

## **Secularisation in Australian Education since 1910**

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### Published

2021

### Version

Accepted Manuscript (AM)

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# Secularisation in Australian Education, from 1910 to Today

## **Abstract:**

This book aims to provide an account of the complex nature of secularisation in the context of Australian primary and secondary education. Drawing on the sociological literature on secularisation alongside historical, sociological, and broader interdisciplinary scholarship on the relationship between Christian and secular belief systems in Australian education, it seeks to complicate understandings of what it means to have a secular education system. Each chapter examines a different period in Australian schooling, providing both a synthesis of key literature and an examination of original case studies.

**Keywords:** Secularisation; Australian education; Australian schooling; Religious education; Religious instruction; Controversies in education; Conflict in education

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# Chapter 1 – Secularisation and Australian Education: Definitions and Approaches

## Introduction

The “secular principle” is well-established as a trait of Australian governance and public education. Yet the extent to which any system of education in Australia can be described as “secular,” and indeed what this term means, is unsettled. Remy Low has identified three key trends in the historiography of the “secular” in Australian schooling, stating that:

While the various associative interpretations of the history of Australian schooling emphasise different aspects of how the secular came to be one of its defining features, they tend to agree on three points: that the secular principle in schooling was accomplished by the putting aside of differences for agreement – whether of common citizenship or procedural fairness; that this secured an education that was and is neutral amidst differences; and as such, the secular principle abets social fairness, inclusion and cohesion in the nation.<sup>1</sup>

Low argues that “the political arrangements that define schooling as secular are not the outcome of inevitable laws of progress or ideal principles, but a result of contingent and contested turns in the political history of colonial invasion in Australia.”<sup>2</sup> These “contingent and contested turns” have contributed to shifting definitions of the term “secular.” The centrality of the “secular” concept to perceptions of Australian schooling also raises questions about how, in what circumstances, and with what consequences, the “secular principle” is contested.

This work builds on my 2018 PhD thesis, where I drew on Foucault’s “history of the present”<sup>3</sup> to uncover the complex and contingent development of the relationship of what I describe as “Christian” and “secular” impulses specifically in the education system of the Australian state of Queensland.<sup>4</sup> In this work, I position the case studies examined in my dissertation in conversation with the broader literature on “Christian” and “secular” settlements in Australia. Through a combination of fine-grained historical case studies and sociological theory, this monograph aims to contribute to bridging the gap between the approaches of historians and sociologists in understanding the relationship between dominant faith groups and “secular” ideals in educational contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Remy Low, ‘Secularism, Race, Religion and the Public Instruction Act of 1880 in NSW’, *History of Education Review* 48, no. 2 (26 September 2019): 175, <https://doi.org/10.1108/HER-07-2018-0019>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Clarissa Carden, ‘Turning Points: Christian and Secular Battlelines in the History and Present of Queensland Education’ (Doctor of Philosophy, Brisbane, Australia, Griffith University, 2018).

While some sociologists have produced valuable studies of the extent to which Australian schools may be considered secular, their work has, almost by necessity, taken a broad approach.<sup>5</sup> Local particularities are obscured in favour of presenting an account of the national situation. Yet historical, or historically-influenced, scholarship focused on specific case studies has revealed the distinct nature of what might be described as “secular settlements” in the varying Australian states and territories.<sup>6</sup> At times, these works have argued for a more careful examination of the complexities of “secularisation” and of what it means for a schooling system to be “secular.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, as Stephen Jackson identifies, this body of historical research has largely focused on the nineteenth century, when such settlements were initially laid down, at the expense of other, equally significant, moments.<sup>8</sup> This has limited examinations of how settlements have changed and developed, and of what “secular” education means today.

In this context, this monograph has two key aims. Firstly, it seeks to provide a more complex account of the relationship between Christian and secular impulses in Australian education than is possible within a study of a single case. It accomplishes this through an examination of the scholarship on this relationship alongside six distinct case studies. Each chapter focuses on a period of conflict and change and seeks to identify the diverse forces at play in defining and redefining what it means to advocate for “Christian” or “secular” forces in education. Secondly, the book aims to argue for the continued utility of secularisation as a theoretical perspective in understanding changes in the relationship between religion and education. In this chapter, I synthesise the sociological literature on secularisation, developing a definition which, I argue, offers a useful way to conceptualise the “battlelines” drawn between proponents of different belief systems at key

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<sup>5</sup> e.g. Cathy Byrne, *Religion in Secular Education: What, in Heaven’s Name, Are We Teaching Our Children?*, *International Studies in Religion and Society* 21 (Leiden Boston: Brill, 2014); Marion Maddox, *Taking God to School: The End of Australia’s Egalitarian Education?* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Clarissa Carden, ‘Bibles in State Schools: Moral Formation in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Queensland School’, *History of Education Review* 47, no. 1 (4 June 2018): 16–24, <https://doi.org/10.1108/HER-07-2016-0029>; Stephen Chavura, “... but in Its Proper Place. ...” *Religion, Enlightenment, and Australia’s Secular Heritage: The Case of Robert Lowe in Colonial NSW 1842-1850: Robert Lowe and the Secular in NSW*, *Journal of Religious History* 38, no. 3 (September 2014): 356–76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12075>; Stephen James Jackson, “‘Not in the Business of Indoctrination’: Religious Education in South Australian Public Schools, 1968–1980’, *History of Education Review* 49, no. 2 (16 October 2020): 249–62, <https://doi.org/10.1108/HER-01-2020-0006>; Low, ‘Secularism, Race, Religion and the Public Instruction Act of 1880 in NSW’; Remy Low, ‘A Genealogy of the Secular versus Religious Schooling Debate in New South Wales (Part I): Terror and Suspicion’, *Journal of Religious Education* 62, no. 1 (April 2014): 25–38, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-014-0003-4>; Remy Low, ‘A Genealogy of the Religious versus Secular Schooling Debate in New South Wales (Part II): Populism and Patriotism’, *Journal of Religious Education* 62, no. 2 (July 2014): 53–64, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-014-0006-1>.

<sup>7</sup> Carden, ‘Turning Points’; Carden, ‘Bibles in State Schools’; Chavura, “... but in Its Proper Place. ...” *Religion, Enlightenment, and Australia’s Secular Heritage*; Jackson, “‘Not in the Business of Indoctrination’”.

<sup>8</sup> Jackson, “‘Not in the Business of Indoctrination’”, 250.

historical moments and to understand how and why “secular settlements have been refined, revised, and rewritten.

The case studies selected in this work all relate, to an extent, to the system of schooling in Queensland, Australia. While some focus on issues of national significance, the use of cases from a single state is instructive in providing evidence of how the national landscape described in the literature is reflected, or not reflected, within more local contexts.

### **Secularisation: The approach used in this book**

Defining secularisation is complex due to the vast body of existing, often contradictory, literature. In Table 1, I identify some of the key movements in the development of secularisation theory. Naturally, this is only a partial account. As this table demonstrates, even among scholars who agree that “secularisation” is a useful theoretical tool, there are significant differences of opinion as to what the term entails and how secularisation ought to be measured. Identifying a useful definition is further problematized by confusion about the social changes which may be defined as occurring within the context of secularisation, and by a tendency to conflate secularisation with religious change or to assume that “secularisation,” and the very idea of the “secular,” are inherently opposed to the continued existence of “religion.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the greatest problem of all is the presumption that modernity and secularisation are necessarily linked, and that the narrative of secularisation in modernity is a linear one.

#### **[PLACE TABLE 1 HERE]**

While no definition will satisfy all theorists, secularisation has the potential to enhance explanations of the role of religious groups, particularly dominant groups, within national or state-based education systems. To do so, however, it must be responsive to what Jackson describes as the “gradations of secularity” which may exist within schooling systems.<sup>10</sup> That is, it must not assume that there has been a simple, linear transition from a religious society to a secular one, nor should it presume that secularisation occurs in the same way in all local contexts, even within a single nation.

In this text, I define secularisation as a social phenomenon that is historically and culturally specific, changing and recursive, which is situated in existing power relations, and which is multi-scalar and multi-dimensional. The definition I propose does not presume that secularisation occurs alongside modernisation, or indeed that there is only one way to be modern, and is, instead, compatible with what Eisenstadt has described as “multiple modernities.”<sup>11</sup> Table 2 provides an overview of the definition used in this book and the most significant scholarship used in its development.

This revised definition is, I will demonstrate, useful due to its ability to explain instances of decline and expansion in Christian dominance over schooling systems in a way that does not rely on the presumption of ongoing decline. It is further useful insofar as it opens up the possibility of

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<sup>9</sup> As critiqued by both opponents to secularisation theory and proponents of a more nuanced, revised, perspective. Rodney Stark, ‘Secularization, R.I.P.’, *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 249–73; Rodney Stark, ‘Secularization: The Myth of Religious Decline’, *Fides et Historia; Terre Haute* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 1; Mark Chaves, ‘Secularization as Declining Religious Authority’, *Social Forces* 72, no. 3 (1994): 749–74; Chavura, “... but in Its Proper Place. ...” Religion, Enlightenment, and Australia’s Secular Heritage’.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, “Not in the Business of Indoctrination”.

<sup>11</sup> Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’, *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 1–29.

interrogating shifts in the meaning of secular and Christian ideologies, rather than presuming that such ideologies hold consistent meanings over time. In doing so, it recognises that, as Chavura et al argue in a recent work, “the concept of the secular receives its full meaning from the cultural context in which the word is used.”<sup>12</sup>

[PLACE TABLE 2 HERE]

***Component 1: Secularisation is historically, culturally, and spatially specific***

The first key dimension of secularisation is that it historically, culturally and spatially specific. This is an argument proffered by Casanova, who states that, while the secularisation of Europe “is an undeniable social fact,” this secularisation is, in fact, confined to Europe itself and to some former European colonies.<sup>13</sup> For him, secularisation is a culturally specific phenomenon, which has become accepted as a necessary part of modernisation, due to the influence of predominantly European sociologists. Even the most vigorous proponents of the secularisation theory have noted that a very different pattern of secularisation occurs in Europe, where there has often been a state church, compared to the United States, which was founded on the assumption of religious, or at least denominational, pluralism.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, David Martin argues that it is possible to look at differences in cultural contexts which may not be, on their face, related to religion, and find that they are nonetheless related to how secularisation as an ideal, and a set of processes, operates within these contexts.<sup>15</sup> Martin's analysis reveals that secularisation is not the result of a single change, but of many, often contradictory, changes. He argues that a historical analysis of secularisation should recognise these changes, which may be modest, without obscuring the reality that they are specific to the circumstances in which they occur, and that countermovements are possible.

***Component 2: Secularisation is changing and recursive***

The second, related, component of secularisation as it is used in this book is that it is shifting, changing, and recursive. This is in line with the thinking of neo-secularisation theorists such as Dobbelaere and Tschannen, both of whom argue that secularisation is not linear.<sup>16</sup> Instead, they indicate, it is dependent upon historical processes which are sensitive to cultural change and which may be reversed. For Dobbelaere in particular, secularisation is far from an ongoing progressive force. Instead, it is accompanied by processes of desecularisation and resecularisation, through

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen A Chavura, John Gascoigne, and Ian Tregenza, *Reason, Religion, and the Australian Polity*, 2020, 9.

<sup>13</sup> José Casanova, ‘Cosmopolitanism, the Clash of Civilizations and Multiple Modernities’, ed. Reimon Bachika and Markus S Schulz, *Current Sociology* 59, no. 2 (March 2011): 255, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392110391162>.

<sup>14</sup> Bryan R Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment* (London: C. A. Watts & Co Ltd, 1966), 101.

<sup>15</sup> David Martin, ‘Secularization: An International Debate from a British Perspective’, *Society* 51, no. 5 (October 2014): 464–71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-014-9812-z>.

<sup>16</sup> Karel Dobbelaere, *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels*, 2. print, Gods, Humans and Religions 1 (Bruxelles: PIE Lang, 2004); Olivier Tschannen, ‘The Secularization Paradigm: A Systematization’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, no. 4 (1991): 395–415.



which churches may regain lost authority and social influence or, alternatively, lose the power they have regained. While I identify this component as emerging broadly from the neo-secularisation movement of the 1990s and 2000s, the possibility of religious revitalisation was recognised even during the 1960s and 1970s movement. For example, Wilson suggested that, even in the context of a secularised or secularising society, specific pockets of religious belief can experience revival or growth.<sup>17</sup> For Wilson, though, desecularisation was expected to occur within specific places and communities, not necessarily on a broader cultural level.

***Component 3: Secularisation is embedded in existing power relations***

A third aspect of defining secularisation is that it is embedded in power relations. This has been recognised in the work of the 1960s and 1970s with, for instance, Berger arguing that religion provides an important justification for social institutions.<sup>18</sup> A useful theory of secularisation must also recognise that churches can retain power and authority even for those who do not hold a religious belief. For example, Wilson notes that churches can play an important part in offering “appropriate ceremonial for prestige and status-enhancement at crucial stages of the life-cycle,” particularly for events like baptisms, weddings, and funerals.<sup>19</sup> This ceremonial prestige is particularly significant in relation to the public mourning of official war histories and events of serious social upheaval.

***Component 4: Secularisation is multi-faceted and multi-scalar***

In keeping with a recognition of the relevance of the specificities of cultural and political context, the definition of secularisation employed in this book is multi-scalar and multi-dimensional. By this, I mean that it recognises, not only large-scale transformations of society, and not only the mass decline of individual religiosity, but also the subtler shifts and changes through which secularisation, or its opposite, may be described as “desecularisation” may occur.

Dobbelaere takes up this argument, proposing that secularisation takes place at three levels: societal secularisation, organisational secularisation, and individual secularisation.<sup>20</sup> In recognising that secularisation can occur at these levels, he also suggests that it is possible for desecularisation, understood as a reversal of the secularisation process, to occur at the same levels. Understanding these different spaces and processes of secularisation allows the sociologist to uncover the interrelations between the three. Dividing the analysis between these three levels also helps to overcome the tendency to differentiate between the “public” and “private” sphere, with the latter viewed as a space in which religion may be present, but which cannot be analysed as part of public forms of secularisation.<sup>21</sup> While Dobbelaere’s analysis provides an important tool in demonstrating the scales and dimensions along which secularisation may take place, it also has the potential to obscure the subtleties of secularisation processes. It is important to take this analysis as suggestive, not conclusive.

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<sup>17</sup> Bryan R Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 37.

<sup>18</sup> Peter L Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Middlesex, England: Penguin University Books, 1973), 42.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Dobbelaere, *Secularization*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

Dobbelaere's concept of "societal secularisation" refers to a process through which the values of organised religion become increasingly irrelevant for the legitimation of everyday life. This is the result of processes of differentiation – the quintessential separation of church and state. It can occur through deliberate policy or latently, as an unintended consequence of actions intended to promote rationality or differentiation of sub-systems in society. Talcott Parsons highlights the significance of denominations in causing this separation to occur.<sup>22</sup> Societal secularisation may occur, for example, through the differentiation of education from religion or politics. It can also result in attempts by religious groups to counter the reduction of religious influence in such differentiated spaces.<sup>23</sup>

"Organisational secularisation," another concept emerging from Dobbelaere's synthesis, occurs within a religion. This requires that religions become more worldly, more concerned with everyday life rather than with transcendental meaning. Churches undergoing this process may adopt the values of the secular society in which they are positioned. This can enable churches to leverage their value and influence through providing services and forms of care that the state neglects or seeks to hand over to non-government organisations. The adoption of values associated with a broader secular society may occur through an active declaration of secular values or a subtler shift to a more open and less negative relationship with popular ideals and cultures. They may alternatively undergo a reversal of this process and seek to re-sacralise religious life.<sup>24</sup> This is a phenomenon that is evident, for example, at Christmas and Easter, where churches often seek to open a conversation about the religious meaning of these holidays.

For Dobbelaere, "individual secularisation" is associated with a decrease in individual commitment to, and integration in, religious bodies.<sup>25</sup> Examining individual secularisation implies uncovering the closeness – or otherwise – of the beliefs and practices of individual actors to those prescribed by religious groups, including those to which the individuals may subscribe.<sup>26</sup> Despite the limitations of this type of categorisation, the recognition of multiple levels inherent in Dobbelaere's analysis helps to understand tensions like that noted by Possamai, who states that while it appears to be the case that "traditional institutional religion' is declining, there are nonetheless still people who experience religion and religious experiences in their everyday life, and people who believe in God or something similar."<sup>27</sup> Using Dobbelaere's terminology, it can be suggested that this observation reflects a situation in which societal secularisation has occurred, but individual belief remains potent. Similarly, McLeod has argued that the weakening of Christian belief in the West has not necessarily kept pace with the decline in practice.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Talcott Parsons, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies* (New York: The Free Press, 1981), 295.

<sup>23</sup> Dobbelaere, *Secularization*, 19–20.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>27</sup> Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament*, Gods, Humans, and Religions, no. 7 (New York: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2005), 32.

<sup>28</sup> Hugh McLeod, 'The Crisis of Christianity in the West: Etering a Post-Christian Era?', in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, ed. Hugh McLeod, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 325, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521815000.019>.

The idea that secularisation is multi-scalar has been taken up by geographers, including Wilford, who argues that a multi-scalar and multi-faceted understanding of secularisation offers much to the analysis of the relationship between religion and place.<sup>29</sup> For Wilford, it is necessary to recognise the possibility of religious entrepreneurs filling “archipelagos:” particular spaces in which it is possible to sacralise everyday life.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Gao et al show that, even in the context of a secular or secularising nation-state, specific groups such as migrant workers can reinvigorate the sacred in the locations in which they live.<sup>31</sup> While this work focuses on the resacralisation of local spaces, other research explores the public sphere with Possamai arguing that a “re-invasion of religion in the public sphere” has occurred.<sup>32</sup> A useful definition of secularisation would recognise that the secularisation is spatialized and that revivals in the public sphere or in local “archipelagos,” exist alongside other, fragmented and potentially very different, changes in the relationships between religion and “secular” ideals.

### ***Component 5: Secularisation can be understood in relation to multiple modernities***

A final factor in a useful definition of secularisation is that it must take into account the existence of what Eisenstadt terms “multiple modernities.”<sup>33</sup> This term refers to the reality that modernisation has not occurred evenly or followed the same path throughout the world. There are, for Eisenstadt, multiple modernities because there are many pathways to modernity and many ways to be modern. Given the historical intimacy between the ideas of secularisation and modernisation, the recognition of multiple modernities helps to illuminate the cultural specificity of secularisation. The recognition of multiple modernities helps to explain the limitation in some sociological accounts of secularisation highlighted by David Martin, who states that “even when sociologists deal with the past they are selective, because only approved routes to modernity, like ascetic Protestantism, are allowed to count.”<sup>34</sup> In this sense, Martin contributes to the argument that sociologists are themselves both products and authors of the complexity of modernity and that, in managing this complexity, they can reduce perspectives to those that are manageable and coherent. In essence, his argument indicates that the perspectives sociologists choose frame ways of seeing and not seeing, which obscure or remove from the representational frame cases which offer contradictions or challenges to established theory. They ignore the varying local forms of secularisation, which may occur in a manner different from that anticipated by the master narrative, just as they ignore the resurgence of particular forms of religious identities. For Martin, alternative master narratives focusing on particular belief systems rather than, or in addition to, secularism can help sociologists to think about multiple modernities as they relate to religiosity. Martin reiterates the importance of cultural context in understanding secularisation, stating that:

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<sup>29</sup> Justin Wilford, ‘Sacred Archipelagos: Geographies of Secularization’, *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 3 (June 2010): 328–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132509348558>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>31</sup> Quan Gao, Junxi Qian, and Zhenjie Yuan, ‘Multi-Scaled Secularization or Postsecular Present? Christianity and Migrant Workers in Shenzhen, China’, *Cultural Geographies*, 2018, 1474474018762814.

<sup>32</sup> Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 33.

<sup>33</sup> Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’.

<sup>34</sup> David Martin, ‘Secularisation and the Future of Christianity’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20, no. 2 (May 2005): 145, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537900500067687>.

When we study secularization from a comparative cultural perspective we do not simply compare figures of belief and practice. We look at how people in different societies are embedded in structures of power and webs of culture, and how they place themselves in the narratives of history, especially the narratives of national history as constructed by local elites.<sup>35</sup>

From this perspective, the utility of secularisation as a theoretical frame is dependent upon the ability of the researcher to understand the studied culture in terms of power relations, histories, and ways of knowing.

The idea of multiple modernities is also taken up by Possamai and Spohn, respectively,<sup>36</sup> who view it as enabling a more mindful approach to the geographical and cultural specificities of religion and secularisation around the world. For Spohn, processes of secularisation and desecularisation occur in their specific cultural contexts. He argues that, just as no single master narrative can explain the historical and social trajectory of all nations, no single master narrative can explain changes in religiosity in all nations. For this reason, Spohn argues, a theory of secularisation wherein modernity requires religion to dissolve in order to give way to secular understandings of the nation is demonstrably mistaken. Instead, he states that an understanding of multiple modernities highlights the possibility for modern nations to define themselves by religion, just as they can define themselves by secularism.

### **The plan of this book**

In the next three chapters, I draw on the synthesised definition of secularisation outlined above to analyse key issues at three distinct periods of Australian educational history. Each chapter provides an account of the key literature and examines two case studies that reveal the complexity of Christian and secular relationships in education within a similar period. Chapter Two focuses on the first two decades of the twentieth century. It explores the meaning of “free, secular, and compulsory” education in Australia and the relationship between this edict and the presumption of shared Christianity. Chapter Three focuses on the 1960s and 1970s, a time of significant change and upheaval in the relationship between Christianity and schooling in realms such as science and social studies not only in Australia but internationally. This was also the period during which federal funding to private, religious, schools, known as “state aid” was introduced, creating one of the pillars of the faith/state relationship in contemporary Australian education. Chapter Four focuses on the twenty-first century, exploring how the Christian faith enters and plays a role within contemporary state-based education. Finally, the conclusion serves as a brief endnote to the work, drawing together the findings from the literature and original case studies.

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<sup>35</sup> Martin, ‘Secularization’, 465.

<sup>36</sup> Adam Possamai, ‘Post-Secularism in Multiple Modernities’, *Journal of Sociology* 53, no. 4 (2017): 822–35; Willfried Spohn, ‘Multiple Modernity, Nationalism and Religion: A Global Perspective’, *Current Sociology* 51, no. 3–4 (2003): 265–86.

