Exploring Secularity

Studying Australian Secularists

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Abstract

This thesis investigates what it means to be secular. Though secularity is the subject of increasing scholarly attention, the discussion is only beginning to be approached via empirical methods. Therefore, many theoretical and conceptual critiques continue to rely upon certain ontological assumptions about the nature of the secular. It is argued that exploratory empirical research is necessary in order to think beyond these assumptions. Through the examination of members of organised, domestic secular associations, I demonstrate that a range of subtle, ‘banal’ (Billig, 2005) and ‘hidden’ (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) forms of secularity are found in material and symbolic environments, social relations and practices of identification. Existing categories with which the scholarship attempt to segregate purportedly distinct secular ideologies were not found to be intrinsically meaningful in terms of predicting divergent forms of political behaviour and secular subjectivity. Instead, an alternative typology emerged from an attempt to organise this diversity. The result is a tripartite analytic typology of which I term ‘epistemological dispositions’. The typology offers a language through which to articulate and explain distinct patterns of secularity. Throughout the thesis, the potential for developing a more expansive social science of the ‘secular’ and its constitutive elements is considered.

This work is substantially my own, and where any part of this work is not my own, I have indicated this by acknowledging the source of that part or those parts of the work.
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Chapter One – Presenting the Research

Introduction

This thesis presents an empirical and conceptual examination of the ontology of one aspect of secularity in Australia – of what it means to be secular within organised domestic secular associations. Long neglected by the social sciences’ preoccupation with religion and religiosity, secularity is increasingly discussed and contested by social scientists (Bullivant and Lee, 2012; Casanova, 2011; Zuckerman, 2010a, 2010b). Whether the analysis focuses on the individual, the organisation or society, an increasing body of research recognises that the nature of being secular has largely been taken for granted by academia and requires more consideration (e.g. Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen, 2011; Knott, 2005; Cannell, 2010). As Calhoun explains: secularity is often seen as the exclusion of religion from the private and public spheres but ‘somehow in itself neutral’ (2010, 35). An assumption of what secularity embodies has resulted in a scarcity of engagement via empirical methods of research (e.g. Pasquale, 2010; Turner, 2010; O’Brian Baker and Smith, 2009), with the few attempts to theorise the concept (e.g. Asad, 2003; Taylor 2007) consequently severely limited. This thesis adopts the view that the construction of the ontology of the secular is best served by employing observable substance and analytic conceptualisation at the same time.
The critique of existing social scientific approaches to ‘the secular’ – or, rather, lack of approaches – is not itself simply methodological. Rather, eclectic yet compelling indicators of the growth of empirical phenomena understood as denoting the ‘secular’ is of notable social significance. This is magnified when contrasted with the apparent resurgence of religiosity in the Australian public sphere (Crabb, 2009; Brennan, 2007; Warhurst, 2006; Maddox, 2004). The first of these phenomena involves the sheer scale of populations associated with the category in survey counts. The extent of those unaffiliated with a religion amounts to the world’s fourth largest ‘religion’ (Zuckerman, 2010a). In the latest Australian census, 22.3 per cent declared themselves as having ‘no religion’ (increasing from 18.7 per cent in 2006) with a further 11.9 per cent not stating a religious adherence (ABS, 2012). Indeed, if we follow Siegers (2010) in interpreting ‘fuzzy religiosity’ – the classification Voas (2009) suggests for those neither clearly religious nor clearly irreligious – as exemplifying lack of engagement with religion and thus a form of secularity, the category emerges as the modal type of ‘religion’ in Australia (Wallace, 2009).

The inconsistency between the contemporary academic knowledge and empirical significance of secularity is sufficient to justify further study of the topic. This dissertation is also of theoretical significance. The inspiration for this project was an engagement with the sociological theory of secularisation. Adopting the irreligious rationalism that emerged from the European Enlightenment – a paradigm that understands religion to be inconsistent with modern science and reason – Weber (1904) and Durkheim (1912), amongst others, assumed that modernisation and secularisation were essentially
coterminous. The notion that modernity necessarily entails a diminishing role for religion, however, is now contested along multiple fault lines. Some argue new religious forms suggest religion is not so much diminishing as altering (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). Others query whether the compartmentalisation of religion to its own sphere is as straightforward as secularisation theory suggests (Shiner, 1967; Dobbelaere, 1987), whilst some question whether religion is declining at all (Hadden, 1989; Bader, 2007). These critiques, although intuitively prioritising a conceptual exploration of religion, bring secularity into the frame and, importantly, require its empirical examination in order to mediate the debates. Indeed, Bader contends that if we insist on using the ‘notion’ of the ‘secular’, it is best to focus on the ‘respective substantive content of the options’ rather than the concept itself, which is ambiguous and complex, and where the debate suffers from ‘shifts from more minimal to more maximal conceptions’ (2007, 104).

**Potential Ontologies**

The dearth of prior examination means the ontology of the secular is full of possibility. Academics dealing with various aspects of secularisation have, however, implicitly suggested some possibilities of its constitution. Bailey’s ‘implicit religion’ (1997; 2001) and Davie’s ‘vicarious religion’ (2007) – though minimal in terms of empirical examination – provide possible conceptualisations of the secular. Others have favoured differentiating internally, according to scope, such as in Dobbelaere’s dimensions of secularisation (1999); or degrees,
as in Modood's moderate and radical forms (2010) or Kosmin's 'soft' or 'hard' forms of secularism (2007). Some have treated secularity as a self-evident, incontrovertible absence by using qualified nouns such as 'areligion' or 'postreligion'.

This diversity of terminology – often used in a haphazard manner – does little to elicit a simple understanding of the ontology of the secular. Each usage is, however, implicitly sculptured by a set of assumptions and understandings about secularity itself. Such terms, thus, provide abstract theories of what the secular involves. Though the scarcity of existing empirical approaches motivates the employment of an inductive and exploratory methodology, the research design is shaped by two hypotheses generated by these theoretical interpretations.

First, those expressing secularity as ‘postreligious’ or ‘areligious’ suggest that ideal-typical secularity is a non-condition, simply involving the subtraction of religion – an understanding inspired by classical secularisation theory (e.g. Bruce, 2002; Zuckerman, 2008; Bagg and Voas, 2010). Such an interpretation promotes the ontological perception of the secular as an absence rather than a presence. In this way it denotes everything that is not transcendent in Taylor's ‘immanent frame’ (2007), or everything that is not sacred in Alexander's (1998) conception of the ‘profane’. Alternatively, if religion is perceived to yield to modernity (e.g. Gauchet, 1997; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), then the secular is modernity; alternatively, the secular denotes fragmented, individualised society if religion is conceived as the precursor to individualism
(e.g. Turner, 2010). Such conceptions of the secular as nothing yet everything inspire the dissertation's first hypothesis: the ontology of the secular is a general absence of something concrete, something intrinsically insubstantial.

More recent work, by contrast, perceives the secular as *something* – something concrete, tangible and thus substantive – and provides a contra-hypothesis for this thesis. This approach conceives the secular as a subjective ideology that constructs and thus restricts religion in ways that are necessarily anti-religious (Lee, 2011). Scholars have argued the importance of anthropological treatment of secularity – something supposedly only possible within the epistemological paradigm that observes the secular as something substantial – a positive phenomena rather than an absence or neutrality (e.g. Casanova, 2009; Asad, 2003; Cannell, 2010). Postcolonial scholarship critical of the notion of neutrality, observing it as a purposeful strategic stance to claim or justify power, has arguably inspired such analytical positions (Stanley, 1992). Scholars within this paradigm contend the secular individual is not necessarily merely devoid of something, but rather is positively and politically acting according to their stance toward religion. Casanova, for example, argues ‘the religious and the secular are mutually constituted through socio-political struggles and cultural politics’ (2011, 63). Such perspective is incompatible with the interpretation of the secular as a mere ‘natural reality devoid of religion...as the natural social and anthropological substratum that remains when the religious is lifted or disappears’ (Casanova 2011, 55). This scholarship provides potent theoretical contention for the substantive treatment of secularity but has, thus far, delivered weaker and empirically unsubstantiated accounts of such perspective. Indeed,
distinguished contributors to the field such as Asad (2003) and Cannell (2010) have supplicated for, rather than provided, an empirical anthropology or sociology of secularism.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the inductive method of research this thesis employs may reveal the secular and secularity as something as of yet unrecognised – to be revealed through empirical methodology. As the above literature is largely theoretical – seeking to delineate secularity among abstract lines (presence or absence) – empirical exploration may expand the conceptual frame with which we associate and study the secular.

In this vein, this thesis will demonstrate that the extent to which secularity constructs social and political life often goes unrecognised and has not, therefore, intervened to the degree in which is should have in contemporary theories of existential secularity. The discussion will emphasise the roles of sociality and epistemological disposition in the construction of secular identities and behaviours. In doing so, this thesis will undermine the notion of secularity as an absence and offer researchers an expanded methodology through which to explore the topic.

**Research Design**

This thesis will explore the concept and meaning of ‘the secular’ using empirical methods. So far, this chapter has engaged some hypotheses concerning the
ontology of the secular. They have been shown, however, to be quite vague and largely unempirical. The research design of this project therefore employs an exploratory and inductive methodological approach. Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen argue ‘there are multiple ways of experiencing the secular – and, indeed, of being secular – and the challenge of social science is to investigate and understand these different forms of secularity’ (2011, 21). Although their argument presupposes a substantial interpretation of secularity, this project aims to contribute to the challenge by engaging with a particular demographic that is expressly secular: members of organised domestic secular associations.

It must be noted that this is only one way in which secularity may be operationalized. The research concerns the meaning and ontology of an aspect of the secular; it is thus not possible to focus squarely on one particular ‘object’ that is conceived in some fashion to be secular. Instead, the emphasis must be on conceptualising and attempting to comprehend secularity in its breath. Given the diverse manifestations in which the secular may be operationalized, this task cannot be achieved comprehensively; the aim is instead more rooted in understanding something of its framework and parameters within a particular context. This methodological approach must therefore acknowledge the contestability of its own claims. The data will establish empirically guided conjectures that do not suppose to be instances of absolute Truth.

The examination of members of organised domestic secular associations to elicit the meaning and ontology of the secular was chosen for two principal reasons. First, as explained earlier, the number of individuals disaffiliated from religion in
large-scale national surveys is in the millions. A random sample of those who self-identify as unaffiliated from religion, or a demographic distinguished by factors such as age or location could have been engaged. However, the chosen subject population allows investigation of organisational aspects of secularist individuals and, indeed, of formal secularist associations. This is useful because by engaging with members of organised associations, this thesis is able to analyse the level (or, indeed, possible inexistence) of solidarity between the various secularist groups.

This solidarity can be explored in two ways. First, from an examination of the existence and dynamics of shared ideological perspectives (both from an inter and intra-organisation sense); and secondly, by analysing whether any formal or informal cross-organisation collaboration exists. Indeed, researchers within sociology and social anthropology have begun to explore these communal aspects of secularity – challenging the perception that ceremony has a special relationship with religion (Engelke, 2011; Mumford, 2011). This project thus offers an empirical contribution to this emerging analysis by investigating the ways in which members of organised secular associations interact.

Organised secularity has always had a relationship with public engagement and protest against public expressions of religiosity (Mutch, 2010). In attempting to empirically and conceptually examine the ontology and meaning of the subject population’s secularity, one cannot ignore the (possible) ways in which they (and their groups) attempt to spread their ideology to wider publics. Classical theorists dealing with secularity and, especially, processes of ‘secularisation’,
envisioned the significance of religious institutions and private religiosity would eventually, albeit for differing reasons, fade away in modern society (e.g. Weber, 1993: Durkheim, 1912). This conception of a linear progression of secularity with modernity has been vigorously challenged within the social sciences for decades (e.g. Casanova, 1994; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Berger, 1999). On this note, several commentators have observed a contemporary surge in the level of religiously infused rhetoric and decision-making in the Australian public sphere (Maddox 2001, 2004, 2005; Warhurst, 2007; Crabb, 2009; Brennan, 2007). This thesis will engage this literature and explore what effect, if any, such shifts have on the sample population. In doing so, the discussion will highlight the divergent ways in which secular individuals engage politically – undermining the notion of secularity as an intellectually and behaviourally unitary construct.

Importantly, as implied above, the selected subject population will have some effect on the conclusions drawn from the empirical examination. The individuals engaged by this research have each made an active decision to join an organised secularist group. This implies a certain degree of reflexivity by the population of their secularity – something incompatible with some existing theoretical constructions of secularity that observe it (at least partially or possibly) as an unconscious phenomena (Voas and Ling, 2010). Comparing conclusions drawn from this research with that directed at a subject population exhibiting some more general form of secularity (say, for example, those holding a general disbelief in God but who do not join secularist associations), may provide interesting dissimilarities but explaining these is beyond the scope of this project.
What is the Secular – Topic(s) and Terminology?

This section will provide an explanation and further justification for the research design and terminology employed in this thesis. The previous section illustrated the inconsistency and imprecise nature with which scholars have treated topics and terminology of the secular. Some have suggested this issue has inhibited empirical attempts to study the secular (Campbell, 1971: 18; Pasquale, 2007: 760). In establishing my own task of providing ‘an empirical and conceptual examination of the ontology of one aspect of secularity in Australia – of what it means to be secular within organised domestic secular associations’, I have deliberately begun with an imprecise depiction of ‘secularity’. Scholars disagree as to the validity and importance of terminological considerations and guidance in social research. This is in large part a result of conflicting epistemological positions, specifically between constructivists who do not focus on discovering an absolute reality and, conversely, positivists who do (Fitzgerald, 2007). Noticeably, Weber purposefully resisted terminological discussion in his work:

To define “religion,” to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behaviour. (Weber, 1993:1).

Weber resists the notion that researchers require an explicit working terminology in order to properly design an empirical study. More recently,
Beckford similarly argued that, from a social scientific point of view, it would be better to abandon the search for, and the assumption that there are, generic qualities of religious meaning and, instead, to analyse the various situations in which religious meaning and or significance is constructed, attributed or challenged’ (2003: 16).

Woodhead (2010) argues, however, that such methodology takes for granted that the research ‘object’ is associated with clear representations – something incompatible with a project that is attempting to investigate an analytically amorphous category such as the ‘secular’. Weber’s (1993: 1) focus of ‘study[ing] the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behaviour’ implies that such social behaviour is self-evident. Campbell argues – albeit over four decades ago and prior to the development of an increasing body of literature dealing with the secular – that the study of secularity can make no such assumption: ‘[t]he claim of the sociology of irreligion to be accepted as an important and viable sphere of study clearly cannot be admitted until its specific subject of investigation has been outlined’ (1971: 17). Such a perspective is supported by evidence that irreligious people identify themselves in diverse ways. Bruce, for example, finds that only 8 per cent of Britons identified themselves as atheists in 2008 (2011: 193), whilst 18 per cent said they did not believe in God in the 2008 British Social Attitudes survey (also see Voas and Ling, 2010: 71). It must therefore be recognised that ‘the’ secular paradigm cannot be reduced or represented within a single tangible form or code. This project will explore resonating themes emanating from the sample population while recognising the
possible multifarious ways in which secular representations and ideologies manifest.

Implications for Research Design

The inductive research design employed by this project – in limiting examination to a subject population explicitly exhibiting a certain reflexivity and acknowledgement of their secularity – restricts such methodological concerns. In working with a codified and institutionalised form of ‘nonreligion’ there was no need for a complicated task of defining the sampling population. The primary source for data collection was semi-structured interviews that allowed for the collection of ‘thought processes and narratives’ of the subjects (Devine, 2002). This was important as it facilitated interviewees to articulate detailed and reflexive considerations of relevant aspects of their identity and activities. The central aim of the project is to elucidate what it means to be secular within the target population. It concerns how the subjects construct their secularity and how they consequently perceive religion and religiosity. A premise of such research design is the possibility of vast and divergent secular paradigms. It was thus impossible to attempt to establish pre-existing, well-defined categories for which to place the data prior to a coherent understanding of the subject matter. It is for this reason a precise working terminology that seeks to compartmentalize ‘secularity’ in some fashion has not been attempted prior to empirical investigation.
In this sense this project employs a grounded theory methodology and its method of maximising variation across the sample population in order to understand the broad parameters of the group. Grounded theory techniques, according to one of their principal advocates, can be ‘stated simply’ as comprising of ‘systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories “grounded” in the data themselves’ (Charmaz, 2005: 2). It is a predominately inductive process that uses the method of ‘constant comparison’ in which any newly collected data is compared with previous data. Theories were consequently formed, enhanced, confirmed (or discounted) as a result of new data that emerged from the study. This research methodology encouraged me to adopt an openness to the possibility of different themes emerging throughout the interview process – something that was facilitated by the inductive, exploratory nature of the project. Further, later interviewees were presented with my interpretations moulded by earlier interviews – allowing a form of ‘peer interpretation’ that, in the words of Clark (2003: 240), ‘enriches the exploration and increases its validity’.

This grounded theoretical notion of “constant comparison” involves maximising variety between cases in order to theorise about the whole – an approach that Polkinghorne refers to as a ‘maximum variation sampling strategy’ (2005: 141). Engaging members of a broad range of domestic secular associations operationalized this technique and allowed the identification of both generalisations and comparisons. These organisations included a diverse range of regional and national atheist groups, state and national humanist associations, university secular societies, ‘freethinking’ coalitions, and rationalist and ‘reason’
organisations. A common factor with all groups engaged by this project is an explicit and official statement, either in print or online, that the group conceives themselves as “secular”. Such self-recognition was important as it removed the researcher from making any unilateral assumptions as to which associations represented the ‘secular’.

Method

As explained above, a wide range of secular groups were engaged by this project. To the best knowledge of the researcher, every organisation in New South Wales, Australia that explicitly conceived itself as ‘secular’ was invited to participate in this research. The maximum variation sampling strategy employed by this thesis led the researcher to several large organisations based outside New South Wales. Although based interstate, two such organisations – The Rationalist Society of Australia and Reason Australia – had operations in Sydney. The only body to reject an interview was The Secular Party of Australia – a federal political party established in 2006. This, however, was not especially detrimental to the project as electoral politics was not a central concern.

Before interviewing commenced, the researcher attempted to familiarise himself with the history and activities of each organisation. This process was complicated by the opaqueness of several of the associations. While each group had a website, several contained minimal or outdated information. The contact details of each organisation were, nevertheless, publicly available through this
medium. Most interviews were conducted in person at the headquarters or meeting places of each organisation. Where this was not possible, interviews were conducted either on Skype or over the telephone. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted for between forty to sixty minutes. All interviews began with the interviewee describing their participation within the organisation and proceeded based on this information. This thesis does not discuss all elements raised in the interviews. It should be noted that the researcher is not a member of any of the organisations engaged by this project.

**Thesis Outline**

Thus far, the research topic, potential hypotheses and methodology of this project have been established. Chapter Two presents an overview of the classical secularisation thesis and explains how it has affected subsequent paradigms of secularity and methodologies for its study. The deficiencies of existing approaches that attempt to examine secularity are explored before a brief summary of the benefits of an empirical study.

Chapter Three expands on the conventional ways in which the scholarship has approached the ‘secular’ by presenting an analysis of the variety of non-intellectual and sometimes non-lingual ways in which secularity manifests in the everyday lives of the sample population. The discussion will then present the ways in which secularity was seen to be, in part, a socially constructed phenomenon. I argue the notion of secularity as an absence, or as a construct of
post- or a-religiosity is not as accurate or helpful descriptor of empirical realities as has been previously argued within sections of the scholarship.

Chapter Four considers the ways in which secular constructs shape divergent political projects. Where the previous discussion presented a general analysis of the social morphologies associated with organised secularity – offering new ways in which to approach secular solidarity – this chapter compartmentalises these data into distinct paradigms. The discussion will illustrate the inadequacy of widely employed existing categories that purport to express distinct qualities of being secular. This thesis will, in light of this, present a new way of investigating secularity – one that codes distinct secular identities in terms of distinguishable epistemological paradigms.
Chapter Two – Literature and Theory of the Secular

Introduction

Chapter One presented a brief depiction of the diverse ways in which secularity has been understood. Contemporary scholarship has been unable to achieve much clarity even though it is increasingly recognising confusions that exist – in the words of one influential scholar: ‘a Socratic mode of wisdom that [scholars] stand in need of in this domain’ (Taylor, 2009: xi). Indeed, Turner (2010) explains that the repeated use of the term ‘secular’ means that the lack of explicit and sustained empirical accounts of secularity is in stark contrast to the plethora of ways in which the theory has been employed within the social sciences.

This chapter expands on the discussion presented earlier and argues that many of the diverse and otherwise alternative interpretations of the nature of ‘secularity’ share one common characteristic – a consensus of observing the secular as fundamentally insubstantial. Whether expressed explicitly in argument or more implicitly through purportedly self-evident assumptions (Yamane, 1997; Bruce, 2002), such interpretations inherently shape subsequent paradigms of the secular and methodologies for its study. This chapter argues that whilst religion has been treated as a positive and, specifically, socio-cultural phenomenon, scholars have generally failed to treat the ‘secular’ in a similar fashion (Wohlrab, 2011; Cady and Shakman Hurd, 2011). Where the scholarship has, contrarily, treated the secular in a substantial manner, the analysis has
traditionally been theoretical, with remarkably few empirical examinations of such conceptualisations. This thesis will contribute to the study of secularity by empirically investigating in Chapters Three and Four the existing literature in a way that has not traditionally been attempted. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to explore the existing literature in more detail in order to thoroughly elucidate its dominating claims and paradigms. First, a brief analysis of the classical secularisation thesis will be presented in order to contextualise the origins and complexities of contemporary debates involving the secular.

**Secularisation Theory**

Though a relationship between religious decline and modernisation has been recognised since the Enlightenment, Weber (1992) coined the term ‘secularisation’ in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber conceived secularisation as a dynamic process that involved a shift from ‘otherworldliness’ to ‘this worldliness’. The shift followed the three phases of rationalism. First, ‘asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into every day life’, causing the amalgamation of economic activities with the ‘meaning and compulsion of a religious calling’. Then, this irrational compulsion transformed into ‘sober economic virtue’ and ‘utilitarian worldliness’ as the religious ‘roots’ evaporated. Finally, once capitalism ‘rests on mechanical foundations’, the need for religious support is diminished causing the evisceration of the social meaning of the religious sphere itself. The result, in the words of Collins, is ‘a world without magic, a world in which the hard forces of the market and the pressures
of bureaucracy give a secular equivalent to individual powerlessness under God’s predestination’ (1986: 51). Importantly, secularisation for Weber was not conceived as the complete eradication of religion from the world, but rather its marginalisation to the private sphere (1992: 43).

The Weberian thesis is frequently evoked as inspiration for more recent theories of secularisation. Over half a century after Weber, Berger adopted and built upon Weber’s conception of secularisation to construct what he termed the ‘Weber-Berger thesis’ (Bruce, 1992: 14). Berger argued that the birth of a ‘modern secularised consciousness’ was a result of ‘the pluralisation of social worlds’ caused by the processes of rationalism; thus ultimately a consequence of modernisation (1967: 9). Christendom, for Berger, provided both a ‘social-structural and a cognitive unity that was lost…upon its dissolution at the beginning of the modern age’ (1967: 9). Modern [1960s] society heralded ‘discrepant worlds [which] coexist within the same society, contemporaneously challenging each other’s cognitive and normative claims’ (Berger, 1967, 9). Berger contended that modern society is thus characterised by a ‘market of world views simultaneously in competition with each other’ and in as much as religion rests upon ‘superempirical certitudes’, this pluralistic situation was a secularising one, plunging ‘religion into a crisis of credibility’ (1967: 9). This perception of modernity – as shaped by socio-political struggles and cultural politics – is shared by some contemporary scholars who argue that ‘institutional and ideological patterns’ are continuously reconstructed by ‘specific social actors in close connection with social, political, and intellectual activists and by social
movements pursuing different programs of modernity’ (Eisenstadt, 2000: 3; Ackerman, 1991).

A related classical theorisation of secularisation originated from the work of Durkheim (1912) in The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. The Durkheimian theorists predicted the erosion of the central role of religious institutions in society as a result of ‘functional differentiation’ (e.g. Bruce, 1992; Luckmann, 1967; Dobbelaere, 1987; Wallace, 1966; Jagodzinski, 1995). Functionalists emphasise that religion is not merely a system of beliefs as suggested by Weber, but also plays an essential function in sustaining social solidarity and cohesion. Durkheim maintained that modern society is characterised by functional differentiation, whereby specialised professionals and organisations gradually replace most of the tasks once almost exclusively performed by the Church. This process was seen to inevitably lead to the decentralisation of the central public roles of religious institutions. Stripped of their traditional social purpose, Durkheim theorists envisioned that the significance of religious institutions would eventually fade away in the modern society (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: 9). Luckmann, in this vein, argued religion would become ‘invisible’ in the sense of being an individualised private form of adherence – one that is irrelevant to the functioning of the primary institutions of modern society (1967: 85).
**Secularity as an Absence**

Secularisation theory has thus generally been understood to denote large-scale processes that result in the diminishing significance of organised religion and religiosity. Whilst some approaches segregate the concept according to the ‘micro-‘, ‘meso-‘ and ‘macro-‘ levels (e.g. Dobbelaere, 1999) – in which three levels of analysis are proposed (the individual, the subsystem and the societal) – secularisation is conventionally divided into two streams: the separation of religion and politics and the decreasing levels of participation in traditional religion. Some commentators highlight differentiation of religious and unreligious spheres (e.g. Martin, 1978) and in doing so contrast differentiation with decline. Such interpretations do not, however, suggest that religion maintains a vital though compartmentalised position in any sphere in which it has traditionally enjoyed such a role. Rather, it suggests that religion *ceases* to play the same vital role in one or several spheres and therefore a singular notion of secularisation, using the related concepts of marginalisation, diminishment, decline and decreasing significance, is sufficient.

It is because it is a theorisation of decline that the secularisation thesis generally perceives the secular, not as a substantial, autonomous and ontologically distinct entity or behaviour, but instead simply as a measure of the marginalisation of religion. In other words, the most prevalent conception of the secular is that it merely encapsulates an analytical category and does not represent any autonomous form of social experience – that it is inherently insubstantial. These interpretations therefore have their origins, in particular, in the work of the
classical theorists dealing with secularisation. In such models the secular condition represents an a-religious or post-religious state, purportedly with no substantive ontology of its own.

Representative of this scholarship include leading ‘secularizationist’ (Bruce, 2011: 3), Bruce (2002), and pioneering researcher of atheism, Zuckerman (2008; 2010a, 2010b). Bagg and Voas (2010) have recently employed what they describe as ‘the triumph of indifference’ in order to ‘prove the secularity’ of Britain. This approach is illustrated in more depth in the work of Norris and Inglehart (2004) who demonstrate that conventional religiosiy is marginalised when ‘existential security’ – a construct combining physical security and a certain degree of affluence – is realised, with religiosiy presented (problematically) as a comforting fallback for those experiencing a sense of ‘ontological insecurity’ (2004: 21). Secularity therefore purportedly emerges, at least in the contemporary era, as the default position when socio-economic conditions are favourable – and is consequently defined by an absence of insecurity (and, thus, religiosiy). To present one influential exposition, Bruce provides the following summary:

In so far as I can imagine an endpoint [of secularisation], it would not be self-conscious irreligion; you have to care too much about religion to be irreligious. It would be widespread indifference (what Weber called being religiously unmusical); no socially significant shared religion; and religious ideas being no more common than would be the case if all minds were wiped blank and people began from scratch to think about the
world and their place in it. This is an important point, because the critics often assume that the secularisation paradigm supposes the human default position to be instrumental, materialist atheism (Bruce, 2002: 42).

Stark (1999) and others propose an alternative conception in what has been described as the ‘rational choice theory of religion’ (see Bruce, 1999; for a critique see Lehmann, 2010). This alternative is consistent, however, with Bruce’s interpretation in that it perceives the secular as a non-entity. Rational choice approaches developed from the work of Stark and Bainbridge (1996) that applies economic processes to the social-scientific study of religion. They argue that religious markets utilise a core product – admittance to an afterlife – and as the delivery to consumers of such product is by its nature impossible within their lifespan, religion acts as a proxy or, in their language, the requisite ‘compensator’. Crucially for their thesis, Stark and Bainbridge (1996) claim this ‘product’ is of universal appeal. The demand for religious compensators is thus conceived as constant with any failure to engage a provider simply a supply-side deficiency – such as, for example, during periods of insufficient competition (Lehmann, 2010: 181-184). Secularised society in this paradigm is reconceived as a potentially reversible state as even though indicators of engagement with traditional religious activity may diminish, this does not in itself illustrate that the demand for such ‘product’ has dissolved. This approach therefore inherently undermines the notion that apparently secular individuals are at all ‘secular’. Instead, secularity is simply a liminal or transitional state as a result of contextual deficiencies of supply – conforming to the predominant interpretation that conceives secularity as insubstantial.
In this way, rational choice theory presents an exemplar for a trend occurring more widely within the contemporary secularisation literature. Recent accounts claiming the resurgence of religion have replicated arguments such as Stark and Bainbridge’s (1996) in sidelining examination of the secular. Indeed, Lehmann goes so far to suggest that rational choice theorists of religion have a strong claim to being the precursors in a ‘reversal of consensus’ in relation to secularisation (2010: 1870). The scholars to which Lehmann refer agree conceptually as to the resurgence of religion though perceive differing empirical ‘directions’ of change: ‘de-secularisation’ (e.g. Berger 1999a; 1999b), ‘re-sacralisation’ e.g. Davie, 2007) and ‘re-enchantment’ (e.g. Gane, 2002; Berman, 1981). Others maintain secularisation’s traditional conception of ‘religious decline’ should be modified to ‘religious change’. In this vein, some emphasise the growing significance of individualised religion (e.g. Luckmann, 1992; Jagodzinski and Dobbelaere, 1995) or alternate sources of quasi-religious spirituality (e.g. Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Houtman and Mascini, 2002; Houtman and Aupers, 2007). A thorough examination of each theorisation is beyond the scope of this project but, importantly, such theories shelve any potential examination of the state of being secular, instead favouring analysis of what is perceived to be the more significant condition, religiousness. Such approaches focus on uncovering forms of religiousness beneath an apparently secular façade, marginalising the need for investigating secularity as a potentially autonomous state.
Secularity as an Absence: Implications for Existing Empirical Methodologies

The previous section illustrated the pervasiveness of identifying secularity as an absence or insubstantial entity within the secularisation scholarship. Such a widespread paradigmatic view has meant that many of the data dealing with the secular are of limited use in terms of elucidating what secularity may mean. Large-scale surveys focus almost exclusively on traditional religiosity, invariably attempting to quantify religious affiliation and church participation. Some have broadened the exploration to a larger set of phenomena – although still explicitly Christianised or Abrahamic – such as belief in God or a higher power, the afterlife, sin and the devil (e.g. Davie, 1994; Halman and Draulans, 2006; Keysar and Kosmin, 2007; Voas and Crockett, 2005). Such methodologies are interested in explaining movement away from traditional modes of religiosity rather than exploring the possible existence of a modern and distinct condition. Voas and Day (2007) explain that while correlations between lower levels of religiosity can be made with other areligious characteristics included in such surveys, attempts to do so are inevitably restricted as they are only able to associate such connections with a very crudely defined irreligious group: either those who do not believe in God, say, or those who do not attend organised religion services.

These methodologies are not employed to aid investigation or differentiation of this population into more precise types. Rather, they treat secularity as ‘residual category’ (Campbell, 1971: 16; Vernon, 1968). Some have commented that this is the principal barrier that restricts the usefulness of existing quantitative data and analyses of unreligious populations (Campbell, 1971: 10; Barker, 2007;
Vernon, 1968). In addition to these concerns, it must be noted the inconsistency with which secular options are provided. The Australian census, for example, provides the option to recognise oneself as having ‘no religion’ – other surveys have provided options such as ‘not religious’, ‘none’, ‘atheist’, ‘agnostic’ or even ‘atheist/agnostic’ (Barker, 2007). Without qualitative study it is impossible to understand how such opaque and contestable categories are interpreted and, therefore, what they tell us about the group in question.

The few qualitative approaches conducted, however, have been shaped by the conception of the secular as insubstantial – not as ‘something in need of elaboration and understanding’ (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen, 2011: 5). While, as explained in Chapter One, there is burgeoning interest in secularity, the scholarship has remained principally interested with how religion interacts with and is mutually constituted by the political, economic and administrative unreligious spheres. This approach considers religion ‘in relation’ rather than examining the substantive framework and ontology of secularity. In this way it explores the interaction between the religious and the secular but does not make analysis of the secular its principal concern. Those scholars who do focus on empirical examination of secular populations often define their subject as the absence of religion (e.g. Zuckerman, 2008). A leading psychologist dealing with nonreligion, Beit-Hallahmi (2007) explains: ‘those who have shaped the modern human sciences have been preoccupied with explaining the phenomena of religion and religiosity [...] accounting for the absence of religious faith has never been of much concern to them’ (cited in Zuckerman, 2008: 95).
Zuckerman (2008) has arguably conducted one of the most extensive qualitative examinations of secular populations. By interviewing a cross-section of the whole Scandinavian population he considers what life is like in ‘societies without God’ (2008: 75). Zuckerman’s attraction to the ‘insubstantialist’ theory of secularity is explicit. He explains: ‘a constant theoretical and methodological question for me during my time in Scandinavia’ was exactly ‘how to study the relative absence of something’ (Zuckerman, 2008: 76); and argues that the ‘fascinating sociological and theoretical implications’ of his study are ‘not only our understanding of religion, but for our understanding of its absence’ (2008: 57). Zuckerman does, briefly, pose the question of what it means to be secular but answers it in one short statement: ‘though the meaning is ‘nebulous and fuzzy’ [...] and ‘changes over time and in different contexts, generally when we speak of someone being secular...we basically mean that he or she is not religious’ (2008: 95). Such analysis does not consider the possibility that secularity is a substantive and subjective ideological construct.

Secularity as a Presence

Working against the tradition of perceiving secularity as a subtractive condition, an emerging body of literature provides alternative ways of conceiving the secular. Taking a relational stance to ontology – in which neutrality is perceived to be a political strategy rather than a representation of reality – scholars have argued that if secularity involves any relation to religion it will inevitably engage some form of position-taking and, therefore, is necessarily substantive or, more
precisely, ideological in nature. Although offering far more of a critique than a substantive empirical or theoretical account, scholars such as Asad (2003), McLennan (2010) and Cannell (2010) have effectively argued this point. They argue secularity is substantial and naturally varies in quality and quantity. As Cannell argues: ‘the powerful idea of secularism’ is as something with ‘effects [that] – like the effects of some religious faiths – vary according to how far people believe in it and in which ways’ (2010: 86). Casanova similarly argues secularism refers to the ‘range of modern secular would-views and ideologies’ that are ‘consciously held and explicitly elaborated into normative-ideological...epistemic knowledge regimes’ (2011: 55, emphasis added). Such theoretical approaches – whilst empirically unsubstantiated – reject the dominant tradition of sidestepping engagement with secularity.

There have been few empirical examinations of such theorisations. This widely-observed scarcity of empirical study of secularity (Vernon, 1968; Campbell, 1971; Zuckerman, 2010a; Pasquale, 2007) has been explained by Campbell as a result of ‘sociology’s foundations in an irreligious epoch’ that led, paradoxically, to a perception of religion as an irrational and unscientific oddity – a “problem” to be explained, and vastly different from the unremarkable, taken-for-granted phenomenon of secularity (1971: 8). Pasquale’s (2010) examination of organised secular groups in mid-Western areas of the United States is one notable exception. He observes a rich diversity in the way in which the sample population engaged with religion:
Even if secularisation is not a straight-line trajectory culminating in “hard secularity,” there is evidence of increasing individuality and eclecticism in people’s constructions of their existential and metaphysical worldviews. The more closely we look at affiliated secularists, the more cultural diversity becomes apparent among the institutions they create. [...] The central preoccupations, and institutional ethos, in Atheist, Sceptic, and Secular, Jewish, or Unitarian Humanist groups are not the same, even if they share a degree of doubt or disapproval concerning certain culturally prevalent “religious” ideas or institutions (Pasquale, 2010: 36).

Such observation is indicative of Pruysers’s claims two decades earlier in which he argues:

Irreligion is not merely the absence of something, and certainly not simply the missing of something good, desirable, or pleasant. It is much closer to adopting an active stance or posture, involving the act of excluding another posture [...]. Irreligion, like religion, can be zealous, militant, declarative, dogmatic, or [persuasive]. Like religion, it can be the product of training, existential decision-making, or drifting’ (Pruysers 1992, in Pasquale, 2010: 44).

Notwithstanding Pasquale’s (2010) study, the gap between such substantial theorisations of the secular and empirical verification (or otherwise) is considerable. Pasquale’s focus on inter-group variances also ignores possible intra-organisation conflict. In sidestepping this issue, a thorough examination of
the organisation and structure of a secularist group or movement in terms of reward structures, identity and ideology construction, authority and collaboration is untenable. Understanding these aspects is important as they may explain, at least in part, the ways in which the sample population interact with each other and the modes in which they politically engage with wider publics.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the classical secularisation paradigm or thesis in terms of explaining the way the academia has and, more importantly, has not approached examination of secularity. Whilst the works explored in this chapter provide variable hypotheses for an investigation of what it means to be secular, a much richer, qualitative engagement is required. O’Brien Baker and Smith (2009) emphasise this as follows:

> It can reasonably be said that what is most glaringly absent from current studies of those who are not traditionally religious is a qualitative understanding of the ways in which different types of ‘nones’ [secularists] construct their moral frameworks and meaning systems (O’Brian Baker and Smith, 2009: 730).

Even ignoring the dearth of empirical examination specifically dealing with the Australian context, the potential for meaningful study of what it means to be
secular is substantial. This project attempts to contribute to such study by empirically engaging a largely unexplored (secular) population within Australia. The connection between secular constructs and divergent forms of political action has similarly been under-theorised. Where Pruyser proposes that ‘irreligion’ can stimulate distinct patterns of political engagement – ‘militant’, ‘declarative’, ‘dogmatic’, ‘zealous’ – there has, however, traditionally been remarkably few empirical examinations of such conceptualisations. This thesis will address this scarcity by exploring through empirical methods the ways in which the sample population engage with wider publics.
Chapter Three – ‘Matter’ and Sociality of the Secular

Introduction: Expanding the Focus from Intellectual to Practical and Social

The preceding discussion has explored the conventional ways in which scholars have generally approached study of the secular, highlighting the deficiency of the predominant ‘secularisationist’ question (Bruce, 2011: 3) – ‘how religious are people?’ This project shifts this focus to a more distinctly qualitative discourse that analyses how people are not religious – not to what degree an individual may be considered secular (Dobbelaere, 1999; Modood, 2010; Kosmin, 2007), but in which ways their thought, culture and behaviour can be considered secular. The discussion will present the ways in which secularity was seen to be, in part, a socially constructed phenomenon – a finding that further informs the ontology of the secular. In this way, this thesis follows Chabal and Doloz (2006) in advocating the adoption of anthropological methodology in political science, a practice well suited to the exploratory and interpretive methodology employed by this thesis.

What is clear from the few existing empirical substantialist accounts of secularity is their focus squarely on intellectual matter – they observe secularity as a construct concerning ideas and ideology; ‘it’ is interpreted solely as a philosophical view, or feature of political action (e.g. Campbell, 1971; Budd, 1977; Pasquale, 2010). In this way the scholarship has almost unanimously viewed the secular as an intellectual and ideational movement rather than a
practical and embodied one. This thesis does not ignore or seek to sidestep ideational frameworks of the research population – the interview methodology allows an investigation of the presence and meaning of secular beliefs, politics and principles – but instead expands the exploration to the variety of non-intellectual and sometimes non-lingual ways in which secularity is seen to manifest in the everyday lives of the individuals engaged by this study. The purpose is to elucidate the ways in which secularity was seen to structure social relations and spatial environments of the research population. I argue the notion of secularity as an absence, or as a construct of post- or a-religiosity, is not as an accurate or helpful descriptor of empirical realities as has been previously argued within academia (e.g. Bruce, 2002; Zuckerman, 2008; Berger 1999b). The material presented in this chapter complements analysis of overtly intellectual expressions of secularity discussed in Chapter Four with the aim of providing an expanded conception of the ontology of the secular.

‘Banal’ Secularity

The following discussion will explore instances of secularity that I argue can be compared to ‘lived religion’ literatures (e.g. Lynch, 2012) or even Billig’s (1995) concept of ‘banal nationalism’ – becoming ‘banal secularity’ within the present domain. Such literature demonstrates, for religion and nationalism respectively, that cultural attachments can operate and be formed subconsciously (Billig, 1995: 6-7). Billig’s notion of ‘banal nationalism’ argues that, rather than concentrating on nationalism as ‘exotic’ and imposing social movements –
something that ‘only comes in large sizes and bright colours’ (1995: 6) – contemporary nation-states are founded and fortified by everyday ‘reminders’ of the population’s status as nationals. The ‘banality’ derives from the ways in which nationalist objects are perceived rather than the mode or material by which nationalism is communicated. Billig employs a metaphor relating to national flags to emphasize the distinction: '[T]he metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building’ – it is regularly present but often unnoticed (1995: 8). In this way Billig advocates a shift in analytical focus away from explicit forms of ‘culture-making’ to more implicit everyday taken-for-granted ‘productions’.

Such ‘banal’ forms of secular culture were encountered during interviews that were conducted in the everyday environments of several of the interviewees. Inanimate artefacts bearing nonreligious slogans or images – either tacit or overt – were easily observable. Such statements are, to some extent, intellectual, however they were not applied in an explicitly political nature. Indeed, they held an omnipresent-like position in the subject’s life that, generally, the intellectual quality would go unnoticed and form part of the backdrop to their everyday reality. In this way, these artefacts were largely insignificant in structuring or disrupting daily life. While this may hint the irrelevancy of secularity, for Billig, this lack of interference – being unable to break through the mundane – reveals the normative function of such ideas and is the defining feature of the encounter.

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1 Some interviews were conducted over the telephone that rendered observations of the physical environments of the interviewee impossible.
In this way, the subject is ‘reminded’ of the attitudes embodied in such objects that, for Billig, would reproduce a sense of secularity.

When interviewing members of the Humanist Society of New South Wales in their longstanding hall, I encountered clear examples of such ‘banal secularity’. The ‘Happy Human’ symbol\(^2\) was printed on the side of several teacups and there were several posters hung on walls depicting prominent humanists such as Professor Dennett. When I enquired about these artefacts both interviewees could not recall the origin or individual(s) responsible for supplying the objects. Victor Bien, the treasurer of the Society, whilst showing some vague recollection of the Happy Human signs imprinted on the cups – symbols which he clearly understood – showed apathy toward them and the posters, instead wanting to move along the conversation. What had most likely initiated as a member’s active decision to purchase the products in an overt act of self- or group-representation had become part of the everyday setting of the interviewees. For Billig, Bien’s casual engagement does not illustrate indifference \emph{per se} – but instead a complicity and (re)production of the meaning involved.

Another instance of an implicit, ‘banal’ representation of secularity was encountered during an interview with Josef Daroczy, the ex-president and member of the Atheist Society of The University of Sydney. During the interview he wore a t-shirt with the slogan ‘Amen’ in prominent display. Below the

\(2\) The Happy Human is an icon and official symbol of the International Humanist and Ethical Union and is widely associated with organized Humanism.
inscription was an image of a man playing a guitar in a burning church. I enquired, jokingly, about his clothing:

Interviewer: Did you wear that for the interview (laughter)?

Daroczy: (Taken aback) Huh? What do – oh (laughter) – nah I... it’s just a shirt, I didn’t think about it.

Daroczy subsequently explained that ‘Amen’ was an atheist metal band and the shirt was depicting one of their songs – ‘Justified’ – that includes a chorus ‘[I]inside this church we will burn all the lives of the women. Inside this church we will burn all the lives of the damaged... walk away from this blaming halo and set fire to your church’.

This is an overtly anti-religious representation but is ‘interweaved’ subconsciously into the ordinary and more prosaic facet of daily life. Josef participates in many organised secular activities (atheist meeting groups, pro-atheism poster campaigns etc.), but by widening our analytical lens away from these explicit representations, the possibility emerges that forms of secularity can be produced and observed in often tacitly communicated, everyday expressions (conscious or otherwise) of cultural association. In this way, such methodology mirrors Lynch’s (2012) emphasis on ‘lived religion’ approaches – studies that include analysis of regular, practical and symbolic aspects of religion – withdrawing from the conventional concentration that has been focused squarely on the intellectual representations of social behaviour.
Another interviewee, Jason Ball, the President of the Freethought University Alliance – a body acting as the umbrella organisation for Australian secular campus groups – wore several bracelets one of which depicted the “Evolve Fish” with ‘DARWIN’ printed on its body. This image is a satirical parody of the popular Christian “Jesus Fish”. The image was so small as to be unrecognisable unless perhaps viewed from within fifty centimetres – further obstructed by the clatter of several other bracelets. Ball explained the artefact had a certain significance but that it was not something that he often contemplated. Like Daroczy, he had nevertheless proposed to wear the ‘object’; something that Dant (1999) argues constitutes the most intimate from of self-representation possible:

> Of all things, apart perhaps from things we eat, clothes are the material objects that are most consistently part of our individual and social lives. They are so close to our bodies for so much of the time they become like an extension of that body, an outer layer of shell with which we confront the social world (Dant, 1999: 85).

Ball expressed the view that the bracelet was for his own enjoyment as opposed to a ‘tool’ of proselytization or confrontation. In this way, the bracelet embodied an aesthetic or social purpose as opposed to an overtly political engagement. Though not often contemplated by the subjects, the above clothing and objects cannot be characterised as representing indifference to religion – a characteristic implicit within the post-religious paradigms observing secularity as an absence. Instead, they implicitly hold some direct engagement with religious constructs. Such instances of everyday, unremarkable secularity may at once go ignored by
the individuals but reveal commitments that may be treated as significant in other circumstances. Daroczy, for example, explained experiencing insults from an unknown (presumably religious) individual when wearing another t-shirt bearing similar anti-religious imagery. In this way the secular ‘object’ explicitly structured a moment of social relations, albeit in a passing, haphazard manner. He recounted the experience having occurred during his daily, unexceptional activity of ‘walking to university, minding my own business’. This experience exemplifies Dant’s (1999: 165) suggestion that we should recognise that ‘textual objects [...] not only mediate through written language but also take on a distinctive material form which situates them as objects within a culture’. Here, Josef’s t-shirt not only expressed a certain sentiment but was the impetus for a particular social interaction.

Other non-lingual expressions of secularity manifested in a sense of ‘imagined embodiment’ – akin to Anderson’s (2006) ‘imagined communities’ thesis. Jesse Rigg, a member of the Rationalist Society of Australia, expressed sentiments indicative of this phenomenon. When enquiring about his perception of religious identities, whilst evading an explicitly normative assessment, Rigg articulated a sense that they had some conscious effect on him:

Interviewer: What do you think of people you come across who are religious?

Rigg: I mean, generally...like almost always it’s not something I think about I guess. It’s not like I have a vendetta against someone who’s
religious, people are entitled to think what they like. Like when I’m walking along the street and I pass people it’s not like the first thing I think about is whether they’re religious [...] once you know someone’s religious though, it’s almost like they’re wearing a big sticker or something and like, you notice it.

Rigg put his hand on his chest – the position he used to signify the location of the ‘sticker’ – to demonstrate this figurative depiction. Though not explicitly good or bad per se, the symbol was significant and something he could, at least, recognise to exist. Importantly, this was attributed to all religious people, illustrating how ‘religiosity’ – as a general construct – was the defining feature of the encounter. Reflecting Dant’s (1999) explanation of the significance of clothing, Rigg utilised the external body as the tacit indicator or carrier of ‘culture’ – in this case religiosity. This implicit bodily projection of religiosity is instructive. It illustrates that secularity can be operationalized in subtle ways – connected to the body in this instance – distinct from typical ideas-focused or intellectual conceptions. Further, it illustrates the way in which secularity structures social relations between Rigg and religious individuals. His awareness of religious ‘others’ only intervened haphazardly, but when materialised it became a constant presence – a part of his spatial environment. A similar experience was elucidated in an interview with Kate Massey, a member of Sydney Atheists. She employed the metaphors of an ‘obstacle’ and ‘halo’ to explain the ways in which both religiosity and secularity interacted with her everyday life:

Interviewer: What do you think when you come across a religious person?
Massey: [Pause] I think they’re very different from me. It’s such a stupid concept to me, living your life through documents written thousands of years ago. It’s as if they’ve got a halo on or something. [...] I don’t go over and call them bat-shit crazy but there’s definitely an obstacle between us, like you can’t have a rational discussion with them. [...] When I’m with my friends you know you can say what you [want], you know, jokes about religion and stuff… but there’s definitely an obstacle to that when they’re [people of religious convictions] around.

The symbolic markers that Massey discusses provide further insight into the typically abstract, non-codified ways in which secularity structured social relations. She presents a physical metaphor – an obstacle – to explain a sort of imagined embodiment of secularity. She vaguely gestured with her hand – from her head to chest area in a downward motion – in order to bring tangible form to the ‘obstacle’ and in this way utilised the body as a medium for representation of her secularity. Massey made clear the people with whom she principally interacts are those she considered ‘atheist’. This marker only materialises when in contact with people in whose company she cannot express anti-religious sentiments – in other words, it only emerges when religiosity disrupts her deeply embedded a-religious norm. She exhibited a sense of frustration with such circumstances, eliciting a sort of emotional response. Indeed, working from within the sociology of religion, Riis and Woodhead (2010) have recently highlighted the role of emotions in the construction of both religious identity and behaviour. This thesis argues such emphasis should be transposed to the study
of secularity. It appears that by investigating the emotions accompanying intellectual representations, one may be better placed to extract secular attachments – especially ‘banal’ forms – typically existing below the surface of social interaction. In this way, methodologies incorporating verbal approaches appear especially informative.

Secularity has thus been shown to exist and operationalise in complex yet subtle forms. Just as Billig says of banal nationalism, secularity does not materialise only through highly visible, intellectual expressions of behaviour – instead, it is comparable to his analogy of the flag being waved and, by contrast, that which goes largely unnoticed perched on the public building. In this way, the postcolonial scholarship discussed in Chapter Two that observes patterns of behaviour as necessarily involving a purposeful, political and strategic stance is not as helpful or thorough a paradigm through which to view secularity as has been proposed (Stanley, 1992). Whilst it, usefully, perceives the secular as a presence, it ignores the range of ways in which secularity can be expressed – sometimes subconsciously – in everyday settings and interactions.

These data undermine the binary division that Bruce (2002: 42) outlines when he presents secularity as a contested paradigm between those who perceive it as ‘instrumental, materialist atheism’ and, by contrast, its conception as ‘widespread indifference [to religion]’. He argues ‘self-conscious irreligion’ is untenable because one ‘has to care too much about religion’, however, the evidence presented thus far illustrates that secular engagements are not merely – nor necessarily chiefly – intellectual. Secularity has been shown to be able to be
expressed in a variety of material forms. Certainly, the boundary between the intellectual and material can be blurred. For instance, Daroczy expressed a willingness to continue wearing anti-religious clothing even after the ‘material’ clearly intersected with the ‘intellectual’. Similarly, the ‘sticker’ employed by Rigg materialised – albeit intermittently – from an intellectual awareness. It follows that we should follow Henare *et al.* (2007) and Pink (2006), amongst others, in recognising the indivisibility of material, spatial, intellectual, social and embodied aspects of behaviour. In doing so, the ontology of the secular becomes more complex than traditional ethnographic approaches to the topic suggest. These data undermine perceptions of ‘indifference’ by illuminating ‘invisible’ instances of secularity – debunking the notion of secularity as an absence of religiosity, or as the ‘mere natural reality devoid of religion’ (Casanova, 2011: 55). Billig’s theory of ‘banality’ is an instructive paradigm through which to view this aspect of secularity as it illustrates how instances of silent, subtle engagements with religiosity can reflect profound moments of secular attachment and normativity. Consequently, the secular may be substantive even where it appears absent.

**Sociality of the Secular**

The following discussion complements the preceding section by further expanding the analytical lens through which one can explore secularity. This section considers the role of sociality – the formulation and expression of social links – in the construction of the identities and activities of the sample
population. It presents analysis of this phenomenon both in regards to the sample population’s involvement within the organised secular groups of which they are members and, more generally, in their engagement with both religious and irreligious ‘others’. It will be argued that aspects of sociality were shown to play substantive functions in the construction of various secular identities and behaviours. The data will thus further undermine notions of ‘a- or post-religion’ as useful descriptors of empirical realities by locating the secular in positive, tangible social relations.

There has, admittedly, been a recent surge in academic interest toward social aspects of secularity. Some have emphasised the support irreligious individuals afford each other when they are in marginalised, ostracised positions (e.g. Cimino and Smith, 2007; Smith, 2011). Such approaches, however, do not necessarily show that there is anything inherently social about being secular – beyond, perhaps, explaining how it may serve a palliative, haphazard protective function. Casanova (2006) and Knott and Franks (2007) have, importantly, considered how secularity informs social interaction. However, Casanova’s attempt is empirically unsubstantiated, while Knott and Franks focus solely on one institutional setting – a medical centre – limiting the usefulness of their work to an exploration of the ontology of the secular. Other approaches – rooted in post-secular critiques of secularist paradigms – observe any social aspect of secularity in negative light (e.g. Habermas, 2006; see McLennan, 2010 for a good overview of such post-secular literature). In this vein, several have associated secularity with overt forms of anti-religion: with Islamophobic behaviour (Levey and Modood, 2009) or with ‘New Atheist polemic’ (Amarasingam, 2010). Whilst
conceiving secularity as, in part, social, these scholars highlight how the secular individual plays a role in constraining religion. In other words, such studies of the sociality of the secular have, generally, framed analysis of such sociality in relation to religion, as opposed to investigating its role in the interaction amongst secularists and the construction of their secular identities.

The previous section presented data that illustrated the variety of ways in which the secular may be social – not in disruptively antagonistic ways – but in everyday, routine behaviours. The ‘stickers’ and ‘obstacle’ metaphors employed by Rigg and Massey had some bearing on the quality of their interaction with religious others. These data begin to illustrate how the ‘secular’ may be social in a much more expansive fashion than the existing literature suggests but are, still, explicitly focussed on the relationship between the secular and religiosity. It still remains to explore the ways in which sociality constructs the identities, interactions and activities of the sample population. Indeed, the ways in which individuals interact in modern society – in regards to religion and otherwise – have recently been widely theorised and contested. Some argue communitarian systems of association persist – albeit in new forms (e.g. Wood, 2007); others that contemporary society is ‘individualised’ (e.g. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005) or ‘individualistic’ (Putnam, 2002) with the modern ‘social’ involving ephemeral, often volatile ‘tribal’ bandings (Turner, 2010). Some scholars have reflected Durkheim’s notion of ‘organic solidarity’, reconceiving traditional associational structures according to network models (e.g. Castells, 2010) or patterns of hidden or informal solidarity (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Whilst illustrating the complexity with which scholars have
approached sociality, these diverse theorisations present useful paradigms through which to explore the present research population.

The individuals engaged by this research expressed a unanimous view that the secular groups with which they associate present a social opportunity. Regular contact through weekly activities structured friendships and fortified a sense of communitarianism. Fred Flatow, the vice president of the Humanist Society of New South Wales, reflects this common theme:

I’ve thoroughly enjoyed my time with the Society. I’ve met some of my close friends through it. I had considered joining for a long time before I actually did, about fifteen years ago now. I wanted to meet likeminded people and the society’s been great for that. I’ve enjoyed all the discussions and debates about humanism, about its relation to life and religion. [...] It’s definitely been a positive experience for me.

I enquired whether much ideological diversity as to the meaning and philosophy of humanism existed amongst the members. Flatow, at first, resisted the notion of much interpretational plurality but, subsequently, upon reflection shifted his response:

Interviewer: When you say debates about humanism, can you elaborate on that? Are the members very different from one another?
Flatow: No I wouldn’t say that, we’re all humanists. We all reject supernatural dogma. We believe in personal fulfilment without the need for supernatural theism. What I meant was, um [pause]. Like to give you an example, others in the group bring up topics I’m not all that personally familiar with like, um, stem cell research and laws about adoption. I mean, some of the things people bring up, to be honest, I haven’t really thought about before, at least in terms of them relating [to] humanism, and I definitely don’t agree with some of them. However, not always, but sometimes, what gets brought up I think is really important and, as humanists, I think we should be concerned about. Stuff like stem cell research I’ve become passionate about, and I guess that’s what great about being part of a group like this, because it can really open your eyes to things you hadn’t really considered and can change your perspective.

This response is illustrative of the role of sociality in constructing secular identities. Here, Flatow presents the social not merely as the communal, pleasurable interaction of the membership – although it certainly encompasses this dimension – but rather as a substantive function in the construction of his secular identity. The question is that which secularity denotes – not whether it denotes anything at all. This is instructive to the exploration of the ontology of the secular in two regards. First, it illustrates the subjectivity of secular paradigms – again undermining the general notion of secularity as an absence. Secularity is not merely presented as an intellectually unitary property that emerges as the default position under a certain set of contextual conditions (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: 21). Secondly, and relatedly, aspects of sociality can
positively construct which subjects are seen to denote or involve the secular. As Flatow explains, a foreign and previously unconsidered topic – stem cell research – became involved in the composition of his secular identity.

Andrew Johnson, a member of Sydney Atheists, by contrast, presented a different way in which sociality constructed the secular:

I’ve had atheist beliefs for a long time but I only joined [Sydney Atheists] two years ago. I’ve always been a pretty private person but lately it’s just been annoying me how ‘in your face’ some of the evangelicals are. [...] I saw a poster for a Sydney Atheist event and thought I’d go along. At first I was a little sceptical because I’ve never really been too activistic [sic] but I had a good time, met some pretty cool people. I thought at first I might just go to a few meetings. I never thought I’d get super involved though, especially like campaigning on the streets, putting posters up, helping to organise the atheist convention, stuff like that. [...] Everyone just sort of convinced me that nothing’s going to change if we don’t, you know [pause], all try to actually do something about it. [...] It’s just part of being part of the group I guess, trying to change something we’re all very passionate about.

While Johnson’s intellectual engagement with secularity remained constant – the behaviour tied to that identity was socially constructed by his interaction with other members of the group. In this way, a Gemeinschaftian (Tönnies, 1887) form of association was presented whereby the membership was constrained, albeit
voluntarily, by common mores and beliefs about appropriate patterns of group behaviour and responsibility. This reflects an emerging body of research within social anthropology that explores communal aspects of secularity – challenging the perception that ‘ceremony’ has a special relationship with religion (Engelke, 2011; Mumford, 2011). In the present case, ‘ceremony’ can be expressed in terms of the group’s implicitly expected and shared modes of behaviour. Johnson’s use of the word ‘all’ – ‘nothings going to change [unless] we all try to do something about it’ – is instructive. It creates a reward structure attainable only under an explicitly communal behavioural framework. The sociality of the group conflates shared secular ideologies with a particular and expected mode of collaboration. This was seen to have a substantive function in the construction of the behavioural elements of the membership. Johnson’s shift from ‘private’ to ‘public’ expressions of his secularity can, therefore, be explained by social aspects of the secular – again illustrating the indivisibility of intellectual, social and material aspects of behaviour (Henare et al., 2007; Pink, 2006). These data validate Casanova’s argument that secularity involves a ‘range of secular identities’ that are ‘consciously held and explicitly elaborated into normative ideological...knowledge regimes’ (2011: 55, emphasis added). However, they go further by demonstrating the interconnectedness of such identities with the role of sociality in both enabling and constraining intellectual and behavioural engagements with the secular.

Sociality, therefore, has been shown to play a formative function in both the constitution of secular ideologies and material practices. A resonating theme emerging from the discourse of the sample population was the role of sociality in
forging closer, stronger secular solidarities. We could observe this in the way in which Johnson was encouraged to adopt a particular behavioural mode. It was the invisibility of his solidarities – those that were ‘hidden’ to use the language of Spencer and Pahl (2006) – that posed some sort of problem. Durkheim (2001) provides a theoretical explanation for this by arguing that religion partly concerns the desire of a population to in some way objectify itself. Through an analysis of religiosity, he essentially argues that self-representation of the community is, in itself, a valuable resource for its preservation. It follows that Pahl and Spencer's (2004) notion of hidden solidarity, at least within this paradigm, presents an inherent contradiction – as such form of commonality would constrain the social reproduction of the group (for a good explanation of the role of social reproduction in maintaining cultural (and other) attachments see Di Chiro, 2008: 282). Indeed, David Nicholls, the president of the Atheist Foundation of Australia, echoed such sentiments in explaining the way in which his organisation interacts with wider publics:

We’re not out there touting members. We don't go out of our way to convince people you should be a member, but we do try to put a message out there that atheism is not what some in the religious community make it out to be. It is not Stalinism. [...] We do try to put a message out there that atheism is a positive thing. Most people, even the higher educated religious people, think that a secular nation is the way to go. Our role is to make more people feel more secure and comfortable in being able to voice their atheist or secular views so the next time Jill and Joe go and vote something may twig in their imagination.
Framed in an analysis of the political community, this discourse presents a desire for articulated solidarities to replace those that are 'hidden'. Nicholls presents what he perceives to be an inherent disjuncture between the number of those holding secular paradigms with those who express – either verbally or by voting – such ideologies. For Nicholls, communal and public displays of secularity do not involve new experiences of inter-subjectivity; rather, they expand the kind of practice associated with existing, hidden, forms of secularity. Evaluating such a thesis is beyond the scope of this paper but, if correct, hints that purportedly 'new' forms of secular sociality that develop as a result of contact with explicit secular culture appear to be assembled upon pre-existing informal secular networks – as opposed to brief and erratic ‘tribal’ interactions (Tuner, 2010).

What is important is that we, at least, need to recognise that the secular can embody some form of sociality so as to not ignore the role social interaction may play in the construction of secular ideologies and behaviours. Daroczy, the ex-president of The University of Sydney Atheist Society, expressed a similar sentiment:

I think our [society's] principal role is just sort of creating a secular presence on campus. It's not so much about us actively changing people’s perceptions about religion and atheism; it’s about us existing, about showing people we exist, even in the background, it’s about normalising the concept. I think that’s the most powerful way to effect change. Most people don’t really care about these sorts of things, but if all you have are religious groups parading themselves around all the time, then the idea that there’s another way becomes marginalised. If we can get people
talking about the issues with their friends – however they want to perceive them – then I think we’re doing something powerful.

Here, the default position is not presumed to be overtly secular but, still, a certain social engagement is presented as providing the impetus for movement toward greater communal, intellectual forms of secular representation. In this way, Daroczy emphasises the importance of stimulating discussion of secular paradigms. Indeed, just as some form of interaction is positioned as the stimulus to greater forms of secularity, a similar conception is attributed to religiosity. Daroczy explains that by ‘parading around’ – a form of public engagement – religious groups are able to monopolise the awareness of the student body.

It is important to note the evidence presented in this section does not suggest that there is some essential incompatibility between secular cultures and notions of atomism or individualism. It is not possible on the basis of this qualitative examination to argue anything general about the relationship between secularity and different systems of association. By interviewing members of secular groups, this project did not access a- or anti-social individuals. This section has, however, presented an analysis of the various ways in which aspects of sociality were seen to construct the behaviours and identities of the sample population. As discussed in Chapter One, the individuals engaged by this research have each made an active decision to join an organised secular association – signifying a certain degree of reflexivity of their secularity. Further, involvement in such groups intersects, to a degree, the ‘political’ with the ‘secular’. The social morphologies associated with organised secularity are, therefore, not automatically
transposable to other manifestations of the secular. Nevertheless, that sociality has been shown to integrate and construct various forms of ideology and behaviour further informs the interpretation of secularity as the embodiment of something substantial.

**Conclusion**

The discussion has expanded upon the narrow, conventional analytical focus with which scholars have generally approached study of the secular. The variety of non- or partially-intellectual ways in which secularity manifested in the everyday lives of the sample population hinted at a more complex conception of the secular than that which scholars have traditionally presented. Where the scholarship has predominantly observed secularity as an absence or construct of post-religiosity, the data presented in this chapter illustrated these conceptualisations to be inaccurate descriptors of the ways in which the sample population's subjectivity and behaviour reflect profound moments of secular attachment and normativity. Furthermore, that sociality was seen to play a substantive function in the construction of secular paradigms and behaviours undermines the notion of secularity as insubstantial. While we must be cautious to infer anything more general about the secular beyond that which it suggests for the sample population, it is apparent that more explicitly qualitative approaches are required in order to elucidate its multifarious and sometimes opaquely ‘banal’ composition.
Chapter Four – Intellectuality and Politics of the Secular

Introduction

The preceding discussion presented forms in which secularity is observable in material and social environments, and how such manifestations shape and interact with patterns of subjectivity, behaviour and sociality. These data have conceptual implications for the ontological question of whether the irreligious individual is better described as substantively secular or subtractively postreligious. The analysis demonstrated that the extent to which secularity constructs social life often goes unrecognised and has not, therefore, intervened to the degree in which it should have in contemporary theories of existential secularity. By illustrating the role of sociality in the construction of secular identities and behaviours, the previous discussion has undermined the notion of secularity as an intellectually unitary property. Having established the existence of a substantial social form of secularity, this chapter will explore the ways in which secular constructs shape particular political projects.

Where the last chapter presented a general analysis of the social morphologies associated with organised secularity – offering new ways in which to approach secular solidarity – this chapter will compartmentalise these data into subjectively distinct paradigms. The discussion will illustrate the inadequacy of widely employed existing categories – used both by the academia and sample population – that purport to express distinct qualities of being secular. This
thesis, in light of these findings, will present a new way of observing secularity – one that codes distinct secular identities in terms of distinguishable epistemological paradigms. Whilst aspects of sociality and, specifically, ‘ceremony’ have been shown to shape patterns of public engagement, it will be argued that divergent epistemological conditions also have some positive effect on the ways in which the sample population attempts to spread its ideology to wider publics. The discussion will, therefore, further inform the ontology of the secular by incorporating a conventionally excluded element – epistemology – into its theoretical constitution.

Secularity as ‘Politics’

As discussed in Chapter Two, classical theorists dealing with secularity and, specifically, processes of ‘secularisation’, envisioned the inevitable fading significance of religious institutions – both formal and informal – to modern society (e.g. Weber, 1993; Durkheim, 1912). This early twentieth century orthodox conception of a linear progression of secularity with modernity has, however, been vigorously challenged within the social sciences for decades (e.g. Casanova, 1994; Berger, 1999). That secularisation is now, generally, characterised as ‘probabilistic, not deterministic’ (Norris and Inglehart, 2006: 16), at least in the Australian context (Wallace, 2009: 13; Nicholls, 2012: thesis interview), informs Casanova’s notion that ‘the religious and the secular are mutually constituted through socio-political struggles and cultural politics’ (2011, 63). It is in this vein that Berger suggests the ‘relation between religion
and modernity is rather complicated’ (1992: 2). He draws this complexity from the observation that ‘secularisation on the political level is not necessarily linked to secularisation on the level of individual consciousness’ (1992: 2). However, part of the intricacy is derived from a simple understanding of ‘modernity’ itself. Where classical theorists assumed a linear decline of religion in proportion with modern development, in the past several decades many political scientists have instead theorised a dialectical, tumultuous relationship between modernity and religiosity (Giddens, 1986; Wuthnow, 1998; Casanova, 2009; Stark, 1999; Herve-Leger, 2005). In this way, Berger characterises contemporary Western society as a ‘market of world views simultaneously in competition with each other’ (1967: 9). For Giddens (1991: 5), modernity’s ‘pluralisation of social worlds’ forces individuals to construct their self-identities and lifestyles in a reflexive way. He explains:

The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple competing choices as filtered though abstract systems. The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options [...] Because of the ‘openness’ of social life today, the pluralisation of context of action and the diversity of ‘authorities’, lifestyle choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity (Giddens, 1991: 5).
It is within this conception of modernity that Berger contended, albeit over half a century ago, that ‘discrepant worlds coexist within the same society, contemporarily challenging each other’s cognitive and normative claims’ (Berger, 1967: 9). It is for this reason that debates concerning ‘secularisation’ are often located in the realms of cultural politics and social movement theory (e.g. Casanova, 2011; Asad, 2003). In this way, the social and political spheres have been conceptualised as malleable to both religious and secular pressure – something of which Gidden's characterises as ‘the diversity of ‘authorities’” (1991: 5). This undermines Luckmann’s (1967: 85) contention that modernisation would inevitably force the privatisation of religion. He argued religiosity would become ‘invisible’ in the sense of being an individualised private from of adherence – one that is irrelevant to the functioning of the primary institutions of modern society. Hadden (1989) and Greeley (2003), amongst many others, empirically falsify Luckmann’s prediction by demonstrating the tumultuous, widespread entanglement of public expressions of religiosity and contemporary politics. For Casanova, societal modernisation does not, therefore, inevitably lead to the privatisation and marginalisation of religion in the public sphere, as privatisation is not a modern structural trend but ‘rather an historical option’ (Casanova 1994: 215; 2011).

Following Berger, Eisenstadt argues ‘institutional and ideological patterns’ are continuously reconstructed by ‘specific social actors in close connection with social, political and intellectual activists and by social movements pursuing different programs of modernity’ (2000: 3). Within this understanding of ‘modernity’ – one where the secular is an option in the ‘market of worldviews in
competition with each other (Berger, 1967: 9, italics added) – secularity is implicitly constructed, albeit often in some abstract way, as a particular political project. Framed in an analysis of the sociality of the secular, Chapter Three began to illustrate the ways in which the sample population politically engaged with wider publics. This chapter will explore in more depth the diverse modes in which this political action materialised – further debunking the notion of secularity as a unitary, selfsame intellectual or behavioural property. First, however, a brief analysis of the contemporary interplay between religion and the Australian public sphere will be presented in order to place the theoretical debates concerning secularisation in the domestic context.

Religious Expression in the Australian Public Sphere

Much in the vein of Luckmann’s thesis of religious privatisation, Juergensmeyer claims the ‘rivalry between secular nationalism and cultural identities makes little sense in the modern West, where the idea of religion has been conceptually confined to personal piety, religious institutions and theological ideas’ (2011, 193). Over the last decade, however, many have noted a surge of religious rhetoric in the Australian public sphere (e.g. Sullivan and Lepert, 2004; Maddox, 2005; Lohrey, 2006; Crabb, 2009; Fozdar, 2009). This is in contradistinction to what others have identified as a traditional hesitancy of politicians to employ religious conviction, at least publicly, as justification for policy decisions (e.g. Maddox, 2001; Howe and Nichols, 2003; Warhurst, 2007). Such reluctance may stem from the work of multiple commentators who have observed that the
majority of Australians across the nation's history have supported some general principle of the separation of religion from politics (e.g. Mol, 1971: 281; Hughes et al., 1995: 67; Humphrey, 1987: 233; Evans and Kelley, 2002: 114; Pearce, 2005: 1).

In examining the characteristics of several thousand speeches given by Australian federal politicians, Crabb (2009) identified an increased frequency with which they have publicly expressed religious rhetoric. The proportion of speeches containing such discourse has increased from 9.1 per cent in 2000 to over twenty-one per cent in 2008 (Crabb, 2009: 263). This amplification has been multidimensional with religious themes being invoked in an ‘increasingly broad range of policy issues’ (Crabb, 2009: 264). This suggests the diversification of religious rhetoric as it becomes normalised within the political sphere. The fluid presence of political expressions of religiosity reinforces Casanova’s (2011) notion of the malleability of the public sphere to what Eisenstadt (2000) describes as ‘differing programs of modernity’.

Warhurst (2006: 6) and Maddox (2004: 1) employ a Huntington-esque (1996) ‘clash of civilisations’ paradigm in order to explain the marked increase in religious discourse. Maddox argues that following the September 11 terrorist attacks, former Prime Minister Howard ‘whipped up’ anti-Muslim (“them”) sentiment by drawing on what he perceived as the nation’s Christian foundations (“us”). Indeed, Crabb found issues of ‘foreign relations’ – specifically those relating to Australia’s involvement in the Middle East – draw the most potent religious presence. Maddox argues politicians, therefore, often utilise
‘ambiguously Christian rhetoric’ to appeal to an audience that longs for a ‘safe reference point in an uncertain world’ (2005: 46). In the same vein, Crabb contends ‘Australia’s political leaders have sought to create a sense of solidarity by projecting a shared Judaeo-Christian identity when the nation has felt threatened’ (2009: 268).

Such theses mirror Norris and Inglehart’s (2004) existential security paradigm in two ways. First, religiosity is conceptualised as embodying a fluid and dynamic presence in contemporary politics. Secondly, and relatedly, some relationship exists between subjective perceptions of ‘existential security’ and the extent of expressions of religiosity in the public sphere. Evaluating the quality of such relationship is beyond the scope of this thesis but would be intrinsically complex owing to the difficulty in assessing the degree to which opaque forms of political motivation inform such discourse. Indeed, Maddox suggests the use of religious rhetoric may be ‘more about a pragmatic choice to utilise religion in an instrumental manner than the desire to express personal beliefs’ (2005: 46). Such observations, nonetheless, undermine conventional assumptions about the inevitably secular nature of modernisation (e.g. Hefner, 1998: 85; Dobbelaere, 1987; Wilson, 1966).

The rising visibility of religiosity in the political sphere has been conceptualised by some, at least in part, as the ‘struggle’ of the religious to reinforce constructions of Australian identity as inherently Christian (e.g. Fozdar, 2009: 3; Tate, 2009: 99). Comments by former Prime Minister Howard (2006) are indicative of this perceived trend:
A sense of shared values is our social cement. [...] In the Australia's case, that dominant pattern comprises Judaeo-Christian ethics. [...] Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, a man whose life and example gives us a value system that remains the greatest force for good in our community. (Howard 2006 quoted in Johnson, 2007: 198).

Here, Howard conflates religious and national values. In this way, the need for cultural homogeneity is associated with the presence of a distinctly religious ideology. Minister Bishop (2007) mirrors this discourse in arguing Australia's ‘Judaeo-Christian heritage forms the historical bedrock of our society's expectation of civil behaviour’. These expressions have troubled some, with Senator Wong (2006), for instance, condemning such depictions arguing they ‘instil a sense of unbelonging [sic], of exclusion for certain ethnic, secular or religious groups’. By presenting Australian identity within an explicitly uniform religious framework, such sentiments appear to subvert Gidden's (1991: 5) thesis of modernity’s ‘reflexive project of the self’. Instead of his notion of the contemporary ‘openness of social life’, such discourse equates appropriate behaviour with a singular ideological perspective. One can observe the apparent inconsistency between this political discourse with the notion that the majority of Australians support the separation of religion and politics.

Casanova thus argues the principal question of the secularisation thesis ‘that remains hotly disputed’ is ‘how, where and by whom the proper boundaries between the religious and the secular ought to be drawn’ (2011: 63). The surge
in religious rhetoric has weakened adherence to the Rawlsian liberal consensus (2005) – the notion that public political discourse and decision-making should be limited to argument defensible by reason as opposed to that which relies on belief in a particular religious or, indeed, non-religious doctrine – by normalising the use of religious terminology in political discourse. Rawls (2005: 16) argues this ‘liberal consensus’ is essential in modern democratic societies where a plurality of ‘incompatible and irreconcilable’ religious, ideological and moral doctrines coexist.

Contrarily, others have advocated a ‘pluralistic model’ whereby religious expression is permitted in the public sphere so long as those who employ it acknowledge when their decisions are based on religious conviction (e.g. Brennan, 2007: 9; Habermas, 2006). Proponents of this position argue this is beneficial because citizens’ ‘religious views of life and the world contributes to their perception, understanding and search for the true and good’ (Brennan, 2007: 9). Further, as Crabb explains, it also means that the audience can assess the ‘true’ basis of the speaker’s positions, rather than ‘the motivation they may manufacture to be publicly acceptable in Rawls’ model’ (2009: 273). A detailed analysis of this debate is beyond the space and scope of this thesis. However, that the presence of religiosity in the contemporary public realm is fluid and widely contested further informs Eisenstaedt’s (2000: 3) notion of its malleability to ‘political and intellectual actors and social movements pursuing different programs of modernity’.
In this vein, religious movements have been said to ‘reactively and proactively engage and redraw the boundaries between the religious and the secular’ (Casanova, 2011: 33). In the Australian context, many commentators working within this paradigm have observed what they perceive to be the growing political significance of a ‘Religious Right’ in Australia (e.g. Browne and Thomas, 2004; Johnson, 2007; Lohrey, 2006; Bachelard, 2008). There is, however, a stark deficiency of analysis of secular countertrends. Indeed, Calhoun (2010: 45) argues that ‘social science discussion of secularisation centres largely on the role of religion in politics’. He notes that ‘situated in the context of a dominant interest in the relationship of religion to politics, secularity is easily backgrounded’. For Calhoun, it is in this context that ‘it is commonly treated as an absence more than a presence’ (2010: 46).

Having established a substantial form of secularity in Chapter Three, it is clear that secular pressure should be understood and studied as a positive structural process rather than the mere absence of religious expression. If the political sphere is shaped, at least partially, by socio-political struggles and cultural politics – as has been widely theorised – each component of the conflict should be the subject of scholarly attention. Indeed, Bader contends that in studying secularity, it is better to focus on the ‘respective substantive content of the options’ rather than the concept itself, which is ambiguous and complex, and where the debate ‘suffers from shifts from more minimal to more maximal conceptions’ (2007: 104). The following discussion, in light of this, will present an analysis of the different ways in which the sample population perceive their secularity and, consequently, how such constructs provoke diverse modes of
political engagement. Ultimately, it will be argued that a new way of conceiving secularity is necessary in order to more effectively elucidate the multiple, divergent ways of being secular.

Secular Identification: The Failures of Common Categories of Secularity

Working from within the emerging tradition of observing the ‘secular’ as substantive, an increasing body of literature conceives secularity as something that naturally varies in quality and quantity (e.g. McLennan, 2010; Asad, 2003). Cannell (2010: 86), in this way, argues its effects ‘vary according to how far people believe in it and in which ways’. Casanova similarly argues secularity refers to the ‘range of modern secular ideologies’ (2011: 55 emphasis added), while Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen contend ‘there are multiple ways of experiencing the secular and, indeed, of being secular’ (2011: 21). Where there exists the theoretical notion of such plurality, there have, however, traditionally been remarkably few empirical examinations of such conceptualisations. The dearth of such investigation obscures the clarity of such conceptual premises. It follows that the ways in which secularity may purportedly be differentiated – in terms of quality or quantity – remain largely unsubstantiated.

There are, however, widely employed existing categories that have commonly been associated with the ‘secular’. While some commentators have criticised survey methodologies for having too few or inadequately theorised secular
classifications (e.g. Campbell, 1971; Bruce, 2002: 193), or for treating the irreligious as an undifferentiated mass (e.g. Pasquale, 2007; O'Brien Baker and Smith, 2009), there has traditionally been little investigation into how common classifications – ‘atheist’, ‘humanist’, ‘secularist’, ‘rationalist’, ‘freethinker’, ‘nonreligious’ – are understood. This deficiency has restricted our understanding of what quality and degree of engagement such categories suggest. Over the last several years, however, an emerging body of literature has begun to explore how such groupings relate to empirical realities.

Smith (2011: 179), in this vein, examines how the category of ‘atheism’ can be appropriated in order for irreligious people to consolidate and enunciate a secular identity in the face of what he perceives as a ‘discursive norm that emphasises theism’. In this way, the term embodies a pragmatic project rather than an exclusively theoretical premise. This theme was corroborated by qualitative data assembled by this project. Comments made by Tori Snir, a member of Reason Australia, in which she discusses processes of self-classification are illustrative of this phenomenon:

Interviewer: There are many labels associated with secularity – ‘Atheist’, ‘Humanist’, ‘Rationalist’, ‘Freethinker’ – what would you fit under?

Snir: I think a bit of each actually – all of the above (laughter). I mean (pause), when I was younger, I always used to call myself an atheist around my dad when I really wanted to annoy him (laughter). But, I suppose I generally call myself a humanist because I think it comes across
as better reflecting the goodness of the human heart as opposed to, you know, specifically targeting religion. I mean, I wouldn’t say I’m not an atheist, I just think it goes hand in hand with humanism. [...] I suppose if I were discussing the existence of God with a religious person, I’d do so not only from an atheist perspective but also from a rationalist one. For me they’re really interchangeable I suppose. [...] Most of my friends aren’t religious, but when I’m around [those friends that are religious]... like if we had a discussion about it I’d just say I wasn’t religious because I don’t really want to get into a big debate about it with friends.

Here, Snir reflected the sentiments of several interviewees in expressing the view that an apparently wide range of secular classifications actually overlapped substantially in meaning. Further, such classifications can be significantly context dependant, altering either according to the way in which secularity or, indeed, religion is being discussed or for the purposes of a particular social interaction – something suggested by the literature on self-representation and secular identity (Smith, 2011: 63). In this vein, Gibson and Barnes (2011) have determined self-classification to be a poor predictor of other aspects of secularity and, specifically, the type of political engagement such categorisation may motivate.

Noticeably, the fluidity with which Snir employed altering secular classifications involved a change of labels – there was no suggestion of any shift in her secular orientation. Indeed, where ‘not religious’ has typically been considered to be – and criticised for being – a simply residual classification in survey data (e.g.
Campbell, 1971; Pasquale, 2007; Cragun and Hammer, 2011), Snir illustrates how this category may in fact be appropriated by a secular individual for a substantive, purposeful reason. Snir employed the rhetoric of ‘not religious’ to avoid conflict – expressing the view that identifying as ‘atheist’ can be perceived as aggressive. This discourse suggests that practices of identification might be meaningful not in terms of describing a secular disposition but as a type of social action significant in its own right.

The complications that such multiple identities pose for quantitative research and, specifically, for large-scale survey data – in terms of the manner in which they currently present secular classifications – are clear. It is important to note, however, that this thesis did not discover an absolute association between identifying as ‘atheistic’ and antagonistic modes of secularity. Several of the self-classified ‘atheists’ engaged by this project articulated that they were motivated to join secular associations by a sense of cultural marginalisation of irreligious people and ideologies rather than the desire to more forcefully denigrate religion. The implication is that the term can embody a defensive disposition – contrasting with the notion of ‘empowerment’ that is frequently used to understand atheism in the United States based scholarship (e.g. Smith, 2011; Cimino and Smith, 2010). Such distinction perhaps illustrates the way in which classifications are contextually – specifically locally – dependent and, therefore, not automatically transposable.
Kate Massey, a member of Sydney Atheists, provided further insight into the diverse ways in which existing categories of secularisation may be employed when discussing the formation of the organisation:

At the start there was a fair bit of debate about what we’d call ourselves. I remember some wanted to use the term secular. But it wasn’t too big of a deal to me; I didn’t really get too involved in that aspect to be honest. In the end we went with ‘atheists’ because we thought the term would be clearest for the public. Not everyone knows what secularism or freethinking means so you might just ignore it you know. Atheism’s just a lot clearer to most people.

These comments again help to reveal the ways in which secular self-representations perform a range of social and intellectual roles, and how they are often deliberately concerned with the sociological project of establishing a certain position in society. That conventional categorisations of secularity can embody pragmatic projects rather than exclusively ideological representations does not mean they are inherently useless but, rather, illustrate that they do not necessarily adequately depict the variety of ways in which the sample population engage with religion.

In discussing atheists, Fred Flatow, the vice president of the Humanist Society of New South Wales, expressed the contrary view that secular categorisations were not interchangeable:
Interviewer: Does the Humanist Society associate with other secular groups around Australia? Do you have any contact with groups such as the Atheist Foundation or Sydney Atheists?

Flatow: We’re part of the Council of Australian Humanist Societies and work with the other humanist groups around Australia to publish our journal. [...] But no, we don’t really have anything to do with the Atheist groups around. I think some of the atheists are a lot more militant, very anti-religion and aggressive against religion and we don’t really go about it that way.

Flatow resists the notion of the interchangeability of particular secular terminology – ‘atheism’ and ‘humanism’ – by alluding to the perceived distinctiveness of both intellectual (‘anti-religion’) and behavioural (militant, aggressive) characteristics of each construct. However, his use of the word ‘some’ – ‘some of the atheists’ – is informative. Such discourse suggests there is nothing intrinsically ‘militant’ about being atheistic. Chapter Three illustrated the communal aspects of organised atheism in which a reward structure was perceived to be attainable only under an explicitly uniform behavioural framework. While this provides possible insight into the convergence of behavioural tendencies, it does not in itself suggest or explain how there is anything inherently distinct about the term ‘atheism’. I asked Flatow to explain how the behaviour of the members of the Humanist Society differed from the perceived ‘militancy’ of atheists:
Interviewer: In what way are [atheists] more militant? What differentiates their behaviour from that of your membership?

Flatow: It's just the way they go about it. We don't go out there and attack religion with profanities for example. We're more about looking at humanism, providing an alternative, talking about the benefits it can offer in relation to religiosity. [...] Some of our younger members get involved in that [militant] sort of stuff, but most of us don't at all really. [...] I remember a couple months ago a few [younger members] wanted to put up some inflammatory stuff on the [Society's] website but it wasn't really what we stand for.

This portrayal of the 'younger members'' militancy undermines the rigid separation of which Flatow had earlier ascribed between the forms of political engagement inspired by 'atheistic' and 'humanistic' constructs. That he had originally rejected the notion that different secular classifications overlap and are interchangeable nevertheless illustrates the different ways in which such terms are understood and employed by the subject population.

This thesis did not discover any notable divergence in attitudes to religion in politics among the sample population. Each interviewee expressed disapproval of the use of religious rhetoric in the public sphere. The interviewees all articulated a sense of displeasure regarding politicians’ portrayal of Australian identity within an explicitly religious framework – instead emphasising the role self-reflectivity should play or, in Gidden's (1991: 5) language, 'modernity's
reflexive project of the self’. The contemporary surge of religious discourse in the political realm was repetitively theorised as an incursive project by a religious minority endeavouring to instil a particular ideology in the public domain.

While there was not any diversity in the way the sample population (negatively) perceived public expressions of religiosity, such perceptions inspired divergent political projects. Hence, where Flatow explains ‘we’re more about...providing an alternative’, this reflects a perceived procedural uniqueness rather than one of ideological distinction. During subsequent discussion, this ‘alternative’ was repetitively located in contradistinction to simply ‘attacking’ religion – as opposed to the embodiment of something ideologically exclusive to his organisation or, even, to humanism. As Flatow later explains: ‘I suppose we’re all after the same thing, we all want the same things. [...] It’s the way people go about it’. In this way, where church involvement in the Australian public sphere has been conceptualised as ‘pluralistic in character’ (e.g. Smith, 2009: 613) – both in ideological perspective and political engagement – such plurality is only observable within the secular ‘movement’ in terms of the latter. In this regard, comments made by Josef Daroczy, the President of the Atheist Society of The University of Sydney, in explaining the divergent nature of the membership body, are instructive:

I guess there are two main groups within the Society. You’ve got those who want to just sort of engage amongst ourselves and other atheists in the student body, as in providing a medium in which we can discuss secular ideas and just be atheist (laughter). Like to provide a space where
atheists can be atheists. I mean there are so many religious groups on campus but we’re really the only secular group. [...] Then there are others who want to be a lot more ‘in your face’. Like they go out and protest against the Christian Lobby, they’d sometimes go to the [Evangelical Union] meetings and try to change everyone there – as in they’d think everyone would just realise how stupid they’re being and wake up. [...] I’m more in between. I think it’s important to create a presence on campus just so people – both atheists and religious – know you exist but I don’t go around confronting ‘EU’ people all the time.

Daroczy reiterated, nevertheless, that the members to whom he referred all considered themselves to be ‘atheists’. In this way, the mode of political engagement associated with an ‘atheist’ identity is presented as heterogeneous. Unlike the experience of Andrew Johnson in Sydney Atheists – discussed in the previous chapter – a gemeinschaftian (Tönnies, 1887) convergence of behaviour was not experienced. Instead, to again employ the language of Tönnies, a gesellschaftian form of association was seen to exist whereby the behaviour of the membership was not constrained by expected mores or modes of behaviour. This suggests that existing categories of secular association do not accurately depict particular forms of political engagement. Instead, the institutional ‘ethos’ and structure of particular organisations can potentially play a substantive function in the construction of behavioural frameworks. In this way, the ability and desire of a group’s leadership to affect modes of behaviour is relevant. Thus, where Pruyser (1992: 44) claims ‘irreligion can be militant, declarative [or]
zealous’, such segregation is unable to be adequately ordered along existing categorisations of secularity.

In his examination of organised secularist groups in mid-Western areas of the United States, Pasquale (2010: 36) mirrors the findings of this project in observing a ‘rich diversity’ in the way his sample population politically engaged with religion. Pasquale, however, categorised that diversity cross-organisationally and, in doing so, argued a relationship existed between different conventional categorisations of secularity and different patterns of protest (2010: 36-7). A member of an atheist group, for example, was said to act in a certain and predictable way because of the group’s association with ‘atheism’. This thesis found no such relationship. There was no intrinsic connection between, say, thinking of oneself as atheist (or, even, joining an ‘atheist’ organisation) and participating in a particular form of political engagement. Instead, behavioural modes were sometimes enabled and, indeed, constrained by interaction with other members of the group.

The evidence, nevertheless, corroborates the notion of Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen (2011: 21) that suggests there are ‘multiple ways of being secular’. Calhoun (2010: 34) contends the ‘challenge of the social sciences is to investigate and understand these different forms of secularity’. That existing categorisations of secularity inadequately explain the divergent ways in which the sample population politically engage with wider publics leaves this task unfulfilled. In offering a different way to compartmentalise secular behaviour, Kosmin (2007) suggests that forms of secularity may be distinguished from
‘hard’ to ‘soft’, with the former more conducive to overt projects of proselytization or protest. However, such approach does not sufficiently explain what it is that ‘makes’ one practice a particular form of secularity – it appears to leave such occurrence to haphazard chance. In other words, that secular constructs have been shown to motivate divergent forms of political action hints at a plural conception of Berger’s (1967: 9) theorisation of ‘secularised consciousness’, but the task still remains to explain why such diversity exists. The following section will consider the role of divergent epistemological commitments in constructing the differing ways in which the sample population politically engage with wider publics.

**Epistemological Disposition and Political Action: A Tripartite Typology**

Having shifted the analytical focus to a more distinctly qualitative discourse that analyses how people are not religious – not simply to what degree an individual may be considered secular in some abstract terms (e.g. Kosmin, 2007; Modood, 2010) – this thesis has built a richer picture of the ways in which secular engagements with religion can structure social and political environments. In doing so, it became possible to attempt to organise some of the variety of these engagements into subjectively distinct paradigms. An obvious mode of differentiation – self-classification – has been shown to offer little guidance in this regard – a conclusion corroborated by other researchers (Gibson and Barnes, 2011; Bullivant, 2008). The ideals and aspirations associated with conventional categorisations of secularity likewise failed to be useful in
explaining divergent patterns of political behaviour. Instead, an alternative typology emerged from an attempt to organise this diversity. The result is an analytic typology of which I call 'epistemological dispositions'.

The typology involves three epistemological dispositions – the ‘humanist’, the ‘holist’ and the ‘pragmatic’. Each construct is defined by a distinctive conception of the fundamental ‘location’ of knowledge and the extent and method by which an individual can access this repository. The types are ideal typical (Freund, 1968: 59-70), with empirical cases often involving a combination of these epistemological orientations – sometimes requiring an analysis of the relative ‘balance’ of each type. The epistemological principle is, nevertheless, the singular definitional quality of each type. Importantly, though I posit the epistemological provides a good way in which to explain the materialisation of particular forms of political behaviour, this does not mean that it is the only or even most significant feature. Indeed, just as aspects of sociality and, specifically, ‘ceremony’ have been shown to shape patterns of public engagement, one can hypothesise that certain environmental characteristics – such as, for example, parental pressure – can suppress particular forms of political engagement. An individual’s personality – being an introvert or extrovert – may similarly play a role in the way in which they interact with others. Nevertheless, this thesis found the epistemological to be a useful ‘starting point’ in which to predict particular modes of political engagement. Noticeably, every participant in the sample could be analysed according to this typology – suggesting, though not proving – that its application would be warranted in the study of other secular publics. It was not explicit, propositional statements relating to the location of knowledge that gave
rise to the epistemologies typology; rather, it evolved from an analysis of the differing ways in which the participants felt *justified* to express their ideology. The typology is as follows:

**Humanism** focuses on the acquisition of knowledge solely through the means of rational science and, therefore, rejects teachings from supernatural sources. This epistemological type is distinct from the philosophical life-stance use of the term that is employed by several organisations discussed in this thesis. The root of the word is the plural notion of ‘humanity’ as opposed to the singular ‘human’. Humanists object to knowledge that cannot be generalised into a rule that applies to all humanity and often actively seek to repress supernatural ideas and representations that they may encounter. Humanists are engaged in the task of reducing complexity – they focus on the ability of the human to know things through the human faculty of reason and categorically reject the subjective as a way of authenticating knowledge. While contemporary scientistic cultures typically have a humanist underpinning (see Voas and Day, 2007), the epistemological category ‘humanism’ gets at the irreducible core of this culture: a commitment to humanity's knowledge. The supernatural is thus positioned as an obstacle to the progression of such knowledge.

**Holists** similarly believe that rational science is the only legitimate means by which humans can know the world. Crucially, however, they highlight the limits of human knowledge. Whereas humanists emphasise what humanity knows, holists emphasise, contrarily, what we do *not* know. Holists problematise absolute categories of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and in doing so emphasise the
constructed nature of morality. Their outlook is relativistic in this way, but opposes the subjectivism often associated with this approach. The holist is sceptical of those claiming and asserting extensive knowledge – whether objectively or subjectively acquired - and, therefore, do not claim the same right to knowledge as humanists.

Pragmatism is defined after its philosophical definition, as the doctrine that an idea should be understood in terms of its practical consequences; hence the assessment of the ‘truth’ or validity of a notion is effected according to the perceived usefulness of its practical consequences. Epistemologically, pragmatism involves ‘enmity towards the view that there are firm, unchangeable foundations to knowledge’ (Baert, 2005: 147). Morality in this construct is a pragmatic matter concerning outcomes. Where the holist emphasises the limits of knowledge, pragmatists emphasise the irrelevance of abstractions concerning the ultimate source of knowledge. Both can be differentiated from the humanist celebration of the power of knowledge, and any intrinsic claim to the truth under such terms.

The following discussion will present a brief selection of samples from my data. The examples are chosen to (i) draw out the basic epistemologies outlined above and (ii) illustrate how these ideal types have been drawn from the data. Summarily, humanistic dispositions motivated more overt, antagonist forms of political engagement and protest; holists were less inclined to participate in aggressive confrontations with religious others; while pragmatists readily shifted their mode of engagement based on immediate needs.
Andrew Jonson, a member of Sydney Atheists, embodied a humanist epistemological disposition. He explains:

“It’s wrong for the evangelicals to go around telling people to believe something that’s just so ridiculously stupid, and not just stupid but something so fanciful that it belies belief. [...] We shouldn't have to tolerate it. It's just wrong to go around arguing something that there’s just no proof of.

Religiosity is placed squarely in contradistinction with the humanist notion of discovering knowledge through the human faculty of reason. Johnson finds this ‘intolerable’ – especially ‘when they go around’ proselytizing such disposition. This motivates him to engage in overt, retaliatory behaviour – ‘campaigning on the streets’; ‘putting anti-religious posters up’ – as a way in which to emphasise the validity of his contrary epistemological position. Importantly, it is the perceived unjustifiability of the claims of religious others that motivates Johnson to engage in particular forms of behaviour. That Johnson described his action in terms of some *response* to the advancement of religiosity in the public sphere introduces a pragmatic element – a good reminder that the epistemological types are conceived of as ideal typical. Nevertheless, the thrust of this discourse displays a humanistic approach: a rejection to knowledge authenticated purely by the subjective.

Victor Bien, a member of the Humanist Society of New South Wales, contrarily exhibited a holistic disposition. He explained that though he had no ‘use’ for
religion in his own life, he felt unable to categorically denounce those to whom it had some intrinsic value: ‘[i]ts hard to know why many people believe they need religion...probably because that’s the way they’ve grown up I suppose, but surely that can’t explain it’. This statement exemplifies the holistic approach by articulating a statement of complexity – emphasising the lack of knowledge – as opposed to claiming some ‘right’ to knowledge based upon the perceived superiority of rational science and reason. Bien did not engage in antagonistic or aggressive forms of political action, instead preferring to ‘just involve [himself] in the society’ with likeminded individuals.

David Nicholls, the president of the Atheist Foundation of Australia, demonstrated the third component of the epistemological typology – pragmatism – in his explanation of the way in which he perceives and engages with religion. He explains:

Everyone can see we’re heading to being a far greater secular nation, even the religious can see it and that is why they’re causing such a fuss at the moment. It’s important that we counter this [religious activism] when it happens and remind people of why the shift’s happening in the first place – so that we can escape outdated religious dogma.

Here, Nicholls makes no allusion to the ultimate source of knowledge. Instead, secularity is presented as a way to reach what he perceives to be some sort of superior outcome. His behaviour is fluid in the sense that it is constructed by the aspiration to ‘counter’ or protest religious representations when they
materialise in the public sphere. While Nicholls exhibits the humanistic element of rejecting the supernatural, he does so for pragmatic concerns rather than because such ‘knowledge’ originates externally to human reasoning. As he later argued: ‘[i]t doesn’t matter where it comes from; if someone tells my son he will go to hell if he doesn’t believe what they do, then I have a big problem with that’. In this way, Nicholls again reflects the pragmatistic emphasis of the irrelevance of abstractions concerning the origin of knowledge – instead attributing ‘rightness’ according to the practical consequences of the representation.

A common theme resonating from the interviews was the expression of an unwillingness or apathy toward cross-organisation collaboration. Participants generally had no contact with members of other secular organisations. While several argued that collaboration between the groups would increase the visibility of the secular agenda through the presentation of what Nicholls described as a ‘unified front’, most were disinclined to even consider the implementation of such cooperation. Meredith Doig, the President of the Rationalist Society of Australia, explained a rare attempt to create cross-organisation collaboration through the formation of Reason Australia in 2010:

At the 2010 Atheist Convention a few of us from the different groups got together at the end [...] with the aim of establishing an organisation that could act as a representative for all of us. [...] Nothing really came of it though because of the [participants] ideological differences and personality clashes.
While Reason Australia has a website, it never performed any function in facilitating cooperation on any level between different secular organisations. I asked Doig to explain and elaborate what she meant by ‘ideological differences’. Noticeably, she struggled to articulate a response. She found it difficult to find the appropriate language to describe such variance: ‘It’s hard to say, I suppose we come at it from different angles – some just want to go about it harder than others’. I posit that the epistemologies disposition typology helps to explain such diversity and offers a language through which it can be expressed. Doig explained that practical limitations – principally a lack of volunteers and time – also contributed to the failure of the organisation. This demonstrates the importance of not employing the typology in isolation.

**Conclusion**

Where the scholarship has recognised that secularity has some relationship with engagement and protest of public forms of religiosity (e.g. Mutch, 2010; Casanova, 2011), the quality of such connection has remained under-theorised. Existing categorisations of secularity have been shown to be inadequate in terms of predicting the ways in which participants engaged in divergent modes of political behaviour. This chapter presented a tripartite typology involving distinct epistemological characteristics as a way of explaining what it is that makes a secular individual act in a certain fashion. This inductive theory of epistemological disposition should be employed alongside analysis of aspects of sociality and, specifically, ‘ceremony’ discussed in previous chapters, with the
aim of providing the researcher an expanded methodology through which to explore secular behaviour. The typology offers a language through which to articulate distinct patterns of secularity. That the theory targets a universal aspect of human life – epistemological disposition – suggests its utility to the examination of other secular (or, indeed, religious) publics.
Chapter Five – Conclusion

This thesis has explored the concept and meaning of the ‘secular’ using empirical methods. Although some hypotheses exist concerning the ontology of the secular, these have been shown to be of a very general kind and are largely unempirical. This project, therefore, employed an exploratory and inductive approach in its research design. Given that the research concerns the ontology of the secular – something that is an analytically contested and amorphous category (e.g. Woodhead, 2010) – it was not possible to concentrate on some particular ‘object’ that is perceived to be secular. Instead, the focus is on understanding secularity in its breadth – not comprehensively, of course, but rather to apprehend something of its parameters. I interviewed people who describe themselves as secular, but employed a maximum variation sampling strategy to explore the variety of behaviours and discourses that intersect with this basic self-classification. The thesis used grounded theory methodology to compartmentalise some of this diversity into manageable categories of which I have termed the ‘epistemological disposition typology’. For this reason, I deliberately began the project without attempting to establish pre-existing, well-defined categories for which to code the data prior to a coherent understanding of the subject matter.

This research commenced as an engagement with the secularisation thesis, arguing that there was insufficient data concerning the nature of secularity to mediate long-running debates. In emphasising the need to give the secular
further academic attention – theoretical and, necessarily, empirical – this research echoed the sentiment of several contemporary projects in the social sciences (e.g. Asad, 2003; Knott, 2005; Pasquale, 2007; Zuckerman, 2010; Cannell, 2010). It departed from them, however, in arguing that the conceptual frame with which the scholarship generally approaches the exploration of the ontology of the secular was so inadequate as to require the development of new methodologies for its study.

I argued the prolificacy of partial theoretical interpretations – without sustained empirical examination – meant the ontology of the secular was fundamentally indistinct. These theorisations, ironically, had to be sidelined in order to reach the hazy empirical ‘space’ that they sought to depict. An inductive and exploratory research design was thus employed in order to effect an empirically grounded engagement with secularity. The approach was to engage the research population and then consider how to describe what ‘substances’ were found there. This methodology produced diverse ethnographic data and the chapters have unpacked these findings according to different aspects of social and political life. The overarching conclusion is that there are a variety of ways in which secular people engage with religion, working against a simple interpretation of the secular as insubstantial.

The first chapter to outline such data – Chapter Three – dealt with non- or partially-intellectual expressions of secular culture. I argued that the apparent ordinariness of this secular culture spoke of a well-established and ‘banal’ (Billig, 2005) or ‘hidden’ (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) form of secularity. The discussion
suggested that conventional notions of a- and post-religiosity should be displaced by more substantialist understandings of the secular. The second part of the chapter expanded upon these preliminary speculations of the tenuous nature of the concept of ‘postreligion’ by exploring the ways in which secularity is associated with and embedded in various forms of social relations. That sociality was shown to play a formative function in both the constitution of secular ideologies and material practices further undermined the notion of secularity as insubstantial.

Chapter Four investigated particular practices of identifying oneself as ‘secular’. Existing categories with which sections of the scholarship have traditionally attempted to segregate purportedly distinct secular ideologies – ‘atheism’, ‘humanism’, ‘rationalism’, inter alia – were not found to be intrinsically meaningful in terms of predicting particular forms of secular identities and behaviours. Rather, such classifications were shown to embody pragmatic projects instead of those of an exclusively theoretical premise. I argued at least some of the diversity of experience encountered could be explained according to varying epistemological dispositions. In doing so, the analysis moved against the exploratory agenda of the earlier discussion in trying to reduce some of the complexity.

Throughout the thesis, the potential for developing a more expansive social science of the ‘secular’ and its constitutive elements is considered. The variety of subjectivity and behaviour discovered should expand our understanding of the empirical substance associated with secularity, unsettle those assumptions that
simplify this complexity, and arm future researchers with better conceptual tools and more precise research questions for its continued examination. In these ways, this exploratory methodology, in consort with its findings, should provide a number of concrete ways of understanding and researching the ‘secular’. The hope is to make subsequent study of the ‘secular’ appear far more manageable than before.

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