CHAPTER EIGHT

SECULAR FAILURE—A HISTORY FROM TWO AUSTRALIAN STATES

Australian difficulties with religion in public education have been present since its first school halls were built. Current controversies echo similar, and as yet, unresolved disputes from colonial times—about the meaning of the secular principle and the power of some Christian churches. Prolonged, ambiguous applications of the principle continue to create confusion and division today, but these debates have been part of Australian political life since British settlement. Australia’s two earliest settled and now most populated states, New South Wales and Victoria, undermined the secular principle. New South Wales did so through ambiguous interpretations of legislation and Victoria did so by granting local exceptions to legislation. This chapter compares the politically pragmatic approach of Henry Parkes’s faux secularism in New South Wales, with the more inclusive view taken by George Higinbotham in Victoria.¹ The next chapter looks at the erosion of secular intent in the state of Queensland.

A Radical Idea Meets Anglican Dominance

In many nations, the nineteenth century radically transformed education from a church function to a state duty. During the 1800s, Australian legislators debated the foundations of education for their new society. Decades of acrimonious argument, and sustained (but failed) attempts to create a workable denominational system led the colonies to explore more radical options. To minimise religious division, Australia’s proposal was for public education to be ‘free, compulsory and secular.’ New South Wales legislated for these then politically progressive principles in the Public Instruction Act 1880, following Victoria in 1872 (and Queensland and South Australia in 1875). But no state defined the term ‘secular’ and each interpreted it differently, at a time of Anglican privilege in all areas of Australian society.

As the colonies were being established, education issues were often raised alongside property entitlement discussions. It was well understood that "the proximity of a good school always enhances the value of land," and the English lords were clear about who would be granted privilege. In 1826, King George IV issued an imperial charter which deeded one-seventh of the colony’s ‘crown’ land (land taken by the crown without recognition of Indigenous ownership), and associated revenue to the Australian Church and Schools Corporation, for “maintenance and support of the clergy of the established Church of England ... [its] schools and school masters.” This valuable land included thousands of acres around Botany Bay in new South Wales (and a small coal mine in greater Sydney) making the Corporation “the third largest landowner in the Colony.” Land legislation became “confused and tangled by the education question.” In addition, growing Catholic populations increased the focus on education’s “problem of dogmatic content.”

In 1830, private funding was solicited for a non-denominational school “for all parties, of whatever religious persuasion.” The Sydney Gazette objected to the proposed school’s lack of religious instruction. It argued that “Christianity was the sole foundation of human happiness and [that] ... Presbyterian and dissenting [Protestant] schools were indeed to be tolerated, but the official aim was to establish a public school system ... which would be exclusively Anglican.” In response, the newly arrived Anglican leader, Bishop Broughton, proposed the Kings School, in which “the masters ... were to be clergy and ... the whole atmosphere ... was to be pervaded ... by the teachings of the Church of England.”

Anglican dominance was challenged in New South Wales by Governor Bourke, who feared “the blighting influence of intolerance.” Bourke argued that reforms in religion education were essential for a progressive community and pushed for equal endowments for “the three grande Divisions of

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2 J. Rutledge. The Empire, September 11, 1855, 2.
3 Sydney Morning Herald, July 11, 1863, 7.
7 Sydney Gazette, 16, and 19 January, 1830, 2.
8 Baker, (1963), 228.