

## Article

# Secular Jewish Identity and Public Religious Participation within Australian Secular Multiculturalism

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**Abstract:** Many Australian Jews label their Jewish identity as secular. However, public representations of Jewish culture within Australian multiculturalism frequently highlight the religious practices of Judaism as markers of Jewish cultural authenticity. This study explores how secular Jews sometimes perform and reference Jewish religious practice when participating in communal events, and when identifying as Jewish to non-Jews in social interactions and in interactions with the state. Ethnographic participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine self-identified secular Jews living in Queensland, Australia, were employed to gather data. These self-identified secular Jews within the community incorporate little religiosity in their private lives, yet in public they often identify with religious practice, and use a religious framework when describing and representing Jewishness to outsiders. This suggests that public Jewishness within Queensland multiculturalism might be considered a performative identity, where acts and statements of religious behavior construct and signify Jewish group cultural distinctiveness in mainstream society. These secular Jews, it is suggested, may participate in this performativity in order to partake in the social capital of communal religious institutions, and to maintain a space for Jewish identity in multicultural secular society, so that their individual cultural interpretations of Jewishness might be realised.

**Keywords:** secularism; Judaism; Jewish identity; performativity; multiculturalism; Australia

## 1. Introduction

Jewish life in the Australian state of Queensland dates back to the early days of statehood—when the first Jewish communal institutions were established in the state capital city of Brisbane in 1865. Jews, classified as a religion by the Australian Bureau of Statistics rather than an ethnic or cultural group, make up 0.16% of South-East Queensland society, with a total officially-recognised population of 2740 in the region, where the majority of the overall Queensland Jewish population live ([Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018](#)). Local Jewish authorities estimate a much larger population figure of 4000, due to issues of undercount well-documented in Jewish communities in other states and countries ([Encel and Buckley 1978](#); [Graham and Waterman 2005](#); [Markus 2006](#)). This incorporates many Jews who do not indicate “Judaism” or “Jewish” in the national census, many of whom self-identify as “secular Jews”.

The personal practices and experiences of Jewish individuals in Queensland vary depending on their own personal level and style of religiosity, including secular Jews. Jewish identity has been variously defined and described as a racial or ethnic identity, a religious identity, and a cultural identity, as well as combinations of some or all of these. As [Goldlust \(1993\)](#) observes of other Australian Jews, “self-identity as ‘Jewish’ may incorporate various combinations of ethnic, national and cultural elements, while it also may or may not include any necessary allegiance or identification with Judaism

as a religion.” Yet on a community level, religious practice and participation in religious institutions are presented publicly as one of the core facets of local Jewish identity, and the norms and narratives of religiosity tightly controlled, as part of a mission of political integration and equality within the state’s multicultural framework. By publicly performing a strong, defined religious identity in the public sphere, and by lobbying for the ability to do so in public institutions, just as [Modood \(2006\)](#) observes of minorities in the United Kingdom, the community reinforces its place within the multicultural framework of Queensland society. Notably, the community’s secular Jews, who experience and express Jewishness non-religiously in private, may also take part in much of this public reinforcement of the religious facets of Jewishness.

As part of a broader study on Jewish identity in the South-East Queensland region, this paper explores the relationship between secular Jewish individual identity and religious Jewish group identity for secular Jews within the framework of Queensland’s state multiculturalism. The term “secular” has varying definitions; in his treatise on Jewish secular thought, [Biale \(2011\)](#) provides a list of several potential interpretations, including the theological division of worldly and spiritual, the political separation of church and state, or the dismissal of religious traditions from cultural practice. Likewise, the concept of religious identity and practice has varying facets; Biale echoes other Jewish thinkers and identifies Jewish religion as a “trinity . . . God, Israel and Torah”, defining religion as belief in God, ethno-religious peoplehood, and praxis defined by religious rules. However, rather than fix on any one definition for either “religious” or “secular”, this study takes a phenomenological approach, where these concepts are self-identified and self-defined by the individuals within the study.

Data are drawn from ethnographic participant observation and semi-structured interviews with nine self-identified secular Jews: Caleb, Dalya, Jonathan, Joseph, Jori, Nathan, Noah, Ruth and Susannah (see Table 1 in Section 4 for more details). I examine how these secular Jews define and experience “secular” within their private identities, and how they publicly participate in religious events and speak about religiosity as part of Jewishness in their public discourse. While these nine subjects are only a small number of the local community and cannot be considered representative of that community in general, their stories do offer insight into the experience of negotiating and practicing a Jewish identity within and beyond the Jewish community for self-identified secular Jews. Based on their experiences, I theorize that public Jewishness within multicultural secular society for many secular Jews might be described as performative when it comes to religiosity, as per Judith Butler’s conceptualization of identity as deliberate acts and utterances of “ongoing political contestation and reformulation of the subject” (1997). Due to the official recognition of Jewishness as religion, more than ethnicity or culture, by the Queensland state, the Jewish subject can best be legitimately politically contested, formed and reformed within the framework of the multicultural state through performance and discourse on its religious facets. Effective negotiation of the place of Jewish religion within the state then creates space for the non-religious, cultural elements of Jewish life to be experienced by the community.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. Defining “Secular Jewishness”

Contemporary secular Jewishness, particularly in Western countries, comes from a long historical and philosophical tradition, one “no less Jewish for being antitraditional” ([Biale 2011](#)). Though drawing on ideas of the European enlightenment and corresponding Jewish enlightenment (Haskalah), scholars from the medieval period, and even earlier, engaged in debate and differing interpretation of the power and presence of God within Jewish theology and praxis. Modern-day secular Judaism draws on centuries of such thought, from medieval scholars like Maimonides, to enlightenment philosophers like Spinoza, and to post-industrial intellectuals like Freud and Einstein, though perhaps few modern-day secular Jews would intentionally deeply engage with such philosophies. Yet, for all its rich theoretical foundation, secular Jewishness is difficult to neatly define. [Biale \(2011\)](#) lays out

a list of criteria for secular Jewish identification: Independence from scripture and later-revealed or rabbinic law, non-identification with any specific Jewish religious movement, “unsynagogued” or non-attendance at synagogues or temples, and often atheist. However, he is quick to counter that many of the great secular Jewish thinkers, and equally many everyday secular Jews, do believe in God or a god-like force or energy, and that equally “one can reject God’s existence but still live according to his law.” Secular Judaism, therefore, may involve Jewish theological belief and halakhic praxis—or at least praxis based on ideas of halakhah—or equally, it may not, and the two may not go hand in hand necessarily. Across the nine self-identified secular Jews of this Brisbane-based study, the makeup of secular Jewish praxis and belief was different in each case. Interpretations of belief in God, attendance at synagogue, observance of festivals and adherence to elements of Jewish religious law, or halakah, differed amongst individuals. Although many of the practices the group reported following may be nominally considered religious in nature, it should be noted that these were not considered “religious” practices by their practitioners, but rather as cultural traditions, in so much as they did not conflict with a secular understanding of the individuals’ own identities.

The group was divided on their thoughts regarding the existence of God. Dalya, Susannah and Jonathan stated they did not believe in God—Jonathan’s response was a simple “No” with no further explanation, Susannah identified herself as “probably will always be an atheist”, and Dalya claimed to be an atheist but said “I don’t want to say 100%, though I’m tending more to the ‘not’ side of thinking within myself.” Noah, Jori and Joseph classed themselves as agnostic. Joseph considered himself “very much a rationalist, but given how important religion is to just about every culture in the world, I don’t think I could personally say I’m definitely an atheist.” Jori stated he didn’t “subscribe to a specific interpretation of who and what God is, but there’s the potential for some kind of higher power out there.” Noah spoke about “when you feel really helpless, you feel like you’re just tempted to ask for something, and there’s probably nothing out there but you worry about what if you’re wrong?” Conversely, Ruth, Nathan and Caleb all claimed a belief in God, though took issue with some of the scriptural discourse on God within Judaism. Ruth’s attitude towards God was more universalist: “I see myself from the position that everyone has a relationship with God so it doesn’t need to be tied to any particular religion or culture whatsoever.” Nathan felt the idea of an “all-benevolent God” for Jews was problematic—“I’ve had a fair bit of trauma in my life, and I’ve seen a lot of things that I would consider fairly unjust”—but that equally “there’s something inside me which says yes, there probably is a higher being.” For Caleb, the issue of secularism was not so much belief in God, but discomfort with religious interpretations of scripture: “I do have some belief in a higher power, I do believe in the morals the stories tell. But I don’t believe in all the stories in the Torah, if you have a book telling you that homosexuality is an abomination, I find that very difficult to believe that that’s the same God telling us to honour thy mother and father and stuff.” Most saw value in the stories of the Torah, as Caleb did, but more in line with [Biale \(2011\)](#) interpretation of Torah as “a prescription for social justice or a document of culture” than a set of rules.

The group was again divided when it came to attending synagogue. While nobody attended regularly at the time of interviews, Dalya and Caleb attended synagogue for the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; Susannah had previously attended synagogue regularly while living overseas; and Ruth had attended weekly sabbath services before moving from the inner city to the suburbs. For Dalya, attendance meant an education in Jewish concepts and Jewish social connections for her child: “In Israel there’s no chance that my child would even know what a Rabbi is. But here I said yes to her going to Sunday school, because here there’s nothing else.” For Caleb, attending for holy days when there were higher numbers of the community present was important “not because I want to feel closer to God or anything, but mainly just because I think that it’s an important relationship to nurture [with other Jews].” Susannah also related attendance to social connection: “I used to go when I was living abroad, and that was mostly to meet people, because I was living there alone and didn’t know anyone.” However, this reason lost its relevance once she returned home, and her attendance has lapsed. Ruth stated she had previously seen her synagogue attendance as carrying

out a “mitzvah”—literally a commandment, though often interpreted as in this case more broadly as a good or praiseworthy deed—which she had replaced over time with weekend volunteer work for charity organisations. “I devote a lot of my time and effort into doing good things in the world, not just the Jewish community. I see that as part of being Jewish, though now I’m too busy to go most of the things at shul [synagogue].” Nathan, Jonathan, Noah, Jori and Joseph attended religious services for significant life-cycle events amongst their friends and family: Bar-mitzvahs, baby naming ceremonies, and funerals. Nathan observed that he felt his Jewish identity keenly at these events: “At times like that you realise that there is a connection to your Jewishness that you can’t get away from.” However, none attended outside these special occasions; Jori observed that even for his own bar mitzvah, or coming-of-age ceremony, he didn’t attend a synagogue: “We did it in a hall and we brought a Torah with us, and a bimah, but otherwise it wasn’t that religious.”

None of the group translated their thoughts about the existence, or otherwise, of God to much observance of halakhic religious law requirements at home, particularly when it came to keeping kosher dietary laws. When asked if she kept kosher, Dalya laughed uproariously: “Come on, normal people don’t eat Kosher!” Similarly, Noah thought that “I feel like if it was a real part of the religion, it wouldn’t matter whether or not you eat prawns that God would love you. That’s just stupid to me.” Ruth’s interpretation of kosher was directed by her interactions with the rest of society, and was more situational: “You also have to live in the real world . . . it’s rude if people offer you hospitality, to say I can’t eat that. I see the mitzvah of kosher as that every time I choose not to eat something not allowed, that’s a mitzvah, rather than it being a required way to live.” Joseph, who grew up observing a “kosher-style” diet with no pork or shellfish, reflected on the irony of one of his uncles who “it was incredible how orthodox he was, and yet he would scoff down so many prawns”, and that this contradiction had likely contributed to his own views on kosher restrictions. However, he also observed that while his wife and children are non-Jewish and he follows few other traditions and eats bacon, “I still can’t bring myself to eat pork chops, or pork meat, as such.” Jonathan and Susannah both reported being quite mindful of the fact of eating pork when they were doing so, but did not elect to cut it out of their diets completely. Even when dining kosher-style with family and friends, as Caleb discussed doing, such nominally religious practices were never described as being done for religious reasons by participants.

The group chose not to observe a strict Sabbath, or occasionally followed some selected Sabbath practices and philosophies rather than full traditional religious observations. Dalya follows a family tradition from her Israeli childhood where “I’ll light Shabbat candles in my home, but I won’t do the blessings.” Jori, who immigrated to Australia from Israel as a child, lights candles and says “simple one-liner” prayers in Hebrew: “The prayer for the candles, the prayer for the wine, and that’s that.” Caleb’s family observed Sabbath every Friday night: “It’s the norm to have the whole family over on a Friday night, there’s a standing invitation over to a family friend’s place every Friday night and we always go, everyone always brings something, we say Kiddush and do the prayers, it’s the only way I know.” Regardless of their Friday evening practice, none kept strictly to the rules of *shomer shabbat*—prohibition on work, driving, electricity or using money on a Saturday. However, some did use the day as a period of restfulness and meditation, though without any religious aspect. Jonathan and his non-Jewish family spend every Saturday at home rather than going out with family and friends:

“We definitely see the value in having a day off where you don’t do anything and having it consistently. It seems like a very valuable tradition, though there’s no religious aspect to it for us. No lighting candles or having challah or anything like that, but just saying you know, from today til tomorrow we’re not doing anything, we’re just going to rest. We sort of drew the parallels between what we wanted to do and “well, Jews already do this”, so there’s a good reason to do it.”

As with kosher and kosher-style dining, when individuals did choose to follow nominally religious practices associated with Shabbat, none described this as a religious practice at odds with their secular self-identification. Finally, some observed home-based festivals, but in ways that did

not follow strict religious interpretations or motivations. Joseph and his family observed Pesach at home. However, they had developed this tradition, not so much due to his Jewish upbringing, as to the influence of a close circle of Jewish friends made while living interstate, and it had been carried on by his now grown-up children to become an event centered around intergenerational family celebration rather than religious observance. Ruth observed Purim with a group of friends annually, though identified this more as a fun social event for eating and drinking and masquerade parties, and Jonathan joked that he particularly liked observing Purim “because it’s a religious requirement to get drunk, and that’s very Australian.” Caleb observed Yom Kippur, but at home rather than in a synagogue, and connected the appeal of the festival to the annual visit from his interstate brother to observe the fast as a family. Jori joked that almost all the Jewish festivals were about “‘somebody tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat’, so even the really depressing Jewish holidays are good. The focus is on family, and any excuse to get together with family is a good one.” Some decorated their homes with Jewish religious symbolism—Noah and Susannah have intricate menorahs prominently displayed on shelves in their living areas, while Ruth and Jonathan both had mezuzot (small doorpost scripture phylacteries) at their front doors. Ruth, a hobby artist, also showcased for me several pieces of her own artwork rich with Jewish religious symbolism.

As can be seen, there is great variety amongst individual understandings of secular Judaism and Jewish practice and identity within the private sphere. Interpretations can include belief in God or non-belief, attendance or non-attendance at synagogues, partial observance or non-observance of religious customs and observance or non-observance of festivals, within the secular individuals’ own households and families. While nominally many of these practices and expressions may be religious, the key factor is that these practices were not seen as religiously-defining for the group, and not at odds with their own individual private secular self-identification.

However, when identifying publicly as Jewish, whether within the Jewish community or presenting as Jewish to non-Jews, the equivalence of Jewishness with Judaism and Jewish religious practice becomes a lot more homogenous and clearly defined. Whilst some secular Jews—including Nathan and Joseph—maintain their Jewish identity as “not openly Jewish”, many publicly identify within the Jewish community and wider community as Jewish. With this public identification there often comes a reinterpretation of the place of religion within Jewish identity, even for secular Jews.

## 2.2. Public Participation in Religious Performance

Brisbane’s Jewish community follows the general trend towards “traditional” forms of Jewishness (Fagenblat et al. 2006), where Jewish communal life and identity is linked to congregational affiliation, especially Orthodox congregations, even if members do not attend regularly. Brisbane is the most geographically spread-out capital city in Australia, and its Jewish population is far less geographically-centred than most other Australian Jewish communities. While in the first 100 years of the community’s history, dwelling patterns were more clearly centered around the city’s synagogues (Creese 2014, 2016), today there are no significant Jewish suburbs or enclaves, and most community members do not live in close proximity to the synagogues or Jewish cultural facilities. Jewish social and communal life, as a result, happens less organically than in tight-knit Jewish areas observed in larger Australian centres like Sydney, Melbourne or Perth, and tends to take place through community institutions, particularly congregations, rather than over neighbourhood fences. The “vast array of communal institutions covering the gamut of religious, social, political, educational, welfare, health, media and recreational needs” Levey (2004) identifies in the larger Jewish communities of Sydney and Melbourne are much fewer in the smaller Brisbane community, and those social, educational and recreational institutions are linked significantly to congregations and religious bodies.

For many secular Jews, identification and involvement with the community therefore means public participation in religious events held by the community’s congregations—for example, religious festivals, communal shabbat meals, religious life-cycle observances and prayer services related to particular public events. For Noah, occasional participation is the price to be paid for communal

involvement: “I feel like if I want to belong and be part of that community then I’ll have to be religious sometimes . . . though I associate with the culture, I don’t associate with the religion, but I think you have to have both.” Jonathan also saw an inescapable communal and religious participatory element to being Jewish in Brisbane, lacking other cultural outlets he theorized might be available in other Jewish communities: “It’s not enough just to do or feel or say, you have to go do things in the community . . . you can’t really be a Jew in isolation, you can’t just stay at home, you have to go to do it.” Susannah, whose family only identified with their Jewishness when she was in her teens, saw her participation in religious organisations as an investment in her Jewish continuity: “I want to go because . . . if I have children, I want them to be part of the community so that if it’s too late for me, it’s not too late for them.” Dalya’s view was similar: “I’ll keep my Jewish identity any way I can, and raise a Jewish kid, even though I don’t believe.” Jonathan recounted a story of an Israeli-born work friend who had sought out his company as a fellow Jew and begun participating in community events for the sake of his children: “He makes the argument that if he doesn’t involve his kids now then they’ll be angry at him later in life, but he doesn’t do it for himself.”

Many of the religious observances which did not form part of the participants’ secular Jewish identity did feature in their practice as part of the broader Jewish community. Some would cater kosher, or at least kosher-style, food for communal meetings and events, whether or not they were instructed to, or would order kosher-style when eating out with other community members. Attending a community Sabbath dinner, Ruth showed me the pomegranate and feta salad she had prepared with a view to “being both kosher and Israeli, and inclusive”, and described her intense search for kosher cheese to include in the dish. Dalya, as an event manager, is one of the community’s go-to guides on securing kosher function and catering facilities, and has a deep knowledge of kosher requirements which she fastidiously implements for events, although she does not follow them at home. Being seen to be present at religious events was considered more important than participating actively in religious ritual by many secular Jews. Jori, for instance, attends almost every community festival, but volunteers for security duty rather than worship participation. Dalya talked about attending Yom Kippur every year “even though I don’t feel the spiritual feeling that everyone’s getting at Yom Kippur, I just sit there”. However, she did speak with pride of when the congregation’s Rabbi noted and thanked her for her attendance. Jonathan talked about attending religious events as evidence of his Jewish authenticity, though ritual practice was not a necessary component of this authenticity: “I’m confident like “by all the laws and customs I can be here”, but at the same time, I really don’t know what I’m doing, so, I mostly just stand there and take it in.” Some also felt driven to represent the local community in religious terms. when meeting visitors from other Jewish communities: Caleb commented that “when students came on an exchange or from other countries, I’d reach out to them if they wanted to come for a Seder or a Shabbat dinner or something like that”.

While participation is common, it is not always comfortable for secular Jews. Noah related an incident at one of his first communal gatherings after moving to Brisbane from a country town, where he was pressured into performing the ritual of wrapping tefillin (binding small phylacteries with prayer scrolls to the forehead and forearms for prayer):

“There was only one person there who I knew, and she pressured me into going over to the Rabbi. Then before I knew it, he started wrapping me up and said, “repeat after me.” I really had no idea what was going on, and then someone told me that was effectively my Bar Mitzvah and it was all done kind of by accident. I felt totally disempowered, and I was only doing it because of getting told I had to.”

Others also voiced discomfort with the connection between community participation and religious participation. Both Joseph and Jonathan related experiences where their non-Jewish spouse was alienated or isolated from them due to religious demands, causing family conflict. Caleb recalled as a teenager being pressured by religious teachers into choosing between Bar Mitzvah lessons and participation on his school cricket team: “I was told that if I wanted to do Bar Mitzvah, I’d have to give up cricket for the whole season. It alienated me from the Bar Mitzvah teacher and my group, we had



to make special arrangements and it was really difficult.” Susannah worried that the community’s interpretation of religion within Jewish identity, particularly Orthodox religion, left little space for feminist understandings of Jewish identity: “I’d like to feel like I could wear a kippah at a community event and not get weird stares.” Attending a communal dinner at a local congregation with Susannah, I watched her attempt to take a kippah from the communal basket kept by the front door for the use of male visitors, aborted when she saw no other women taking or using them. She appeared embarrassed and awkward at having contemplated publicly performing such an act, and her mood remained subdued and discomforted throughout the remaining event. Even where not outwardly causing conflict, communal events with a religious central framework often left these secular Jews feeling less included, not more. Jonathan remarked of religious events, “Everyone’s all very welcoming, but equally they’re happy to leave you and let you stand there and struggle along. It can be really hard to just stand there and watch and wish you knew what you were doing.” Here, the centrality of Jewish religious practice within Jewish identity may mean that questioning and assisting one’s ability to participate in ritual might be considered equivalent to questioning one’s identity and authenticity. I observed Jonathan and his family at a communal meal hosted by a Progressive congregation, where Jonathan and his sister briefly and discretely argued at their table with their formerly Orthodox mother about the correct format of rituals surrounding the tearing of bread. The family then sat awkwardly in silence through the remaining prayers, having been “thrown off” by the disorientation of competing practices. Secular identity, while not preventing participants from becoming involved with the community, did appear to make deep involvement difficult. Participants were asked to self-assess their levels of communal involvement on an instrument derived from Elazar’s typology of Jewish community involvement (Elazar 1995; see Figure 1 in Section 4). With the exception of Dalya, who was highly active in the community’s Zionist activities, secular participants all ranked themselves at low levels of communal involvement, in contrast to self-identified religious participants who ranked in higher categories.

Often, religious participation in public events was framed in terms of their equivalence with non-Jewish events. The pre-eminence of Hanukkah in the Jewish calendars of most of these secular Jews is notable here. Susannah, whose partner is non-Jewish, spoke of Hanukkah being special for her “because it’s around the same time as Christmas, and there are so many people in my life who are non-Jewish, like my partner is not Jewish, but we can sort of have these two things happening side-by-side . . . you just sort of roll all these big celebrations into one.” Susannah’s non-Jewish partner, who she reports feels uncomfortable with other aspects of Jewish practice in their home, keenly observes Hanukkah with her both in their home and in public community celebrations. Noah, too, participates in Hanukkah at the encouragement of a non-Jewish partner: “She was interested in the fact that it was different and exciting and [through my Jewishness], we get to do this fun thing that not everyone gets to do.” Hanukkah’s popularity is likely also due to its celebratory nature, which aligns with the celebratory traditions of other faiths more than more major holy days like Yom Kippur do. Noah observes, “there’s a lot of festivals where you have to be guilty all the time. But Hanukkah is fun, so we do that.” Festivals also provide a centrepiece for connection with more religiously observant family members: Ruth reported celebrating an observant Hanukkah whenever she visits highly Orthodox cousins in Israel and tries to reproduce this observation with her Australian family in alternate years; “Hanukkah I love because the family’s always involved.” For Dalya, Hanukkah reflected not only her own Israeli childhood, but her self-identified Israeli rebellious streak as a minority: “I’ll put the candles on, put it in the window proudly, if I’m going to get a grenade thrown into the house five minutes later, that’s fine. That makes it the best holiday, for me.” Everyone in the group regularly attended the annual public “Chanukkah in the City” celebration, hosted outside the Brisbane City Council buildings in the city centre by the local ultra-orthodox Chabad branch and supported by the Modern Orthodox congregation.

Despite ideological conflicts, these secular Jews do follow some of the religious practices of Judaism and Jewish identity publicly when participating in communal activities. Often, they are

driven by the congregationally-centered nature of the community and many of its events. However, equally—as seen in the case of public Hanukkah celebrations—Jewish identity and practice are also conducted publicly under the auspices of non-Jewish mainstream multiculturalism. The prominence of religiosity within Jewish identity can also reflect mainstream dominant non-Jewish understandings of what Jewish identity is, what it means and what it is made up of. Those who identify as secular Jews also negotiate these understandings in their experience of publicly identifying as Jewish within non-Jewish mainstream society.

### *2.3. Public Discourse on Religiosity within Jewishness*

Christianity, and particularly Protestant Christianity, formed a core part of early Australian identity, both in its initial colonial settlement similar to other British settler colonies, and in its later federation and national establishment, where divine legitimacy is directly referenced in the formative Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act of 1900 (Chavura 2011; Klassen 2015). Even after more than 200 years, there is a strong narrative in contemporary Australian culture of the country as a “Judeo-Christian nation” (Elder 2007; Vasta 2017). Whilst Australia is, like the United States, Canada and New Zealand, a liberal democracy with a mildly religious population, the prominence of Christian tradition and practice in the public sphere is a formative part of Australian understandings of nationhood, federal education and taxation policies, and state symbolism (Chavura 2011; Klassen 2015). Nevertheless, Australian discourse of the relationship between church and state often labels the nation as a secular society. Rather than an Enlightenment ideal promoting state sovereignty, capitalism and empirical science and removing religion from the public sphere, Australian secular society is “distinct from yet at the same time open to religion” (Chavura 2011); not “exclusive of religion” but rather removing public institutions any privileges, disadvantages and inequalities caused by one’s choice of religion, rather than removing religion itself. Thus whilst the origins of the nation and national mythology may be tied to Protestant Christianity, in the last 35 years since the establishment of multiculturalism as a national policy, the Australian state has attempted to ensure equal public opportunities for all religious groups and affiliations, including the unaffiliated (Coleman and White 2006). It is this model of secularism as an opportunity which shapes Jewish Australians’ interactions with the state; one where rather than removing religious identity from groups, religious identification is one of the most significant factors by which cultural minority groups are understood, and declared authentic, by mainstream society (Ho 2006; Levey 2015). Thus, religious identification has a significant influence on identification with Jewish culture within Australian multiculturalism, even for those who define themselves as secular.

On an official government level, Jewishness in Queensland is positioned as primarily a religious identity, more than racial or cultural. Queensland government department policies and advisory documentation also regularly classify Jewish content by religion, highlighting practices and restrictions as religious rather than cultural. In the national census, conducted 5-yearly by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, individuals claiming Jewish identity are counted only through the question asking for religious affiliation. While individuals may enter ‘Jewish’ under the free-form ‘other’ response of the ancestry question, collated census data from the ABS does not indicate this choice (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Local Jewish organisations have understood these limitations and encourage the community to work within them, on the grounds that a high Jewish count, regardless of what category is used to make it, will mean more services and support for Jewish needs from state authorities. The community has been promoting a “tick Judaism” message every census year for the last twelve years or so, throughout communal social media and other communication channels. Whilst a Jewish representative has recently begun serving on the parliamentary Multicultural Queensland Advisory Council, the Queensland Jewish Board of Deputies, the community’s representational roof body, has historically avoided affiliation with movements like the Ethnic Community Councils, unlike its Victorian and New South Wales counterparts. The interfaith portfolio of the Board of Deputies, one senior official declared at a public meeting, is considered not only “the most important thing we do,



but something only the Board can do.” Such rhetoric would seem to cement the relationship between faith identification and the organised Jewish community.

Socially, the equivalence of Jewish identity with Jewish religion is also made and reflects the positioning of Jews within Queensland society from the early days of colonial settlement. Colonial and early commonwealth Australia was relatively liberal, though begrudgingly so according to [Levey \(2004\)](#), in its toleration of religious difference, so long as Australian cultural norms were taken on. The first Jewish migrants to Queensland were English, and sought colonial opportunities for upward social mobility and social acceptance. The approach of early Australian Anglo-Jewish community leaders in other Australian communities, according to [Rutland \(1985\)](#), was to “eliminate any differences between Jew and non-Jew except in the very narrow religious sense”, and they openly promoted the Australian Jewish community as “British subjects of Jewish faith” ([Stratton 1996](#)). This was helped along by the 1901 establishment of the so-called “White Australia” policy, implemented right at the beginning of Australia’s federation as an independent Commonwealth country, which severely restricted migration to Australia, even for later Holocaust refugees and survivors, and established British race and culture as the essential Australian cultural form within public life ([Levey 2004](#)). The Australian Jewish community, represented by its Anglo-Jewish leading members, promoted an identity which was racially British and white, culturally homogenous with the nation, and quietly religious in decorous forms akin to Anglican Protestantism ([Stratton 1996](#); [Levey 2004](#)). This style of identification was certainly evident in Brisbane’s Jewish community for at least its first hundred years ([Creese 2014, 2016](#)). Australian multicultural policies of immigration and identity discourse have been in place in Australia since the 1970s, and as [Levey \(2004\)](#) states have brought about many changes to the ways in which Jewish culture and politics are situated in public discourse, particularly around the issue of Israel. However, this concept of Queenslanders Jews as culturally Australian practicing a minority religion still shapes many Queenslanders’ understandings of Jewishness.

Several of the group described talking about the public connection of Jewish identity to Jewish religiosity, mostly in their conversations with non-Jews about their identity. Noah remarks that religious understandings of Jewish identity seem to dominate the preconceptions of his non-Jewish contacts: “I’ve never had anyone ask me about Israel, I’ve never had anyone ask me about culture either. Whenever I tell people I’m Jewish they want to know do I pray to God and stuff, always get it confused with Islam. I’ve even had someone ask me if that’s why I wear a beard.” Jonathan agreed, and suggested that many Australians felt like conceptualising Jewishness as a religion, and this was potentially the most comfortable both for Jews and non-Jews, and that “because of the sentiment towards religion, Jews tend to get a bit of a pass” and might not be considered as “other” within society. Dalya, however, saw the equivalence with religion, particularly religious orthodoxy as more problematic, and complained that it was difficult to remove stereotypes of Orthodox religiosity from Australian public understandings of Jewish identity: “[It’s hard] to represent us among other Aussies, to show that Jews aren’t penguins in suits, that’s not what we do.” Jori attributed non-Jewish ideas about religion in Judaism to what he saw as “a Christian sentiment about being Australian. I know not everyone is Christian, but people that I grew up with were Australian and sometimes for them that meant going to church [so] for a lot of people, being Jewish means going to synagogue.” Ruth, too, pointed to Christian understandings of religious identity shaping ideas about Jewishness, even within the Jewish community to some extent, comparing the experience in Australia as a minority to the Jewish experience in Israel of living as part of a majority: “There the religiousness of the community is not the serious thing that’s portrayed in the Christian community, which everyone believes it should be here in Australia.” Susannah, however, talked about experiencing the darker side of this non-Jewish identification of Jewish religion and identity, where her openness about her atheism led to non-Jewish friends questioning her Jewish authenticity:

“I remember having this argument one night with a really close friend of mine who was asking me “why would you even choose to be Jewish if you don’t believe in God, why would you choose to have these cultural beliefs and these traditions?” I was massively offended,

they would never ask this of a Christian friend or a Muslim friend, why ask me? My friends used to sing a song about how I was not a real Jew, to the tune of [Beatles song] “Hey Jude”, which was particularly hurtful.”

The group also spoke about their perceptions of the importance of religious Jewishness, particularly Orthodox Judaism, for continuity of Jewish identity and tradition within wider Australian multiculturalism, even though they did not identify with it personally. Nathan expressed a wish that while “I might not be particularly Jewish in a traditional sense, I’d want anyone who wanted to pursue that [to be able to] without fear of failure.” Jori saw a difference between his private feelings about religious Judaism and his public identification and support for it: “[With regard to] the more religious people, within Judaism I would debate, discuss, argue with those people, but outside of Judaism, I identify with the really crazy Jewish people, because . . . at the end of the day I’m still Jewish.” While Dalya struggled with the prominence of Orthodox Judaism in mainstream identification of the Jewish community, she still agreed that Orthodoxy was important for Jewish communal continuity: “I think it’s a beautiful tradition, and I accept and understand why people follow it, even though I don’t . . . [Ultraorthodox Jewish movement] Chabad’s always doing public things, they’ve got money, they’re very good.” The concept of congregations “doing public things”—performing religious Jewish culture publicly—was seen as key to both community cohesion and public perception, though as Ruth wryly observed, “The [Chabad] Rabbi does try to communicate all the things we do, but he does seem to miss a lot of things that aren’t Orthodox.”

### 3. Discussion

It is apparent, from the observations and practices of the individual secular Jews interviewed, that secular Jewishness is impossible to clearly define as any one set of criteria. Private secular Jewish identity is different between individuals, a product of each one’s life experiences, upbringing, material circumstances and personal values. This would make private secular Jewish identity—indeed, perhaps Jewish identity more broadly—essentially a *habitus*, as per sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1976, 1990). Secular Jewishness, as a *habitus*, is constructed and cultivated unconsciously, and its thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions an embodied reflection of the personal logics, beliefs and practices of the individual.

However, it is also apparent from these same interviews that secular Jewish identity, in public, often reflects practices and ideologies not necessarily in keeping with the private *habitus* of individuals, but more aligned to demarcated conventions and norms of Jewishness as defined by religion and religiosity. Indeed, Biale (2011) claims that “Judaism has no orthodoxy (correct belief) only orthopraxis (correct practice)” and that the visible performance of the commandments and accompanying rabbinical decrees is more a foundation to communal and public Judaism than theology necessarily is. This would make public secular Jewish identity—and again, perhaps Jewish identity more broadly—a performative identity, as per cultural theorist Judith Butler (1993, 1997). Secular Jewishness, as a performative identity, repeats the norms, acts and statements that make up the dominant narrative of Jewish identity within a particular social space, formulating and empowering the “political and cultural consistency” (De Certeau 1997) of Jewishness. With the prominence of religious institutions to organized Jewish life and participation in Queensland, secular Jews do not inhabit the central realms of communal activity and involvement, as might be expressed by Elazar’s typology of community involvement (Elazar 1995), where they might be in a position to re-set the dominant norms of the community away from religion. However, there is no contradiction or cognitive dissonance in secular Jewish individuals participating in the dominant norms of religious Jewish activity; Butler sees the individual themselves as “inconsequential” within the greater discourse being performed, which is “an ideal that nobody actually inhabits” (Kotz and Butler 1992), and that participation in cultural norms is merely a way to “work the trap that one is inevitably in” (Kotz and Butler 1992) within the overarching framework of both the organized Jewish community and mainstream society which construes Jewishness as the practice of Judaism.

There appear to be two different spheres wherein secular Jewish identity is performatively religious; within the community as a group, and outside the community as a minority-identifying individual within mainstream society. In each case, different pressures drive secular Jews to participate and speak in ways that reinforce the religious aspects of Jewishness. Within their own community, religious identification and participation allow for the development of networks of Jewish identification and practice, and access to social capital and resources, in a community in which communal Jewish activity is largely driven and resourced by the institutions of religious movements. As [Ellison and George \(1994\)](#) find in their exploration of social resources and religious participation, the positive social resources available to individuals associated with religious attendance can be separately identified from the cognitive and psychological resources associated with religious belief. Their findings suggest that even occasional religious participation and attendance sees a perceived increase in social resources, ties and support, without necessarily compromising individuals' own private habitus. Performatively connecting with institutions also mirror findings by [De Certeau \(1997\)](#), where by entering into communal and societal structures, individuals gain the "political force [to] furnish [their own individual] cultural expression with the effective power of affirmation".

Additionally, within the wider society, identification with religious interpretations of Jewishness made by non-Jewish state and individual actors makes valid the presence of Jewish identity within the mainstream society and state frameworks. Since the secular state framework has existed much longer than the multicultural state framework in Australia, Jewishness fits readily into conceptualizations of Queensland society as a religion within a secular state, much more so than as a culture within a multicultural state ([Coleman and White 2006](#)). Publicly connecting Jewish identity with Jewish religion to non-Jewish audiences may be for secular Jews a way to empower their Jewish public identification with socially-determined "authenticity" ([Levey 2015](#)), within a framework of comfortable preconceptions about Jewishness held by mainstream society.

It should be said, by way of conclusion, that not all secular Jews participate in public religious events or identify as Jewish to non-Jews, even performatively, as the nine subjects of this ethnographic study. However, their stories provide insight into the experiences of secular Jews, and illustrates that a public performative Jewish identity that involves religious practice can deliver vital social capital, validate group belonging, and secures space for their Jewish identification within wider society. By using religious participation and identification as one more way to "work the trap", as Butler would say, of life as an individual in a small and disparate religiously-framed minority group within Queensland society, these individual secular Jews can safely experience and express their own personal Jewish habitus, and whatever religious elements it may or may not include. The specific circumstances of other Jewish communities, especially larger groups interstate and overseas, may allow for different relationships with Jewish identity in the wider community. However, as a minority both religiously and culturally in most places around the diaspora, other national and regional Jewish groups may also see a comparative interplay between public and private, and secular and religious, Jewish identity.

#### 4. Materials and Methods

Ethnographic data for this paper was drawn from a larger-scale study into the experiences and expressions of Jewish identity in the South-East Queensland region of Australia. The study was supported and approved by the School of Social Science Ethical Review Panel at the University of Queensland, Australia, clearance number RHD4 2017. For this overarching project, I have conducted participant observation across eighteen public Jewish communal events, and carry out in-depth semi-structured interviews with twenty-five individual Jewish community members. Of the total, nine described themselves as secular when asked what style or stream of Judaism they practiced; interview responses and observations of fieldwork directly informed by these nine individuals, therefore, make up the body of data for this paper. These individuals represented a variety of age brackets, birthplaces, professions and lengths of residence in the South-East Queensland Jewish community (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Specifics of Study Participants.

Name <sup>1</sup>	Gender	Age Bracket	Birthplace	Years in Community	Jewish Parentage	Profession
Caleb	Male	18–34	USA	23	Both	Lawyer
Dalya	Female	35–54	Israel	10	Both	Administration
Jonathan	Male	18–34	Brisbane, Australia	10	Both	IT Programmer
Jori	Male	18–34	Israel	3	Both	University Student
Joseph	Male	55–74	Brisbane, Australia	11	Both	University Researcher
Nathan	Male	55–74	Brisbane, Australia	59	Both	Accountant
Noah	Male	18–34	Toowoomba, Australia	10	Both	Teacher
Ruth	Female	55–74	Brisbane, Australia	7	Mother	Medical Doctor
Susannah	Female	18–34	Brisbane, Australia	15	Both	IT Programmer

<sup>1</sup> All participants have been granted pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, as per the Australian Anthropological Society's Code of Ethics, 2012.

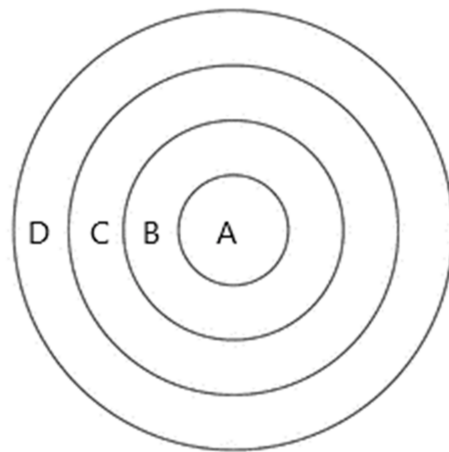
Participants were all asked the same basically structure questions: The questions specifically regarding religion were “Is practicing Judaism as a religion part of your Jewish identity?”, “Do you ever go to synagogue?”, “Do you believe in God?”, “Do you keep Sabbath or Kosher?” and “Do you celebrate any religious festivals?” As semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to further unpack or develop specific responses to these initial questions.

Participants were also asked to complete a Ten Statements Test instrument; this modified version of Kuhn & McPartland's Twenty Statement Test (Kuhn and McPartland 1954) was designed to allow for free-flowing word association with regards to participants' Jewish identity. Participants were requested to provide ten short answers to the stimulus statement “As a Jew I am . . .”; eight of the nine participants, excluding participant Joseph, directly identified themselves as “secular”, “not religious”, or “non-practicing” on this test.

In addition to the Ten Statements Test, participants were given a graphical measurement instrument through which to express their level of community involvement (see Figure 1). This instrument, adapted from the typology of Jewish community involvement outlined by Elazar (1995), asks participants to consider where they fit into the Jewish community, and how tied they are into the community and its organisations, selecting a place within the spectrum of categories. It was completed as a self-determination exercise by the participants pre-interview.

This instrument asks participants to consider where they fit into the Jewish community, how tied into the community and its organisations they are. It can be completed as a self-determination exercise by the participant or completed by the researcher during observation of the participant in communal activities.

Adapted from source: D. J. Elazar (1995). Community and polity: The organizational dynamics of American Jewry (revised and updated ed.). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.



**Figure 1.** Elazar's Typology of Jewish Community Involvement.

**Category A:**

- Jewishness is the central factor of my life, my full-time governing concern, and the framework for how I live in the world.
- am deeply committed to living every aspect of my life, public and private, according to Jewish custom.
- would always prioritise the needs of Jewish culture over the expectations of mainstream culture.
- All my social relationships are with other Jews and the Jewish community.
- am at the core of one or more local Jewish organisations and/or the Jewish community and this is my sole vocation.

**Category B:**

- My Jewishness is a major part of my everyday life, although I do live as part of everyday Australian society.
- am committed to Jewish custom in my private life, and my Jewishness is known in public but I mostly follow mainstream social custom.
- would mostly prioritise the needs of Jewish culture over the expectations of mainstream culture, unless there was a significant conflict.
- My close friends and family are Jewish, though I maintain social relationships with non-Jews.
- serve one or more Jewish organisations and/or the Jewish community, and regularly contribute time or money to Jewish causes.

**Category C:**

- My Jewishness is an important part of who I am, though I mostly follow the patterns of everyday Australian life.
- My Jewishness is significant to my private life, and I often take time out of everyday Australian culture to do specifically Jewish things.
- prioritise the needs of Jewish culture over the expectations of mainstream culture when it is important (for example, taking time off on a holy day).
- have many Jewish friends and family, and equally many non-Jewish friends and family.
- am affiliated with one or more Jewish organisations as a member, and often support Jewish causes financially.

**Category D:**

- My Jewishness is just one of many aspects of my identity, and for the most part I consider myself an everyday Australian.



- occasionally perform Jewish customs in my private life or with my family, and sometimes in public Jewish cultural events within the community.
- would only choose to perform Jewish culture if it didn't conflict with mainstream culture, or if it suited me to do so (for example, taking time off on a holy day).
- My friends and family are from all walks of life; Jewishness isn't a deciding factor in my relationships.
- Sometimes I participate in organisational events or donate to causes, but I don't join Jewish organisations.

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