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

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PART B: INTERVIEWS AND FINDINGS

Chapter 5. Answering the Research Questions

This chapter centres on the major topics raised in the interview process and discusses the findings of the initial stage of data collection – the recorded interviews and the transcripts of these interviews. These topics were found to be central to this research as a result of hermeneutic phenomenological reflection upon the data collected, and were evident across each interview forming the basis of this early reflective stage. With each interview the emergence of specific themes became more apparent and related directly to those that had arisen in the literature as being the key factors. These factors were introduced in the literature review in Chapter 2.

To begin this process, I reviewed each recording as soon as it possible after the interview, as well as my notes written during each session. In the following weeks, I began transcribing the interviews and used a 'block and file' [625] approach to sorting the data, identifying commonalities and segmenting them during these initial readings of the data. I reviewed these recordings several times, firstly to transcribe the data, followed by notes and initial reflections. These initial examinations provide the main focus of this chapter.

The two main questions posed during the interviews reflect the research questions and were

1. How do you define post-secular?

2. How does this apply in the Australian context?

The use of these open-ended questions in expert interviews is recommended, as this technique facilitates analysis and allowed me to enter into the world of the participant

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[625]Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis*.p. 66.

through an open conversational dialogue.[626] This also allowed the participants to explain 'why they think what they think' and is the preferred method for interviewing elites.[627] These questions remained intentionally broad to give the participants scope to consider not only the questions asked but also any additional information in relation to each individual's areas of expertise.

A number of topics were discussed during the interviews with three topic areas consistently emerging in each interview:

1. Secular/secularisation/secularism.

2. Religion and spirituality.

3. The relationship of religion to the self.

Each of these topics will be addressed in this chapter using direct quotes from the participants. This initial reflection is then followed by a more in-depth analysis that adopts further hermeneutic phenomenological techniques, the results of which are explored in the next chapter.

Defining post-secular

All the participants were very much aware of the current literature on the post-secular. Habermas was well known, as was Peter Berger's work and others discussed in the literature review. Discussions on the basic meaning of the post-secular as religious resurgence or greater visibility of religion in the public square were familiar to the participants, as was the lack of literature on the topic in an Australian context.

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[626]Joel D. Aberbach and Bert A. Rockman, 'Conducting and Coding Elite Interviews', *PS: Political Science and Politics,* /4 (2002), 673. p. 674.
[627] Ibid.

There were a number of problems or further lines of inquiry that arose out of the interviews, particularly revolving around the problem of defining and applying the concept of the post-secular. There was an oft-stated objection to the use of the term itself, aptly expressed by Carole Cusack: 'the term post-secular has a number of enormous problems', one of which, she suggests, is that its works from the premise that we *were* secular – we need to consider that this has not been clearly established in the literature. Additionally, it is viewed as an ideologically-charged term used to further the agenda of those who may have felt marginalised under secular ideologies. Again as expressed by Carole Cusack: 'I don't know why anybody would actually use it except with deliberate ideological intent'. This suspicion regarding use of the term post-secular prompted me to consider what context the term has been used in and to consider the reasons why this may have occurred. Using the example of Habermas and Berger, my reflections on this are noted in Table 4.1, opposite.

Gary Bouma also noted that post-secular is one term that has, so far, not led to any conclusive understandings as it has too much inherent uncertainty. According to Bouma it is an 'indicator' of change, 'a kind of "hey something's going on term"', but provides nothing more that can be said. Bouma's preference is for the term 'multifaith', as written in a number of his works. According to Bouma, this term reflects the demographic changes as well as the ideological changes in Australia and other societies worldwide. As a sociologist, this word preference would appear to capture these dimensions.

Table 5.1: Usage of post-secular and de-secularisation – Habermas and Berger

	Habermas	Berger
use and context	Since 2001[628] These were in the context of a discussion of political/liberalist issues calling for wider dialogue in the public square that incorporates religious perspectives, is a political response reconsidering regulated secular public spaces, a political response	1999 – de-secularisation.[629]he is not using it in the same context as Habermas. Berger's understanding is based on resurgent religion and is a sociological response to this
In response to:	Political changes, religious unrest, highly publicised conflict in the Middle East and the 'growing threat' of Islam in the west. Also the global rise of fundamentalism and missionary/conservative activity (not restricted to Islamic contexts)	The rise of fundamentalism, reconsiderations of the conditions of modernity, sociological change and resurgent religion
Purpose	I think he considers the solutions so far employed to seemingly violent and negative tendencies in religion ineffectual, and considers greater understanding can be achieved through open and respectful dialogue. This will always need to include religious perspectives as they remain a strong influence worldwide	I think he hoped to reinitiate dialogue about religion and reignite debate about its role in the public square. Also, for sociologists to reconsider the role of religion in the modern world
Conclusion	Cusack's point that the secular is a theoretical device suggests that the post-secular is also then a theoretical device. Secular and post-secular then become sociological constructs to explain the decline of religious participation and the return to	It would seem counterproductive for Berger to reconsider his own theory. I do think that he came to the realisation that he could no longer ignore the evidence and needed to readdress it. Like Habermas, Berger is reconsidering his previous

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[628]Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere', (, Habermas, 'Faith and Knowledge'.
[629]Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World : Resurgent Religion and World Politics*.

	religion respectively. However, Habermas is readdressing some of what he has said before about the secular by reconsidering this under the rubric of the post-secular.	understandings.

Reflecting on this use of the term post-secular as an indicator, I considered a number of possibilities

1. The term post-secular shares the same inherent instabilities and inconsistencies as terms such as 'postmodern'. Equally, the terms secular and modern were/are as controversial, unstable and troublesome and are still argued in academic circles.

2. This instability allows a range of competing definitions and understandings to circulate at one and the same time, fertilising a dynamic field of thought and theory.

3. This reflects the 'newness' of the term as well as functioning to point to its 'oldness', i.e., its historical roots – this helps me as it shows that an incorporation of the secular is vital to any discussion of the post-secular.

Another response noted a much deeper and deliberate opposition to use of the term post-secular. Scott Stephens stated that 'some people won't buy the description to begin with', and David Tacey likewise said that 'any suggestion that religion might be back really gets a whole lot of people upset, a lot of very influential people'. There is as such also an apparent resistance to its use, based on an ideological opposition to religion. This is not a consequence of greater tolerance of religion but an intentional and programmatic response that seeks to keep religion out of the public square. On the other side of this argument, Tracey Rowland suggested that the problem is not only this active resistance to the term post-secular but a lack of resistance to the forces of secularisation: 'we have allowed our own [Catholic] institutions to succumb to this secularist mentality and we have to fight back'.

There was also an inclination towards considering the post-secular as a development of the secular. Clive Hamilton discusses this in his response:

> Well I mean people talk about post-secular to invoke the idea that we are moving beyond the secular age. Not so much that the secularisation thesis is wrong it's just that it wasn't recognised being a certain phase with a certain character that would come to an end.

This response resonated with my own considerations as, from this perspective, the post-secular is a reflection of the secular landscape and a reconsidering of its contemporary applicability. This aligns with the objectives of this research, which are to address this area of study by reflecting, questioning and considering the implications of these while drawing on a range of voices and perspectives to inform these processes.

In line with the above understandings, some responses also indicated there was a movement away from secular to post-secular views of the world and life. Tacey also considered this the possible start of a new era that shows the inherent weaknesses of secular thinking and ideology. It is more than an indicator, operating as a critique that says the secular is a failed project or sociological experiment. Post-secular, in this sense, speaks of the limitations of secular ideologies. To this extent the responses followed the literature, with a range of viewpoints expressed by the participants. From my initial analysis of the interviews, there appears to be more consensus on the secular than on the post-secular. Participants considered the problems and shortcomings of the secular, as outlined and summarised in Table 4.2.

Table 5.2: Summary: defining secular/post-secular

Participant	Secular	Post-secular
Carole Cusack	Questions the existence of a so called secular age – no uniform secular milieu	'Used by those with overt religious agenda' – questions its use
Gary Bouma	Yes it used to say secular (in reference to Australia) but all that meant was we were ignoring religion at the moment	An indicator of change – questions its use and meaning
Tracey Rowland	An overt ideological agenda	Used to indicate the idea that religion matters in some academic circles

Scott Stephens	An ideological position held up to be the norm	An indicator of problems in the fundamental foundation of western political agendas
Clive Hamilton	Secular has been questioned and found to no longer be valid in its previous understandings	Indicates a move away from secular and widely accepted understandings of the secularisation thesis
David Tacey	Secular has become naturalised as the 'default' position	Indicates deep ideological issues and problems associated with the secular

There is no conclusive or majority response emerging through these interviews on how best to define post-secular. The interviewees were mostly general in their responses and could point out and offer small-scale examples, but no large-scale changes are evident. This is in an immediate sense a direct reflection of the literature as explored in earlier chapters. Even though the interview responses resonated with the literature, there was also a sense of needing to readdress the understandings of secular – this was a unanimous response. The secular was seen as needing redress across the board. This is an interesting response, as it shows that the previously accepted and longstanding theory of secularisation is under question with the interviews reflecting the literature here.

From these initial responses, participants considered the definitions further with a number of more detailed comments. These ranged from broad observations that consider historical and ideological factors to more specific concerns, such as the commodification of spirituality.

Tracey Rowland considered the historical development entailed in the use of the term post-secular:

> I think in its broadest sense it simply means that sociologists have reached a point where they understand that religion matters a great deal to many people in the community. It determines their choices and influences their behaviour and that it can't be ignored sociologically speaking. It's an acceptance that the sort of spirit of the eighteenth century, it's not so much that it's dead, but that it's an inadequate way of making sense of the world.

She went on to express the view that 'I don't think we are necessarily experiencing a resurgence'. Here, she prefaces the need to acknowledge the influence of certain cultural changes heralded by the 1960s. These evoked an anti-Christian, but not necessarily an anti-religious, mentality and reflected the 'search for a different, non-Christian spirituality' that exemplifies a number of these changes in the 60s.

Carole Cusack's remarks are reminiscent of Rowland's in the sense that she acknowledges that the whole point of secularisation was to liberalise religion – not eradicate it. She remains adamant that the relationship between secular and post-secular is based on a false premise: 'Post-secularity doesn't work because we never really had secularity'. Secularity, in this sense, is 'the idea we are in a social situation in which everything is kind of uniformly and blandly committed to the secular, totally secular, has never been the case'.

This attitude is also related to the following comment made by Gary Bouma, who remains unconvinced of a post-secular age. He considers the ebb and flow, movement and countermovement, that characterise religious and spiritual movements. These are never straightforward or clearly delineated eras:

> So I think to say we are post-secular and all of a sudden religious difference makes a difference, it made a difference until well into the 70s and then it stopped making difference for 20 years. Now it started making difference again, well which bit are you gonna be post.

The relationship of secular to post-secular is notably present in the comments made by a number of the participants on the relationship that exists between these phenomena, as indicated by David Tacey's statement:

> I mean as soon as we are able to name the secular, and name it precisely as a theoretical position, we are already post-secular as it were. And so it's one thing to be in it and it's another thing to be able to look at it in a slightly objective way'.

As Tacey suggests, the nature of this relationship is a troubled one, in that the secular has come to be viewed as the 'default' position, a naturalised ideology that is above scrutiny. Even the suggestion of a post-secular emergence stands as a critique of this position and opens up the secular to further examination.

Scott Stephens takes this position further. According to Stephens, the post-secular goes beyond Habermas' notion of resurgence to include the 'beginnings of an identification of what is inadequate in western liberalism itself' as it is located in secular values and understandings of the kind of a society desired by its founders. So, post-secular here does not only operate as a critique of the inadequacy of secular worldviews but specifically indicates deeper ideological inadequacies and instabilities.

How does this apply in the Australian context?

The responses to this second question by the participants indicated a more cautious and reflective response than the previous question. For the most part they were hesitant to suggest that Australia was post-secular. The responses ranged from Carole Cusack's adamant 'no' and Gary Bouma's alternative offering of a 'multifaith society', to more qualified no's including David Tacey's 'not yet' and Clive Hamilton's 'these things always take a long time'. These responses provide an interesting reflection on the current state of religion in Australia

According to Cusack, the state of religion in Australia is reminiscent of a more general cultural understanding of Australians as religiously indifferent, with no hint of post-secular resurgence:

> I think the majority of Australians are utterly religiously indifferent. They're not atheists, there are very few real atheists. They are not fervently religious, very few really fervently religious ones. They're either nominal, so they put themselves down as nominally

somewhere on the census or they're 'nones'. That means if you're religious mate I don't care, it doesn't bother me.

With this attitude apparent in some Australian circles, it is certainly difficult to consider Australia ever becoming post-secular – although there is a generalised perception that Australians are indifferent to many aspect of cultural life, not just religion [630]Gary Bouma also considers that 'you can't get much steam up about religion in Australia. Somebody wants to be steamy about their own fine go ahead just don't bug me, that's the bottom line'. Under these conditions, the use of the term resurgence is a considerable overstatement.

Even so, Tacey, Hamilton and Stephens do not rule out the possibility of a post-secular future, or what I will describe as the surfacing of post-secular undercurrents. Tacey entertains this possibility by stating:

> Australia is anomalous because the religions in Australia don't yet understand post-secular. The religions on the whole are just coming to terms with postmodernism let alone post-secularism and therefore the religions are still in essentially a defensive position in their bunkers... religions are in a sense not yet in a position to be able to grasp the post-secular moment, it's far too early... Australians, they are still reluctant to use the word religion so they say I'm spiritual. Now that is partly I think the first indication that we are in a post-secular society.

This final sentence is indicative of specific changes in the Australian context which are noteworthy and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

Hamilton offers a more extensive reflection that exemplifies a number of characteristics, such as changes in Australia as contrasted with the United States, which he sees as taking a more 'atavistic turn'; Australia is in a sort of interim stage signified by what he considers 'regional chaos'.

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[630] Stephen Harrington, 'Australians Couldn't Care Less About Politics? Really?', *The Conversation,* (2016).

So there is something new happening. Whether it will peter out or gather strength I'm not sure. A year or two ago I thought it was gathering strength now I have doubts again. But I think that represents something new and quite different, that is talking about a clearer set of moral principles that goes beyond the superficial ideas which grew out of the 60s and 70s, about finding your own moral rules and following them. So yes that's my sort of sense of what the post-secular thing means... Now we are in this state of regional chaos in Europe and the US and here in Australia, although the nature of the chaos is different in each place, but I can't see any form congealing out of this yet. It will happen but when and in what form I really don't have a sense of, it's hard to say. I mean we saw in the 90s for example quite a sustained emergence of the new religions which still find an airing on the ABC with *The Spirit of Things,* but now that's faded, that's not going anywhere. I mean there are people who adhere to it but it has lost its dynamism it's quite clearly not going to go anywhere even though it has its adherents, and even though the ABC still has the program.

This sense of uncertainty was echoed in the statements by Tacey, who suggests that Australia experiences changes at a slower, often delayed pace: 'There's always a time lag so for the post-secular it will be a few years before people are allowed to talk more freely about their beliefs than they do at the moment'. Even so, Bouma (in reference to the census) predicts an 'overall increase in the percentage of Australians indicating their religion'.

Stephens's reflections expand on this position by considering the question of Australia as post-secular as being bound up with the fact that so much of Australian social life is 'so visceral'. To him the Australian relationship to religion is characterised by

[s]uch an aversion to notions of authority, not just ecclesiastical authority, but moral authority as well. There is such an aversion to anything like social programs or rigorous conceptions of the common good... but also... an inherent aversion to the notion of sin. Put all those things together along with the relative social immaturity and the reasonably adolescent nature of Australian social life reflected in media and political debate, I just wonder because there is not that social maturity, because there is not that capacity for self-criticism... precisely because of all those things in public life Australia is increasingly oriented towards private interests... because of all those things secularism here is different to the US and Europe... Bound up in a godless mantra of live and let live, I'll leave you

alone, you leave me alone. As soon as somebody crosses that line then we invoke a kind of secular divide.

From Stephens's exposition, it is reasonable to assume that a post-secular Australia, if and when such a movement may occur, will be on a different trajectory to our global neighbours, as the secular foundation upon which this movement is bases exhibits significant cultural differences.

Secular

It was not possible to discuss the post-secular without reference to the secular and the relationship between them. It was also evident that all participants were familiar with the secularisation thesis and arguments surrounding this theory. Responses in regard to the secular were centred on defining the term and the contexts in which it is applicable. A further concern was the secularisation thesis and doubts/arguments about its current validity.

The definition of secular is addressed by Carole Cusack, who considers this a straightforward process: 'etymologically the Latin gives us where we are, the secular is the here and now'. This is expanded on by Tracey Rowland

> [Milbank] argues traditionally the concept of the secular meant the world before the second coming of Christ. In the Latin liturgy there is frequent references to *in saecula saeculorum,* until the end of time, and so it was a concept that was time-related. From Christ to the end of time.

This time/era understanding is based on religious roots and the widely known work of Augustine of Hippo, among others. However, for Rowland it is critical that we stop thinking about secular as a 'spatial concept... that there is something called the secular world', as the time-related concept 'mutated' to the spatial one.

Although appearing relatively clear-cut, it is the use of the terms secularisation, secularism and secularity that elicit further responses in discussions. A detailed response related to the Australian context was offered by Tacey:

> So when they invented this of idea of secularism it's not what we mean today by secularism. When they gathered together in their meetings around Parramatta and Perth and Adelaide in 1890, and then leading up to the federation of the states in 1901, to them secular just meant that the government of the day should not govern with a view to religious prejudices, religious position or favouring say Irish Protestants over Irish Catholics or something like that.

An example of this kind of historical movement can be found in the establishment of the University of Sydney. Established as a secular institution, specifically outside religious influence and governed by secular principles such as merit entry, rather than entry based on religious affiliation, Sydney University broke from previous traditions.[631] Although this is the historical reality, ironically the University now boasts various accommodation houses and support services for those with religious affiliations.

So, although Tacey considers the historical perspective to be less clouded by ideological prejudice as these founders had a view to an open and equal society, what has happened since was also a part of his discussion. Tacey continues, 'secularism is still the dominant force by far in Australia. I mean secularism as an ideology, not secularism just as it was in 1901, but it became a materialistic anti-religious ideology'.

Cusack anticipates this type of response by prefacing her discussion of secularity and secularism as 'real problem terms' because of the ideological baggage associated with them.

> Post-secularity doesn't work because we never really had secularity. We had secularisation and we have the secular, but secularity – the idea we are in a social situation

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[631] The University Of Sydney, 'New History Examines University's Role as a Public Institution', <http://sydney.edu.au/news/84.html?newsstoryid=9132>, accessed March 7 2017.

in which everything is kind of uniformly and blandly committed to secular, totally secular, has never been the case.

This position is countered by Stephens, who notes that these terms go beyond being simply descriptive, to an active ideological agenda: 'there is secularity, there is secular, but in terms of the kind of political social programming – it wasn't descriptive, but trying to be programmative and normative'.

Tacey echoes these sentiments: 'secularisation is an indoctrination. It indoctrinates us so profoundly and so covertly I think that it even assumes it's not a theory at all. It assumes, frequently, because it has the dominant position in our society, that it is common sense'.

This then leads to a discussion of the secularisation thesis which is treated as equally contentious by Tacey:

> The secularisation theory is flawed, and all its assumptions are flawed. Its main assumption is that as humanity gets more educated it will have less interest in and hunger for the sacred, and that has proved to be completely wrong.

Tracey Rowland notes areas previously unaffected by secularisation as now secularised

> We have had a few decades of a kind of self-secularisation in the Church's own agencies. We've had secularisation within our hospitals... We have [so] gone out of our way so as not to offend people that we have allowed our own institutions to succumb to this secularist mentality.

For Rowland, secularism is a force that needs to be resisted as its consequences are a loss of religious, and therefore cultural, identity for institutions and individuals. This suggests that this loss can lead to uniformity and lack of distinctiveness, as religious identifiers are compromised on the basis of not wanting to 'offend people'.

Religion and spirituality

There was recognition by all of the participants of the changes to religion and spirituality in contemporary times. A number of issues related to this topic, including the split between religion and spirituality, the proliferation of spiritual and pseudo-spiritual practices and movements, and definitions of spirituality and religion.

DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION

Beginning with definitions of religion, Cusack provides an overview of three kinds: essentialist, functionalist and polythetic. Essentialist definitions are 'insider' and 'theological' and, she would argue, relevant only to theologians. Functionalist definitions look at 'what religion does' but, for Cusack, this opens up other problems, such as religion being relegated to a category of culture or a variant of ideology, leaving little difference between it and other ideologies. Polythetic definitions offer a number of criteria in order to qualify, such as Smart's eightfold typology that includes 'scripture, sacred places etc.'[632].

These references to defining religion are important as they relate to recent changes in how spirituality is understood. According to Bouma, 'the whole notion that religion and spirituality are different in the twenty-first century in some palpable way, I will argue yes'. According to Cusack, religion has increasingly become viewed as a 'lifestyle choice' and not a birthright, as it may have been previously understood. Tacey's reflections follow on from this; 'young Australians are still reluctant to use the word religion... although even when people say I'm spiritual they will often add at the end of it I'm not very religious'. This rift between religion and spirituality is a significant concern of Tacey's:

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[632] See N Smart Secular Education and the Logic of Religion. 1968, London: Faber and Faber.

> The secular people pulled religion and spiritualty apart because it enabled them to be critical of religion while actually ripping out the guts of religion, which is our relationship with God, which was suddenly called spirituality.

This was also elaborated by Stephens, who reflects on Slavoj Žižek's critical stand on modern, commodified and 'fundamentally self-delusory' spirituality. To Stephens, '[s]pirituality is this thing I nurture, this thing that allows me to hold onto my truest and most authentic self', oriented as it is towards nothing other than 'making us feel better about our godless lives'. Hamilton also considers changes to spirituality in terms of personal subjectivity when he states:

> The thing about it is that we come to it with such a modernist subjective understanding. 'Here's this smorgasbord of spirituality, now what suits my personal need' is not what spirituality or religion is about.

Contrary to these notions, he also notes that religion, and specifically Christianity, is 'not just a set of beliefs but a set of practices... that change who they are'. This theme of transformation enacted through religious practices and beliefs counters the suggestion that religion has been emptied of spirituality.

For Cusack, spirituality only means something in religiously institutional contexts such as 'Catholic spirituality... Islamic or Buddhist spirituality, it mostly matches with mysticism and with religious experience and not with "New Agey spirituality"' as that does not align with 'some kind of person who's a religious specialist, it's used to mean anything you vaguely like the look of'.

Discussion of spirituality by the participants emphasised a turn towards individualism and included frequent use of such statements as 'commodified spirituality', 'pick and mix spirituality', 'spiritual supermarket', 'a bit of this and a bit of that', 'individualism',

'smorgasbord of spirituality' and the ability to 'choose my religion', all referred to as recent ideas. As noted by Hamilton, 'the modern idea [is] let me choose what is best for me'.

Religion and the self

Through the discussion of religion and spirituality, a number of comments were made regarding the relationship of the self to religion. These aspects will be discussed further in Chapter 9. One recurring aspect of this topic was the fluidity of the relationship between the self and religion, marked (as Cusack suggests) by an 'economic mode... of consumption' where 'people constitute themselves now'. Bouma offers a further perspective on the evolution of this relationship, which he describes as a 'foundational cultural shift from rationality to experience'. Religion and spirituality have become codified as predominantly experiential and are viewed as valuable insofar as they offer the individual an experience that responds to this need for the self to experience. As Bouma states:

> My experience is my criteria, and provides my criteria for assessing everything. I will listen to yours because it might be interesting and amusing, and your experience becomes part of my experience. You become an experiential object for me... we don't necessarily need to agree on things, it's part of my experience, it's sacred, it's precious, it's unalterable, it's unarguable... What I see happening at sort of a personal level is that you've got people who are negotiating their own lives and want some experience, they want some mystical experience.

More specifically, Stephens is concerned about 'the emergence of a peculiar and ahistorical understanding of the human body' that symbolises the reconstitution of the relationship between the self and religion.

> As soon as you divorce spirituality from the organisations, institutions, habits, accountabilities, obligations that make religion what it is... it becomes the plaything of the individual body – a personal predilection, a quirk, a fetish.

David Tacey reflects further on this view and suggests that the self experiences God and religion in a number of ways, not just in an institutional sense or means

> In my view, we have to accept this individualistic turn and then embrace, widen the notion of what church is. Church occurs whenever God is experienced and sometimes it's within a church building and sometimes it doesn't.

This change from a relationship of the self to a religion mediated by an institutional presence to a religion mandated and sanctioned by the individual is not unique to post-secular discussions but has been emerging over the last 50 years or more, particularly in western society. At the same time, many individuals are seeking stronger institutional connections. These two seemingly conflicting drives do point to one particular question – why are these movements happening in alignment? What does this suggest about our changing relationship to religion? These questions will be considered in further chapters.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an introduction to the main themes emerging in the interviews. These included

- religion and spirituality,

- the secular,

- the post-secular, and

- their application in the Australian context.

The most notable problem to arise in connection with these themes and terms through the interview discussions was the ongoing contestability of them. This provides a challenge for me as a researcher, as coming to a consensus on definitions and meanings is not feasible. On the other hand, these contested meanings provide multiple ways of thinking about the topics and allow for a range of understandings to be equally relevant, even though they may be

contradictory. Nevertheless, these themes continue to resonate in the literature and media accessed for this research, particularly that used in the literature review and Chapter 5. The questions surrounding these areas of inquiry continue to inform my reflections over these chapters.

One aspect raised during the initial reflection stages in relation to this chapter was the absence of reference to terms and phrases often associated with religious and belief systems. I considered the possibility of some words remaining unspoken and why they would be avoided. To assist this reflective exercise, I used a 'wordle' program. I was able to produce a visual word picture of the interview transcripts in order to reflect on the most frequently used terms, as well as those less frequently used or absent (see Table 4.3).

Table 5.3: Frequency of key terms in interviews (Wordle visualisation)

Visually most obvious	Visually less obvious	Absent
religion	churches/church	supernatural
secular	secularism	belief
faith	Christ	profane
spirituality	Catholics	bible
Christian	secularisation	holy
God	tradition	sacred
post-secular		heaven/hell
Catholic		trinity
		theology

In considering why some words were absent, I asked questions about their use, e.g., why, how and when they may be used. I realised that these terms resonate with my experience of religion and my own associations in these contexts. The only word that did not resonate with my earlier experiences was profane. This word had a strong association with my recent history due to my study of Durkheim, who uses it in opposition to sacred.

I began this chapter by identifying the key themes that arose in the interviews and by applying hermeneutic phenomenological techniques to explore them. I chose hermeneutic phenomenology as my approach in this research to uncover the multiple realities within the

field of post-secular Australia. In the following chapter, I will continue this process by further reflecting on the key themes raised here using these techniques which allow me to view them in deeper more sustained ways.