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

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# INTRODUCTION

The influence and understanding of religion, in both public and private spheres, have altered considerably in recent times. Charles Taylor acknowledges that these changes mean that an individual engaged in the public sphere may not encounter God there, while in the private sphere belief has become one lifestyle option among many.<sup>1</sup> But, far from witnessing the demise of religion, theorists, such as Jürgen Habermas, argue that the contemporary changes to religion, described as ‘post-secular’ in the literature, are indicative of changes within society, signifying an evolving relationship between society, religion and the individual.<sup>2</sup> This dissertation explores this recent stream of scholarship along with the changing role of religion in the public and private sphere, with a particular focus on the changes affecting Australian society since the turn of the twenty-first century, as noted by Gary Bouma in his seminal work *Australian Soul*. The overall aim of the research is to investigate the impact of the post-secular in Australia and ask the question – What is the nature and extent of post-secular changes in Australia?

To answer this question, an investigation of the current renewed interest in the role of religion in society and in the lives of individuals is undertaken. The latter is preceded by an analysis of the influence of the secularisation theory.<sup>3</sup> Originally theorised as a means of marginalising or excluding religion from the public square, and as a herald of the demise of religion, recent responses to this theory are more critical of its initial stance. Emerging from the field of sociology, the secularisation theory gained momentum and widespread popularity in the 1960s, and has since continued to influence contemporary discussions in the sociology

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 1–3.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Jürgen Habermas, ‘Notes on Post-Secular Society’, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25/4 (2008), 17-29, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), Peter Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World : Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Ethics and Public Policy Center ;, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> The secularisation theory is also referred to as the secularisation thesis. Both terms are used interchangeably throughout this research.

of religion. It was primarily the work of sociologists, such as Peter Berger<sup>4</sup> and Bryan Wilson<sup>5</sup>, who brought the theory to prominence, but it was also influenced by philosophers such as John Rawls<sup>6</sup>. Their work questioned the endurance and relevance of religion in a rapidly modernising society.

The historical roots of the secularisation theory go back even earlier, to the work of Marx in *Capital*, Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and Durkheim in the *Sociology of Religion*.<sup>7</sup> It is based on a view of secularisation that assumes the inevitability of the diminishing presence, and ultimately the disappearance, of religion, rather than the coexistence of religion with secular understandings of the world of experience.<sup>8</sup> Alongside this, particular understandings of the secular, secularisation and secularism have also developed. This research refers to the secular as an ‘institutional divide’ often referred to in public spaces such as education and politics where the influence of religion has been disconnected<sup>9</sup>, but also the presence of the secular in private spaces. Secularisation refers to the processes involved in advancing secular notions, and secularism to the ideological presence of the secular in society. Within these changing paradigms, religion has come to be associated with such negative connotations as diminished attendance and affiliation, antiquated ritual and obligatory adherence, while science often offers more accepted truths.<sup>10</sup> The presence of secular thought, philosophies, institutions and movements was to keep religion in check, limiting if not voiding its power in the public sphere, however these did not provide a satisfactory response to human needs.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, and contrary to the prophetic

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<sup>4</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy : Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1st edn.; Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> B.R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (Penguin, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Based on his earlier work Rawl’s 1993 book is regarded as seminal in this field.J. Rawls and P.J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> See Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup>John Caputo, *On Religion* (Thinking in Action; London: Routledge, 2001). p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*. p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. p. 4.

<sup>11</sup>William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). p. 4.

vision intrinsic to secularisation theory, religion has not died out. Indeed, according to contemporary literature it is undergoing resurgence.<sup>12</sup> Though the literature may describe this resurgence of religion as a 'return', some scholars argue that religion never really disappeared and, thus, that talk of resurgence is more a theoretical construct that recognises the resurgence in scholarly interest in the phenomenon of religion, and a recognition that the theory of secularisation has not played out as expected, delegating the secular to a subject of academic and political discourse.<sup>13</sup>

Prominent theorist Jürgen Habermas is at the forefront of discussion of the post-secular revival of religion. Habermas's previous work on the public sphere, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, bases his writing on the notion of the post-secular, as he explores social change and the blurring of boundaries between public and private spaces, the latter regarded as a necessary precursor to the rise of the post-secular. In his more recent *Notes on Post-Secular Society*, Habermas has noted that there are a number of countries experiencing post-secular resurgence, – in particular in Europe and North America, but also Australia.<sup>14</sup> Although there is a significant body of literature on the European and North American experience, very little has been produced regarding the postsecular revival of religion in the Australian context. This thesis wishes to contribute to extant research examining the post-secular phenomenon within an Australia.

The Australian context provides fertile grounds for analysis, insofar as there is a pervading sense, and often generalised perception, of the highly secularised nature of society. Not only is this a significant generalisation, but it also omits those who consider that Australia has

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<sup>12</sup>Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', (, Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World : Resurgent Religion and World Politics*.

<sup>13</sup>Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*.p. 2.

<sup>14</sup>Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', (p. 17.

never been a secular country.<sup>15</sup> In part, this position is due to the presence of various spiritual and religious movements that continue to emerge and develop in Australia, as well as the history of sectarianism that plagued nineteenth-century Australia.<sup>16</sup> Problematically, studies on the presence or lack of the presence of religion in contemporary Australian society often rely on official statistical data provided by government surveys or censuses.<sup>17</sup> These sources obscure the existence and impact of religion and its evolution on more personal levels as post-secular discussions indicate. This research, in fact, is based on the recognition that religion is a far more complex phenomenon than an analysis of statistics can provide, and impacts individual lives in deep and constantly evolving ways.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to address an area of study that has been overlooked and under-theorised in Australia. Although there has been some reference in recent literature to the phenomenon of the post-secular, there has by no means been an in-depth exploration of what this may mean in the Australian context. A more recent reference to post-secular from a human geographer's perspective is made in the 2010 article 'Religious Belief across 'Post-Secular' Sydney'. In this article the researchers draw on census data to investigate changing patterns of religious belief and identification in Sydney.<sup>18</sup> As these researchers indicate, this type of study can give only a superficial sense of religiosity, as it can say nothing about strength of belief and what impact religion has on everyday life.<sup>19</sup> Like other researchers, however, they do indicate that more in-depth investigation needs to be undertaken in this field. Gary Bouma and Tom Frame have been two of the most prominent recent

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<sup>15</sup>Gary Bouma, *Australian Soul : Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). p. 5.

<sup>16</sup>Stephen Blyth, 'A Historical Overview of Australian Religious Sectarianism Accompanied by a Survey of Factors Contributing to Its Dissolution', *Journal of Australian Church History*, Vol 1 (2012 2012), 81-110.

<sup>17</sup> For example, ABS census data often dominates discussions on the growth or decline of religion in Australia.

<sup>18</sup>Deborah Stevenson et al., 'Religious Belief across 'Post-Secular' Sydney: The Multiple Trends in (De)Secularisation', *Australian Geographer*, 41/3 (2010), 323 - 50.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*p.324.

commentators in the Australian context, with a significant use of statistical data in both writers' work.<sup>20</sup> David Tacey has been one of the most prolific writers of interest with his work on the more recent reawakening of various forms of spirituality in Australia. As the field of religion is dominated by discussions of its decline, these writers have induced to question the meaning of post-secular on a deeper level of inquiry and to question this decline. In this thesis, I have adopted a theoretical and methodological orientation which involves a series of interviews with experts in this field. Hermeneutic phenomenology has therefore been deemed as the appropriate methodological and interpretative framework for this project.

The hermeneutic phenomenological methodology has allowed for reflecting on the complex phenomenon of religion and the post-secular:

- without suspending my own ideas and experiences, and
- by considering the subjective experiences of others as valid in the journey towards the discovery of the phenomenon.

This allows me as the researcher to become attuned to understandings on a number of levels, as I seek meaning in both obvious and seemingly less significant details. Hermeneutic phenomenology offers a philosophical framework without dictating a rigid step-by-step approach, permitting the research and interpretative process to 'emerge' through and 'merge' with my experiences.

The purpose of this inquiry is to analyse understandings about the phenomenon of the post-secular, as understood by those who are involved in the discussion of religion in contemporary Australia. The participants in this research were chosen due to their ongoing interest, work and publications in this area. These academic writers, researchers and

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<sup>20</sup>Including Bouma, *Australian Soul : Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-First Century.*; Tom Frame, *Losing My Religion : Unbelief in Australia* (Sydney :: UNSW Press, 2009a).

commentators are immersed in the ongoing dialogue of the place of religion in Australia and, as such, live the experiences and knowledge I wish to tap into.

This research begins with an investigation of the Australian context and theoretical developments of conceptions of the secular, neo-secular and post-secular. It then examines how these theoretical perspectives apply to the Australian context, and how they manifest in Australian society, through the opportunities for reflection the interview process provides. The interviews, in fact, provide to be an effective tool as they allowed for a Gadamerian ‘fusion of horizons’<sup>21</sup> of the researcher/interviewer with the participants as they shared their understandings, meanings and reflections. During the interviews, I discovered that understanding happens when the present understanding or horizon shifts or ‘translates’ to a new horizon through discussion. Thus, the process of understanding is inherently a fusion of horizons. The old and the new horizon combine into something which has an intrinsic and common value.<sup>22</sup>

The questions I asked the participants in the interviews developed from my initial reading of the literature and the perceived gaps I noted. The questions are:

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

I then examine the current shifts in this context with the inclusion of case studies. As religion is an evolving phenomenon in Australia, I found it necessary to be attentive to the movements that have shaped the past, while understanding present and future directions and influences. The auspicated goal was to uncover the interconnectedness of secular and post-secular positions and explore the dynamics of these two phenomena as one of co-dependency.

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<sup>21</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer & Donald Marshall (2nd Revised edn.; New York: Continuum, 1999).

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. pp. 306–07.

Given the lack of research on the post-secular in the Australian context, this study is in itself significant for it being seminal in this particular field of inquiry. It provides novel insights into the phenomenon of the post-secular and the changing role of religion in Australia. Contrary to the apparent findings of statistical analysis, in fact, this dissertation argues that religion and spirituality remain vital forces in Australia and will continue to shape the nature of Australian society. Even though some argue the use of the term ‘resurgence’ may be overstated, investigation of what I view as a ‘post-secular undercurrent’ challenges the dominance of secular thinking and expression. These challenges occur in a number of ways as this research will demonstrate. One of the first and most significant findings of this research is the discovery that the secular is a shifting concept.

## **Context**

In line with Gadamer’s philosophic approach, which collapses the subject–object divide in research, my story is an important part of this entire research process. The context that I bring to this inquiry includes my own personal story and involvement with religion in Australia. This is coupled with an acute interest in the Australian context informed by previous study in both theology and Australian Studies, outlined below. As a hermeneutic phenomenological study requires an ongoing interrogation of my own pre-understandings, it is appropriate that I continuously examine my background and the influence this has on my current perspectives. My background includes experiences with a number of Christian organisations in Australia, all of which have impacted my current religious understandings. As a Dutch migrant and committed and practising Roman Catholic, I continue to be interested in the tradition of my faith and have often thought about the changes to faith and belief occurring in my country of origin.

As migrants to Australia, my family followed the faith tradition of their ancestry. My parents were raised as Dutch Catholics, and in the village from which they came Catholicism was an integral part of community life. What was then a divided country in terms of religious identification (the north viewed as predominantly Protestant, the south Catholic), their marriage in 1960 coincided with the decline in religious practice in Holland, which has recently been considered at the high water mark of secularism.<sup>23</sup> Despite this, there is also discussion of the reawakening of religion in Holland, even though it is also claimed that religion never really disappeared.<sup>24</sup> It is indeed remarkable, and somewhat ironic, that my family came to Australia, again seen as a highly secularised society, and were reawakened to the faith of their birth here. This occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with various experiences in non-denominational Pentecostal movements and the growing Charismatic movements of the time. As an obedient child, my faith life was fostered in these environments and took on many characteristics of those movements.

On return to our Catholic faith heritage, around the time of my mid-teenage years, a deep desire or need of belonging prompted us to engage with our ancestral faith again. This belonging grew as our newly found love of the Church grew. This faith became, in turn, an important part of my identity and that of my own family, and continues to play a vital part in who I am today. The experiences I have gone through over the years with various religious organisations have not always been positive. I have also experienced many challenging and disappointing moments that have impacted my faith in different ways. Religious experience did not preclude negative or difficult moments; more often than not, however, they have been integral to the experience and have shaped who I am now.

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<sup>23</sup>Joshua Livestro, 'Holland's Post-Secular Future', *The Weekly Standard*, January 1-8 2007. 26.

<sup>24</sup>Sophie Van Bijsterveld, 'Religion and the Secular State in the Netherlands', *Religion and the Secular State: National Reports* (2010). p. 523.

My faith is a strongly lived experience for me; it is not simply an identifier, a box I tick at census time, but a daily reality. I continue to engage with various issues that involve my faith, particularly ethical and moral challenges that have become more frequent in recent times, and look to my faith for guidance in these matters.

Alongside this growth and faith journey I began my undergraduate studies at a secular university. From the outset, I was concerned with how I could take part in an intellectual life and remain a faith-filled person seeing how marginalised faith was in my educational experience at university. I need not have been concerned, as I have been guided by outstanding models of this, both living and deceased, who combined their dedication to the faith with their knowledge seeking. As I began to learn about history, society and culture in Australia, I could see how little I knew about the country of which I had become a citizen. These studies opened my eyes to a level of inquiry based on genuine interest. In particular, my interest in Indigenous Australia grew and I have had the privilege of teaching in this field for a number of years now. Through my work in this field, I began to see how the classification of Australia as firmly founded on secular principles erases the impact of Indigenous belief and knowledge systems so foundational to this nation as their beliefs continue to shape the contours of the nation, both geographically and culturally. As the Indigenous writer Charles Harris said, 'God was already here and with the people before invasion'.<sup>25</sup>

In my later postgraduate studies, I began to take a deeper interest and observe that religion in Australia was predominantly written in the past tense in the academic world. With this was also a sense of the overwhelming negativity with which religion is portrayed in some areas of the media, alongside the stereotyping of religious identity as old-fashioned, a nostalgic

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<sup>25</sup>Charles Harris, 'Guidelines for So-Called Western Civilization and Western Christianity', in Anne Pattel\_Gray (ed.), *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past, Present, Future Perceptions of Christianity* (Victoria: Harper Collins, 1996). p. 67.

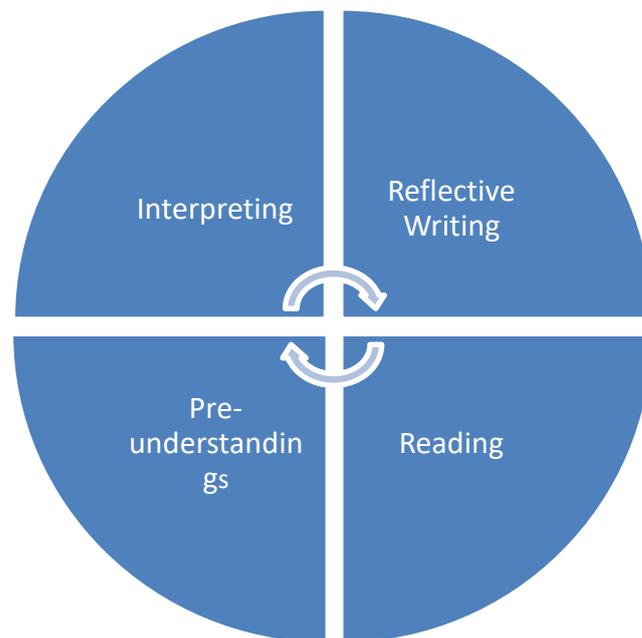
remnant of a lost, simpler golden age, or as an obscurantist and regressive force. This was not the reality of my experience of religion. What I also began to see was the way secular and spiritual worldviews and theories often coexisted in an uneasy relationship for people. In contrast, I began to find an increasing openness to religion and spirituality in discussions with my students. Whenever it came up in the course of tutorial discussion, there was an openness and honesty to much of our discussion, as if students were trying to come to terms with something many of them had never experienced. These were particularly grace-filled moments for me. It was at this time that my research plans began to take shape and the secular environment in which I work offered me the catalyst for this research.

I came across the concept of the post-secular and began to contemplate the implications of such an idea. The last 15 years has been the backdrop to an exploration of my faith. I have questioned, argued and wrestled with changing social, religious and cultural ideas that often circulate in and cohabit the same public space. This research is my way of coming to terms with changes in me and around me that the post-secular symbolises. In this research, I align my personal reflection and experiences with the knowledge and experience of the participants and a growing list of publications on the topics of secular, and post-secular, religion and spirituality.

### **Why hermeneutic phenomenology?**

As important as my personal journey and context are, equally important are my reasoning and choice in the use of hermeneutic phenomenology. I first discovered this approach to doing philosophy in my early research and reading. What drew me to its suitability was primarily the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, particularly *Truth and Method*. In this work, Gadamer outlines an interpretative approach that centres my own understandings, while using them as a springboard to deeper insights. I particularly enjoyed this interrogation of myself and my

way-of-being towards my research, as it enabled me to direct the approach, rather than following a more prescribed or objective outline. Gadamer constitutes understanding as a circular process, namely an interplay between the text and the interpreter.<sup>26</sup> Hermeneutic phenomenology, in my use of it, posits understanding as a circular movement (illustrated in Figure 1) as, through this research, I have continually moved between self, texts, reading and writing in an ongoing interpretative process.



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**Figure 1: The hermeneutic cycle.**

Quantitative analysis is already undertaken by many competent academics in this field and I had no intention of replicating their work. As I wished to explore the deeper significance of religion that is captured by the term post-secular, hermeneutic phenomenology seemed to be the most appropriate framework of analysis and interpretation. It has allowed me to explore and ‘live’ the phenomenon I was scrutinising, and immerse myself in the research process without the need to remain distant from the data. The personal qualities necessary for the use of this approach include openness, sensitivity and focus, making the research process intense

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<sup>26</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. p. 293.

at times. Maintaining this intense focus became very challenging, particularly at times when life events took me away from the closeness necessary for a strong focus on my work.

The reflective devices I used to stay close to the research included an iterative relationship with the interviews and subsequent analysis, journaling, diarising and ‘playing’ with the data. I also had to wrestle with and accept the idea that my work will not be the final word on this topic. Hermeneutic phenomenology can lead to clarity of vision regarding the phenomenon, but with the realisation that this is located within a particular historicity, with new interpretations inevitably to emerge beyond this. So, although I was confident of uncovering some crucial meanings and understandings of the phenomenon, I could not be sure they would still withstand the test of time. . I understood that new interpretations can emerge and challenge currently accepted ideas, and what was required of me was openness to accept and accommodate change.

### **Structure of this thesis**

This thesis is presented in twelve chapters, divided into four parts. Chapters 1 to 3 examine the context and theoretical underpinnings. Chapters 4 to 5 outline the qualitative method used and examine the data collected through interviews. Chapters 6 and 7 analyse further implications of the phenomena associated with the notion of the post-secular. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 offer some extended reflections on the central topics of this research including a case study in chapter 9 and a revisiting of my pre-understandings in chapter 10. Chapter 11 presents the conclusions.

### **Chapter outlines**

This introduction sets the scene in relation to the impetus for this research, the personal context, the purpose of the research and my decision to use a phenomenological research approach.

#### PART A: THEORETICAL

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Australian context, exploring some examples of religious change, both historical and contemporary. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature pertaining to hermeneutic phenomenology and a justification for its use in my research. The central concern is how this method offers a philosophical approach to the search for meaning and understanding while allowing me, as the researcher, to be drawn into the outcomes. Of central importance are the philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Chapter 3 sets the foundation and contextualises this research by providing a historical overview of the literature on the key concepts of the secular, neo-secular and post-secular. Recent tensions and competing issues are examined, as these demands compete with the longstanding and widely accepted secularisation theory. Chapter 4 outlines my method and moves from the philosophical ideas to show how these ideas have influenced the shape of the research process. The intent of the chapter is to open the research process to scrutiny by others.

#### PART B: INTERVIEWS AND FINDINGS

Chapter 5 will examine the findings of the research and begin to explore the interview responses and data, aligning them with the key terms and themes that emerged in the literature review. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 will bring the findings of the research together in discussion sections and present my interpretation of the phenomena to be undertaken in this research. These chapters scrutinise the core topics and themes that have emerged through this research, analysing the essential understandings of the post-secular.

## PART C: FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Chapter 9 examines the contemporary Australian context through the case studies of three religious movements. Chapter 10 revisits my pre-understandings and explores how they have developed during this research.

## PART D: CONCLUSION

Chapter 11 brings together my findings for a concluding discussion and explores the implications for further research.