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

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PART D: CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 11. Conclusion

This final chapter brings together the findings from the previous chapters, with the research aims and objectives. It outlines the theoretical and methodological contributions, and the future implications of this study. It identifies limitations of the investigation, and makes suggestions for future research.

From the outset, this research adopted theoretical and hermeneutic phenomenological methodologies to explore the key concepts of this field of inquiry. These concepts were encapsulated in the question I posed in the introduction - What is the nature and extent of post-secular changes in Australia? Specifically, this study aimed at discovering what the post-secular means in relation to the experience of religion. The research objectives were: first, to review the historical development of the secularisation thesis; second, to uncover the nature of the complex relationship between the secular and religion; and, third, to use a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to aid interpretation and guide understandings of the secular, post-secular, religion and spirituality.

This research responds to the growing debates around the role of religion in contemporary Australian society. These debates centre on the so-called growth of fundamentalism, alongside falling church attendance statistics, but overlook the less obvious indicators of change taking place in contemporary Australian society.

The secularisation theory

One of the most significant findings of this research has been that the secularisation theory has proven to be untenable in the face of contemporary changes to the relationship between religion and the secular. The prediction of the extinction of religion by the founders of the

discipline of sociology, namely Weber, Comte and Durkheim, has not occurred. Although initially the ideological impetus of the secularisation theory was formidable, much revision and rethinking of this theory has since occurred. The predicted detrimental impact of modernity on religion has proven false; instead, modernity initiated new relationships between the secular and the sacred. In reference to the Australian context, the secularisation theory has also proven false. Although it was a common assumption that secularisation applied to the Australian context in the light of post-secular indicators, such an assumption no longer provides an accurate explanation for the changes to the role of religion in Australia. One of the ways this has been made manifest is under the still-contested term post-secular.

The post-secular

This research does not conclude that we have entered a definitive post-secular age in Australia, but has identified the presence of key characteristics of the post-secular. These were investigated from a theoretical perspective, as much of the debate on the post-secular is underpinned by theoretical discussion. Alongside this theoretical investigation, the interviews sought clarification of the research uncertainties, but did not achieve consensus on understandings of post-secular definitions, or its impact in Australia. The research questions I posed to the participants were:

1. How do they understand the term post-secular?
2. How does their understanding of post-secular apply to the Australian context?

The interviews achieved further clarity on the meanings of the secular and how this remains an influential position in the Australian and global context. Even so, what emerged was the naming of the post-secular as the beginning of an alternative position that, in and of itself, opens up a space for a rethinking of secular influences and their relationship to religion. As

Molendijk,, Beaumont, and Jedan, discuss, an indication of diverse religious, humanist and secularist positionalities.⁸³¹The case studies confirmed this.

In essence, the post-secular is the recasting of the relationship between the secular and religion. It indicates a growing awareness of the contemporary role of religion in society as an ongoing search for meaning. The post-secular captures two theoretical positions. The first is Habermas’ position – that of the changing role of religion in social and political spaces and the public discourse surrounding the place of religion in the contemporary world. The second is Taylor’s position – that of a significant shift in personhood and how religion has contributed to this change. The post-secular self is the site where the public/private divide has dissolved, and where a questioning of the artificial boundaries forming this divide has contributed to a new way of understanding being and experience.

Even though there is still much contestation over the use of the term post-secular, certain characteristics noted in the literature (see Table 11.3) can be applied aligning with the five Rosati and Stoeckl factors previously discussed. In terms of the Australian context it can be seen that these post-secular characteristics are evident in the religious and spiritual movements investigated.

Table 11.3: Summary of post-secular characteristics.

Detraditionalisation	The interruption of traditions – religion and spirituality not inherited but more actively sought
Pluralisation	A range of belief options are available – traditional alongside more recently emerged, syncretic and ecumenical outlook
Different knowledge and beliefs intersect	The blurring of boundaries between scientific, religious, esoteric and therapeutic knowledge and practice

⁸³¹ Arie Molendijk, Justin Beaumont, and Christoph Jedan, *Exploring the Postsecular : The Religious, the Political and the Urban* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010).

Self-directed	a mobile association with spiritual and religious viewpoints and practices, experiential values, personal goals and inner authority
Reinvigoration of older traditions	Maintaining connections to established beliefs and practices while modifying aspects of them according to contemporary challenges
Sacredness	Due to current ecological issues a rethinking of relationships with creation and the sacred experienced as immanent and subjective
Relationship between God, humanity, creation	a shift in the way human and non-human are situated in the order of creation – emphasis on interdependency

The presence of these characteristics indicates that the relationship between the secular and religion in Australia is dynamic and evolving.

The cultural framework created by the persistence of religion, contemporary world events and changes to our understanding of the human person have situated religion in Australia as a complex phenomenon that requires new approaches in understanding. The post-secular offers a way of understanding religion that shifts it from a primarily negative phenomenon to one in which it is a dynamic, contemporary force that impacts individuals and societies in previously unforeseen ways. Key research findings are that religion:

- is not experienced the same way now as previously,
- is a dynamic phenomenon that can adapt to social and cultural change, and
- is not about those who go to church and those who do not.

The post-secular offers a critical standpoint from which to investigate the secularisation theory and secular perspectives. This research has asserted that the secular is not:

- in a zero-sum relationship with religion, or
- in an unassailable position as the dominant narrative and ideology of the modern era.

In actuality, secular influence is still apparent in society and in individual's lives today, assisting in the transformation of the function of religion, and not the extinction of it.

Religion and spirituality

Spirituality is now viewed as a phenomenon separable from religion and, as such, continues to develop in both secular and religious spaces. The gulf opened up by the separation of religion and spirituality has seen a profusion of meanings and practices emerge that are fed by both the secular and the religious, charting new ways of thinking and believing.

Concluding thoughts: Australia and the post-secular

When I began this research, Berger's 2009 comment (in a discussion at Boston University on religion and secularity) that he 'doesn't know much about Australia' provoked me to investigate the unknown. I have reflected on what is occurring in Australia, uncovering contested meanings and possibilities. Even so, in Australia, the post-secular is an unfolding reality and is found in places previously viewed as colonised by the secular. These manifestations of the post-secular will continue to punctuate the religious landscape of Australia. This means there will be more to uncover in the future, making religion one of the primary indicators of change in contemporary Australia. This continues to motivate me to contemplate the beyonds of our existence. The post-secular offers a framework within which to rebuild ways of thinking about being, particularly about what it means to be a religious person at this time. The post-secular is this process in practice, pointing towards the future, while simultaneously offering a critical lens on our secular past.