Theses

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

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Chapter 4. Method

This chapter sets out my methodological approach to this research, bringing together the theoretical considerations of Chapter 2, with their application to the research phenomenon. I begin with an exploration of my pre-understandings and then discuss how I apply hermeneutic phenomenological methodologies to this research. This research is situated in the qualitative field of inquiry and employs the constructivist approach, based on the understanding that I, as the researcher, and the participants actively construct the meanings that emerge through this process. This qualitative inquiry will 'not "discover" knowledge from behind a thick one-way mirror; rather it is literally created by the action of inquirers with the "object" (construct) inquired into'.[588]

As discussed in Chapter 2, some key ideas have influenced me, and this research recognises that I, as a researcher, co-constitute meanings with the participants. These meanings are understood as interpretations and descriptions of the phenomena investigated. Additionally, meanings are never complete but continue to develop and are linked to me as the researcher and my preconceptions. Vital to this process of understanding and interpretation is a continuous conversation between the researcher and the 'texts'. The researcher is not outside the processes of investigation but, rather, as an insider with a history of understanding is implicated in the processes and sees this as a positive role in the search for meaning.[589] Particularly through the recognition of my own relationship to the phenomena, this allows for an approach that is dynamic and evolving, moving beyond the various points of knowing and discovering to a deeper interpretative stance. The inclusion of my pre-understandings in this chapter highlights this relationship.

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[588]Egon Guba as quoted by Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Research in Health: An Introduction* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1999).p. 5.
[589]Laverty, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations', (p. 11.

As discussed in the previous chapter, this approach originated in the work of Heidegger and was later developed by Gadamer. This methodology involves a focus on the human person as immersed in and defined by experience, not as something we may simply know, but as something constitutive, as comprising who we are.[590] This is in line with an approach to religion as phenomenological, as a lived experience that individuals, including myself, are immersed in. The rejection of the subject/object divide is fundamental to my processes of understanding here as I live the research process and method.

Pre-understandings

Integral to this research, and my choice of hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology, is the importance for me of reflecting on my pre-understandings and their influence on my research. In the preliminary stages of this research I undertook a reflection of my pre-understandings. Pre-understanding is one of the hallmarks of the Gadamerian approach. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer notes the importance of awareness of 'one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings'.[591] This necessitates the 'foregrounding and appropriation' of one's pre-understanding.[592] An examination of my pre-understandings offered a vehicle for much of what I have examined in this research and was the beginning of my post-secular journey.

As a committed Catholic for much of my adult life, I believe I have a strong awareness of the secular worldview and its effect on the individual. I began by reflecting on this and other assumptions I carry with me about the secular and post-secular and its effect on religion and the individual. Below, I outline my pre-understandings, reflecting on those I view as significant to this research. I reconsider these in Chapter 10.

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[590]Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.p. 67.
[591]Ibid.p. 271.
[592]Ibid.

1. **A secular worldview has a negative effect on the relationship between religion and the individual.**

In the initial stages of this research, I view the secular as always in tension with religious or spiritual aspirations. Societal change, marked as it is by modernity, has pushed religion to the margins, where it must compete against a wider marketplace of modern distractions.

I assume that religious positions exist in tension with all other views, and that this tension is largely to blame for the struggle religious organisations face. One example I have followed over the years that appears to confirm this is the teaching of scripture in public schools. I am also aware that a number of schools, under that 'scripture' banner, may already teach a variety of worldviews, such as Buddhism and pseudo-spiritual topics such as positive life choices. In New South Wales, and in certain schools that I am aware of, there has been ongoing criticism of scripture classes and 'ethics' classes have been introduced as an alternative.

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.**

On an individual level, a person is confronted with many different values and understandings. Certainly, in terms of influences on the individual, the media often has a strongly biased agenda towards a secular position.[593] The individual cannot help but be influenced by these values due to their prevalence in the public and private sphere.

From my own position as a teacher, I have been involved with people from many different backgrounds and in many different contexts. Throughout this time, I have come across few people claiming to be religious or spiritual who do not appear to be in some way influenced

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[593] One such agenda has been repeatedly directed towards the presence of Islam in Australia.

by a secular worldview. If I look at myself, I also have to say that I have not always lived up to the faith I profess, and I can very easily blend into the secular world that I claim to resist.

3. A secular worldview dictates the relationship of the individual to religion.

The pressure that a secular worldview exerts over the individual is inexorable and ineluctable. This relationship is one-sided and the individual has very little power to resist. With this pre-understanding, the secular is monolithic and dominates many sectors of society. It is a causal factor in the waning of religion; as the secular worldview grows, religious influence diminishes. This, to me, was equally relevant from a social perspective an on an individual level. Didn't the statistics verify this? Fewer people in church means greater secular influence; it was obvious. I myself had witnessed this decline in my own experience of faith and that of those around me. All that was left to do was mourn the loss of the 'golden age' when faith was more widely accepted and lived.

4. The secular worldview relegates religion to the private sphere.

I believed that, once religion lost its public relevance, all that was left was the private practices of its remaining adherents. These remnant groups would maintain strong ties amongst themselves in smaller groups, allowing for the growth of smaller community type churches.

My experiences of smaller church groups were a part of my upbringing in the faith, and what I noticed at the time is that they developed out of a shared need for mutuality and that, often, splinter groups formed from larger congregations. They may or may not have had doctrinal or personal issues with the larger groups, but certainly the members of these smaller groups sought devotional comfort and shared faith experience with other members. Due to the

flexibility and mobility of these small groups, there was somewhat of a push for such home church-type groups in my community during the 1970s, 1980s and beyond.

5. Religion is more deeply connected to the individual and their sense of self than the secular worldview acknowledges.

As the secular worldview has no paradigm for understanding religious worldviews, I ascertained that secular positions underestimate the value of religious notions. They offer, at most, a cursory understanding of the importance of religion to the individual, rather than any real attempt at dialogue or shared values. From this position, religious individuals are often stereotyped and mocked. Even a fleeting glance at newspaper and media representations of religious individuals will lead to this conclusion.

I often resent the power of the secular world to impinge on my life. There is so little balanced religious content apparent in contemporary Australia, with the bias toward the consumerist worldview largely obscuring the spiritual values so necessary for a meaningful life. I have often felt powerless against the secular machine, just one remote voice in my corner of the world.

6. The secular worldview has provoked powerful counter-movements.

Links are often suggested between the rise and activity of conservative and fundamentalist religious groups and the power of the secular world. I have often thought this to be a strong possibility, even though I realise that this is more complex issue than popular opinion may suggest. Even so, the media plays a lead role in creating this opinion of so-called 'marginalised' religious groups, often portraying them as cultic or, even worse, immoral or evil.

On the receiving end of this reality, there was even a sense within the smaller prayer and church groups I have been involved of an 'us' and 'them' mentality. There was an overt need to 'stay strong' against the secular tide that threatened to inundate us. Often, too, I recall that the rhetoric of secular values and worldviews as evil was deployed to galvanise the members of these groups.

7. A post-secular worldview fosters the validity of individual religious expressions.

At a basic level, upon initially reading about the so called post-secular phenomenon I may have misunderstood the term. I have understood it simply as the return or revitalisation of religion, a kind of springtime for religion and its followers. It may also encompass the acceptance of individual expressions of religious adherence, and give individuals room to consider the growing public awareness of religious and spiritual thought. I wonder whether this will turn out to be rather a naive way of thinking about the post-secular. It is highly probable that this phenomenon will turn out to be far more complex and contradictory in nature than this.

Despite such acceptance, individual religious experience and identity will, in all likelihood, remain a challenged and even a marginalised place for the individual, as religion is still so often viewed with suspicion and negativity (such evidenced by the popularity of Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*). If the popularity of this poorly argued book, and similar publications, is anything to go, by the rise of atheism is probably just as notable as the rise of the post-secular.

8. The post-secular worldview collapses the boundaries between public and private displays of religious belief.

One view that is raised in sociological discussion is the relegation of religion to the private sphere. This position is underpinned by personal choice and freedom to pursue faith behind closed doors without impinging on anyone's rights not to be encroached upon by this belief.

From my perspective, this plays out in the workplace. I have accepted that my beliefs are, in a sense, 'put aside' to teach at the institution for which I work. To put aside my beliefs and principles is part of functioning in a secular environment. Obviously, this is not as straightforward a process as I suggest here, but in the case of post-secular society it is suggested that this type of demarcation will be less likely to occur. Instead, religious perspectives will be welcomed in the public sphere. Sounds a little too good to be true, but that is my initial understanding of the collapsing of this boundary.

Theory in Action

This research draws on the phenomenological school of thought, integrating philosophical and methodological considerations that require careful negotiation and ongoing reflection. The methods used in hermeneutic phenomenology are not necessarily apparent at the beginning of the research, but become part of an unfolding process. The path towards this can be found during this research through a relationship with the literature and the research process. There are no prescriptive methods available, such as those found in quantitative research, as the researcher needs to consider the best way forward throughout the research process. In other words, hermeneutic phenomenological research can produce unique research informed throughout by the researcher's understandings and individual research journey. Although this can assist in producing unique research outcomes, it can also be considered one of the most challenging aspects of the work. Nonetheless, it provided me with

incentive to work closely and be guided by those who have trodden this path before me. Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenology is an interpretative approach through ongoing dialogue with self and others, with the interviews providing a way to link interpretation and understanding in an ongoing dialogic process.

Moving from philosophy to method was an interesting and challenging time for me and required me to think beyond reproducing the ideas from the texts with accuracy and precision, to instead explore the ideas beneath the text. I drew on the philosophical ideas of prejudice (the historical reality of the researcher), reflection (working with the interview texts, and my understandings as they arise) and interpretation (as a productive not reproductive process) to inform the key steps in my research method.[594] A number of researchers have used similar methods and assisted me here, including Ajjawi and Higgs[595], Hunter[596] and van Manen.[597] These researchers offered me guidance in how to translate the philosophy to the method while including the above-mentioned aspects that were so vital to me as the research unfolded.

What I considered to be the most appropriate method to employ for this research were interviews that were recorded and transcribed, with follow up interviews facilitating ongoing engagement and reflection with the texts and the participants. In-depth interviews support the dialogic and reflective principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, in which meaning is created between the researcher, the experiences and the participants. I used focused, semi-structured interviews as they facilitate in-depth inquiries into a field of study. I employed interviewing techniques in which I was the listener, keeping questions to a minimum and

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[594] Sharkey, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology'. pp. 31-32.
[595] Ajjawi and Higgs, 'Using Hermeneutic Phenomenology to Investigate How Experienced Practitioners Lear N to Communicate Clinical Reasoning', (
[596] Colin Hunter, 'Hermeneutics and Phenomenology in Research', <http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/13615.htm>, accessed May 26 2011.
[597] Max Van Manen, 'Phenomenology', <http://www.maxvanmanen.com/files/2014/07/SAGE-Phenomenology.pdf>, accessed September 2 2014.

allowing the key informants minimal disruption while acknowledging their expertise. My use of key informants or elite interviewing recognised that these participants had specialised knowledge on my area of inquiry that was crucial to moving towards deeper understandings.[598]

The participants I approached and who agreed to participate in this research are listed below[599]:

Table 4.1: Research participants

Participant	Position
Professor Emeritus Gary Bouma	• Emeritus Professor of Sociology, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University 2008 • UNESCO Chair in Interreligious and Intercultural Relations – Asia Pacific 2005
Associate Professor Carole Cusack	• Associate Professor in Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney • Editor of *Journal of Religious History* and a number of related journals
Associate Professor David Tacey	• Associate Professor Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences La Trobe University • Author of five books on spirituality and culture, including *Edge of the Sacred* and *Re-Enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality*
Dr Scott Stephens	• Online Editor of Religion and Ethics for the ABC • Honorary Research Advisor UQ
Professor Clive Hamilton	• Professor of Public Ethics at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics Charles Sturt University/University of Melbourne • Australian author and public intellectual
Professor Tracey Rowland	• Dean of the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family, Melbourne Campus • Adjunct Professor of the Centre for Faith Ethics and

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[598]Victor Minichiello, Rosalie Aroni, and Terrence Neville Hays, *In-Depth Interviewing: Principles, Techniques, Analysis* (Sydney: Pearson Education Australia, 2008). pp.52–53.
[599] All participants agreed to have their names disclosed.

I chose to do elite interviewing for the distinct purpose of involving others in an ongoing dialogue. In elite interviewing, selected participants are especially knowledgeable about a certain field. They may be in a position of authority or working in a specialised context, denoting both their authority in the field and that they have attained a high level of experience and knowledge. My reasons for conducting elite interviews were NOT to

1. uncover truths – but, rather, to produce a more complex picture of the phenomena;

2. uphold my preconceptions – as I needed to be open to alternate/opposing/new responses and directions. My preconceptions needed to be challenged.

My pre-conceptions and my historical horizons were the starting point of my method and moved me throughout the process to question myself and my developing understandings.

As post-secular research is an emerging area of discussion in Australia, I was motivated to gain contact with the knowledge that the participants have through their concentrated lived experience in the field. The benefits of access to their experience are undeniable; nevertheless, there are also a number of challenges involved in expert interviewing. These include gaining access, which may be difficult due to the constraints of the day-to-day program of these individuals, so some flexibility may be required in terms of location and interview times. Another problem noted in the literature is the 'naive image of the expert as [the] source of objective information'.[600] These interviews cannot be viewed as simply collecting information; they require 'careful validation and a solid theoretical basis'.[601] Hermeneutic phenomenology supports the rigour required of this research as it is based on theoretical understandings that justify this intensive and reflexive approach.

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[600]Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig, and Wolfgang Menz (eds.), *Interviewing Experts* (Research Methods Series, Basingstoke :: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). p. 5.
[601]Ibid. p. 6.

Gadamer has contributed to my choice of these methods by emphasising the ongoing processes of interpretation that take place through understanding, which effect change not only to understandings of the knowledge itself, but to those involved in the processes.[602] In my role as researcher, I adopted self-reflexive activities including journal writing, engaging in a reflective dialogical and interpretative process. In addition, the interviews undertaken with key figures in this field will form the basis of an ongoing dialogue with the topic, called for by theorists in this area of study. Further to these interviews I will seek from the participants a continuing reflection on their responses. I have obtained ethics clearances for this research and abided by the required protocols of the University of Notre Dame.

The underlying questions of this research rest on the development of religion in the contemporary context. There are two initial questions; I asked the participants to consider:

1. How do they understand the term post-secular?

2. How does their understanding of post-secular apply to the Australian context?

These open-ended questions were discussed during the interview process, in which the participants responded to the questions with minimal interruption so as to garner their thoughts and reflections without my direction. Offering the participants freedom to discuss and reflect without overt interference supports phenomenological research as it allows the phenomenon to show itself through the discourse of the expert; this approach seeks to find understanding from openness to the structure of the essence of the other's experiences. Allowing participants time and space to bring out these understandings is necessary in phenomenological investigations.[603] These recorded interviews then became the texts used for reflection and interpretation.

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[602]Especially Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York NY: Continuum, 2004).

[603]Grbich, *Qualitative Research in Health: An Introduction*.pp.170–71.

To assist this investigation the interview component adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology due to its applicability to research that incorporates an investigation of human activities. A small sample of participants was used, as phenomenological studies do not rely on quantitative verification, but on thematic and interpretative methods. This process can be time-consuming; hence the small sample of participants. The selection criteria for participants were that they be Australian academics and commentators who are actively engaged in the field of religion and have worked in this field over at least the last 15 years. For my research the participants were approached for a first interview, later followed up by email contact with the possibility of further brief email/phone contact – in total, up to two hours of interview with each. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for analysis. Once initial data was collected, analysis and interpretation was shared and ongoing between myself and the participants. This ongoing reflection on, and dialogue with, the research questions was in line with the need for the deeper reflective techniques advocated by hermeneutic phenomenology. The guidelines provided by Grbich for a good interviewer were essential to the interview process and included the capacity to listen intelligently, total focus at all times, sensitivity in complex situations, enthusiasm and interest in the interviewee.[604]

Interview process

1. Application for Ethics Clearance.

2. Ethics approval.

3. Finalisation of interview questions.

4. Contacting possible participants (initially via email).

5. If prepared to contribute to research, following up with letter and ethics guidelines.

6. Preparation of interview schedule.

7. First interviews.

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[604]Ibid. p. 89.

8. After each interview, transcription and complete preliminary analysis.

9. Following first interviews, analysis across all data. First, each interview was analysed (vertical analysis); this was thematic analysis in the iterative mode.

10. Emergent themes were reflected on and discussed with supervisor.

11. Coding exercises conducted – looking at data horizontally across the interviews and drawing common themes together.

12. Second interviews– these could be skyped, phone or email rather than face-to-face.

13. Participants given original transcript and researcher considered specific themes emerging seeking their ongoing input

14. Ongoing reflection on these interviews/themes followed up by email – thanks and possible further comments.

The first part of this reflection process involved self-reflection on my own pre-understandings. This signposted some issues that may have become apparent in the interviews, including my questioning of secularism and the conflict between faith and secular values that I had considered crucial to the move towards post-secular discussions. That the post-secular has emerged out of conflicting and competing views is something I hoped would come through in the interviews as either valid or not. That the secular worldview, in my initial understandings, is a strong and influential position was also tested. Contemporary considerations of post-secularism show that this may not be the case as the interviews may raise other considerations.

To further reflect on my understandings I began a journal, some of the writings from which will be included at various points in this thesis. I do not have a strict regime of writing at regular times but used it to record questions, consider concepts and to 'get out' some thoughts or expressions that came to mind throughout the research. A diary was also used to record the

interviews and concerns in regard to the mechanics/logistics of the research. Both of these tools are used to encourage reflection and accountability.[605]

Preliminary analysis

Preliminary analysis took place after each participant interview. Each interview transcript was identified by a fact sheet containing basic participant and interview notes. Information included details such as location, date and time, length of interview and any special circumstances that required noting, as well as major issues to emerge and any follow-up issues. Each interview was transcribed as soon as was practicable after it had taken place. The transcript was then be checked, read and reread for accuracy. This was followed by readings requiring a questioning approach alongside a 'checking and tracking' of the data to identify issues arising, including any requiring follow up.[606] Another reading of each transcript for possible future directions then took place. I printed out the transcripts with large margins on the side of the data and noted both questions and ideas that arose from it. A number of other methods can be used here, such as comparing issues in transcripts with my own experiences, reading the data in different sequences, identifying specific words or phrases, brainstorming and noting issues arising, listing topics covered and 'chunking' data according to identified groups.[607]

Thematic data analysis

Full data analysis took place once all first interviews had been completed and preliminary analysis had been completed. This involved a more sophisticated approach to the data than the preliminary analysis, as by then the issues arising in the data had become evident. At this stage, thematic analysis was undertaken in the manner outlined by Grbich.[608]

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[605]Ibid. p.90
[606]Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis* (London: Sage 2012).p. 21.
[607]Ibid. p. 63.
[608]Ibid. p. 61.

1. Read and reread database.

2. Recall the research questions, theoretical framework, and literature reviewed, underline/colour key segments and/or write descriptive comments alongside in the margins where further insight is useful.

3. Group like segments.

4. Attach overarching labels and identify sub-groupings.

5. Conceptualise these groupings and link with literature and theory.

This thematic analysis involved a focus on repeated words or phrases, cases, narratives and evidence of answers to the research questions. This was done manually, without the assistance of a software program. This was followed by an ordering of the data into meaningful groupings that were easier to manage, using one or more of the approaches discussed by Grbich: the 'block and file' method, conceptual mapping and/or segmentation.[609] Each of these approaches is designed to support theoretical interpretation and assist in the writing up of the data in summary form.

In attempting to understand the information participants shared with me, I moved constantly between the whole and its parts – that is, I considered their ideas and understandings in relation to my own, as well as to each other's, moving through and around the perspectives offered. This movement is not a methodological movement as much as it is an ontological one, as Gadamer's conceptualisation of hermeneutic phenomenology was about being, first and foremost, before knowing. So, for me to have the opportunity to scrutinise my histories is fundamental to my being, especially as new understandings emerged and I could see myself changing in and through the research.

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[609] Ibid.

Challenges

There are a number of challenges noted in the literature that were encountered during the interview and interpretation stage; these are described here for reflection purposes as they impact the practical implementation of this research.

Lack of prescription can appear to foster a casual approach to the research. Contrary to this impression, a scholarly and strong familiarity with the philosophical underpinnings approach were required.[610] Alongside a competency in the philosophical underpinnings of the research, I have been able to draw on the experiences of others to consider the best way towards understanding. This is not based on the more traditional or accepted coding approach, which is sometimes viewed by phenomenological research as mechanistic; instead, it is primarily based on reflection and reflexivity, acknowledging my subjectivity as central to the process while calling in to question claims of objectivity often used to authenticate research.

Questions of credibility are likely to be raised but it must be understood that hermeneutic phenomenology is founded in the empirical data of lived experience.[611] The trustworthiness of hermeneutic phenomenological research is situated in the transparency of the process and the ability to bring the reader into the experiences of the researcher. This involves the researcher articulating the experiences of the interviews and data analysis in a sensitive and expressive manner, enabling the reader to see and hear what the researcher saw and heard.[612]

The call for the researcher to work with 'layers of meaning' required me, as the researcher, to reflect deeply.[613] So, beyond the thematic analysis are the other reflective techniques that assisted in my immersion in the research. Journalling, in particular, is accepted as a way of

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[610]Holroyd, 'Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding', (p. 7.
[611]Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*., pp. 22–23
[612]Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis*.
[613]Sharkey, 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology'. p. 31.

understanding the personal views and assumptions encountered throughout the research process. Alongside this, openness to my pre-understandings was critical as I was not seeking to reproduce ideas and concepts but instead to construct them between the participants and myself. Being upfront and owning up to my own ideas is essential to transparency and the ability to move beyond them. In the next chapter, I begin to explore the interviews and develop emerging themes and perspectives that lead to the fusion of horizons between myself and the research participants. This fusion is critical to the ongoing reflective process undertaken in this research, as it facilitates a broadening of the process of understanding and the realisation that I was not seeking an objective and fixed meaning but instead to open up meanings in a dialogic process.

Case Studies and Hermeneutic Phenomenology

In addition to the above research method, I undertook further interpretive analysis by including three case studies on contemporary Australian religious movements. The three cases discussed in Chapter 9 became an area of focus as my research developed. These movements are exemplars of the post-secular phenomena I was investigating. I initially discovered some details regarding these movements in my early research, which then led me to search and reflect further on their significance. As I collected more information on them, I began to notice some commonalities in their origins, philosophies and devotees. To undertake the investigation of these movements I revisited the Heideggerian principles discussed in Chapter 2, including the circular nature of understanding and the forestructure of understanding.[614] These principles underpinned my interpretive approach as I sought to find

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[614] Heidegger, *Being and Time*. p. 195.

further meanings of the contexts in which people experience religion. As Heidegger asserts, meaning does not occur in isolation from culture, history or the social world.[615]

Heidegger and Gadamer argue that the interpretive process is circular, situating the researcher in a dynamic process of moving back and forth between the whole and the parts of the research topic. By including the cases discussed in Chapter 9, I continued to consider and reconsider the meaning of the post-secular – drawing out through the case studies a more fine grained examination of the phenomena associated with the post-secular. The use of multiple interpretive methodologies to explore a phenomenon, in the context of a single study, is a unique perspective for undertaking qualitative research, hence my inclusion of the case studies. The interpretations blend with my ongoing understandings, interview analysis and other data used in this research to arrive at a deeper and more genuinely phenomenological-hermeneutical interpretation of the post-secular in Australia.

Case studies are often employed as a qualitative way of approaching experiences, phenomena and causality. Merriam describes a case study as 'an in - depth description and analysis of a bounded system.'[616] Furthermore, 'Anchored in real - life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences.'[617] As the analysis process in interpretive, phenomenology involves an iterative and repeated course by which the data (in the form of language and text) are read, summarized, and re-read by the researcher. In this way the case study provides an additional opportunity to synthesize relevant information that can guide insights.

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[615] Ibid. p. 43.
[616] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research : A Guide to Design and Implementation* (Somerset, UNITED STATES: Wiley, 2009). p. 40.
[617] Ibid. p. 51.

The case study approach utilized aligns with hermeneutic phenomenological principles by offering a vehicle to explore the details of the interpretative movements of the researcher in relation to the phenomena under investigation. In addition, case studies allow the researcher to investigate the contexts in which the phenomena emerge.[618] The purpose of this research focus was to develop exemplars of the phenomena. Often used in heath research, case studies and hermeneutic phenomenology are paired to assist in the reflection and interpretation necessary in clinical settings. Benner explains this in her work which uses the hermeneutic circle expressed via three strategies: paradigm cases, exemplars, and thematic analysis. These strategies, Benner argues, 'are useful for allowing the particular claims of the text to stand out and for presenting configurational and transactional relationships'.[619] A paradigm case is 'a strong instance of a particular pattern of meanings'.[620] An exemplar case is useful as 'recognitional tools and presentation strategies. An exemplar is smaller than a paradigm case, but like a paradigm case is a strong instance of a particularly meaningful transaction, intention, or capacity.'[621]

The objective of researching, reading, writing and presenting these examples is to search for understandings that can be used as exemplars.[622] In this process, the researcher ascribes meaning to common experiences that are uncovered during the course of analysis. This engagement with the data, along with conscious recognition of their own background and experience, allows the researcher to question and challenge interpretations along the way.

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[618] Sarah Crowe et al., 'The Case Study Approach', *BMC Medical Research Methodology,* 11 (2011), 100-00.
[619] P. Benner, *Interpretive Phenomenology: Embodiment, Caring, and Ethics in Health and Illness* (SAGE Publications, 1994). p. 310
[620] Ibid.
[621] Ibid.
[622] Ashwin Kumar, 'Using Phenomenological Research Methods in Qualitative Health Research', *International Journal of Human Sciences,* 9/1 (2012), 790 – 804. p. 799.

> The validity of insight does not depend on the use of a variety of cases from which the social inquirer can make generalizations, or in any quasi-scientific design, but from an authentic insight into the nature of a constellation...It provides understanding rather than prediction.[623]

In summary, the case study investigation undertaken in Chapter 9 used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach that included an in-depth focus on three religious movements currently active in Australia; New Monasticism, Creation Spirituality, and Evolutionary Christianity. As my research revealed, these movements are important examples of post-secular religion in Australia. As exemplars of the post-secular in Australia I identified characteristics of these movements based on detraditionalisation, pluralism and blended knowledge systems, as indicated by the literature. These three aspects became increasingly evident during my research, and from the Australian context very little had been written about them. This indicates that post-secular changes are occurring on the margins of mainstream religions in Australian society. These changes often go unnoticed, being overlooked by statistical events, hence my focus on them as case studies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Crotty's four questions in relation to developing a research project have been discussed in this chapter.[624]

1. What epistemology is being held to?

The epistemology of this research is constructionism, the view that no objective truth or meaning exists outside the mind. Meaning is not discovered but constructed. Research is a

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[623] A.J. Mills, G. Durepos, and E. Wiebe, *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research* (SAGE Publications, 2009). p. 273.

[624] M. Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (SAGE Publications, 1998). p. 2.

human activity in which the researcher as knower is central, and the investigator and the investigated become interactively linked in the creation of findings.

2. What theoretical perspective lies behind and grounds the methodology?

The theoretical perspective is interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the lifeworld or human experience as lived, illuminating details and aspects within that. This interpretivist framework of inquiry follows the ontological perspective of not one reality, but rather multiple realities to be scrutinised.

3. What methodology will govern the choice of method, linking that choice to the outcome?

The methodology is hermeneutic phenomenology, the study of lives and their meanings. In hermeneutic phenomenological research, when posing a question the researcher must not just understand the question, they must also live it; helping participants describe experiences as they are lived, to capture their key understandings.

4. What methods will be used?

The method employed is interviewing. Often used in hermeneutic phenomenological research, interviews serve two purposes: first, to explore and gather experiential material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of the phenomenon and. second, as a way of developing meanings through understanding of experiences.