influenced by the secular, they also continue to be assisted by post-secular influences. Individualised expressions of religion will continue to be a part of religious discourse, but the influence of these kinds of expression may be greater than I previously believed. Yes, the individual is in a real sense creating their own destiny and their own meanings, with this influencing others, but how this will continue to unfold in the future is uncertain. Post-secular influences may further legitimise these expressions.

As for pre-understanding 8 and the collapse of the boundaries between public and private displays of religious belief, I can see this has occurred in a number of areas as outlined in earlier chapters but, beyond these instances and brief moments, this may not have lasting effects. A permanent breakdown of this divide may not be possible. The secular divide still holds influence in a number of spheres, including political, educational and institutional areas, and these historical separations will remain difficult to traverse. There is an acknowledgement that realities sometimes exist beyond this, but for the secular worldview to accommodate this will continue to cause conflict and dissonance. The reality is that the secular, post-secular and religion are very closely intertwined and the general understanding of their oppositional status remains a surface approach that requires ongoing interrogation.

⁸²⁶Michael O. Emerson and David Hartman, 'The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism', (2006): 127.

This has been largely the driving force of this research – the need to look beyond superficial renditions of these complex realities.

I am the post-secular self

Returning to a point I made in Chapter 1, hermeneutic phenomenology draws me closer to new understandings of myself. According to hermeneutic phenomenology, ‘all understanding is self-understanding’; therefore, I stood to gain a unique insight into myself as the post-secular self. I really do see that this has happened. As the post-secular self I have been seeking, I have journeyed with this research, moving towards and away from it, and back again in a cyclical way.

As a research pilgrim, I have developed a way to dialogue with the secular in a contemporary way. During my research, I came across an article titled ‘Traditional, Modern and Post-Secular Perspectives on Science and Religion in the United States’.⁸²⁷ This is a study of perspectives on religion and science, analysing the data around three perspectives: traditional, modern and post-secular. The post-secular in this study is not the mid-point between these perspectives but inhabits a position in which some aspects of both positions are reconciled. I found this very interesting, as even in the reporting of this study by Huffington Post this group was named the ‘Post-Seculars’.⁸²⁸ So maybe I should be called a post-secular. As a post-secular, I see myself as being able to conceive of religion and the secular in new ways, ways that view the relationship between them as more than just conflicted.

As a post-secular I value:⁸²⁹

- understanding the link between the secular and religion as not just one of conflict,

⁸²⁷Timothy L. O’Brien and Shiri Noy, ‘Traditional, Modern, and Post-Secular Perspectives on Science and Religion in the United States’, *American Sociological Review*, 80/1 (02// 2015), 92-115.

⁸²⁸Cathy Grossman, ‘New Religion and Science Study Reveal ‘Post-Secular’ Rejection of Evolution’, *The Huffington Post*, 29/01/2015

⁸²⁹Based on O’Brien and Noy, ‘Traditional, Modern, and Post-Secular Perspectives on Science and Religion in the United States’, (

- seeing the relationship between religion and the secular as an enabling one,
- allowing science and other worldviews to contribute to how I interpret the world alongside my religious perspective,
- recognising that the boundary between the secular and religion is not static and shifts depending on the issue and the individual, and
- realising that religious and secular knowledge systems are multifaceted and both serve as sources of knowledge and values

The reflection on my pre-understandings has been critical to this research as it has allowed me to enter into the process of reconsidering my prejudices and working through them as a catalyst for the research process. As Holroyd notes, 'The opportunity to engage in hermeneutic understanding is likely to arise when individuals undergo any experience that serves to disrupt the ordinary, taken for granted aspects of existence'.⁸³⁰ The disruption of the everyday in my preunderstandings is what I had hoped to achieve, and I think that I have achieved this, fully recognising that these understandings will continue to change.

⁸³⁰Holroyd, 'Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding', (p. 93).