CHAPTER NINE

DE-SECULARISATION—A HISTORY FROM QUEENSLAND

Queensland became the only Australian state to remove the secular clause entirely from its education statutes. Secular intent in the northern state, Australia’s third largest and often referred to as ‘God’s Country,’ was strongly established, then slowly eroded and ultimately, legally, rejected. Queensland is the only state to not offer any General Religious Education in primary school social science curriculums and in which no public high school offers a senior Studies of Religion elective. Instead, Queensland has two forms of Christian-centric instruction: non-sectarian bible lessons, able to be delivered by state-funded teachers, and sectarian (mostly Christian) Religious Instruction (RI). RI is delivered largely by religious volunteers, but also in some cases, by the school principal and increasingly by federally funded chaplains. The removal of the secular clause via the Education Amendment Act 1910 legitimised Christian privilege in state education. However, this was not always the case. This chapter examines the de-secularisation of Queensland public education through developments in law, policy and practice.1

A Time of Strong Secularism

Queensland’s first parliamentarians were strongly secular. They spoke of “extreme liberal democracy”2 and “free exercise of religious tolerance,” and viewed themselves as “the pioneers of civilisation.”3 One of the first Acts of Queensland Parliament was to cut off church aid. Queensland’s initial approach to school governance was based on notions of equity, so the religious and state school boards were combined into a single entity. Regulations made by this Board (to accompany the Education Act 1860) restricted RI in state schools to “before or after school

3 The North Australian, April 20, 1860, 4.
Early Queensland aimed to deal fairly with both religious and non-religious demands, but this brought the full force of clerical indignation and interference.

Initially, the press supported the secular agenda. For example, *The Queenslander* espoused the view that “religious bodies should have nothing to do with (education),” since “we are split up into many denominations ... it can only fairly be done by imparting secular instruction ... leaving religious teaching to the clergymen and the parent.” The newspaper also commended the government which “intended to cut every possible connection between the State and the teaching of religion in any relation, in any form, or to any extent.” According to historian John Lawry, during the 1870s, Queenslanders’ “basic and ... predominant” faith was in “the liberal, democratic and secular state.”

Meanwhile, parliamentarians pondered over how to support the secular principle without appearing un-Godly. Reformers in the Legislative Assembly (lower house) were stymied by opponents in the Legislative Council (upper house) in an atmosphere of unpleasant “political manoeuvreing and sectarian wrangling.” One Education Board member reported “very strong and active efforts made ... to bring the Board into disrepute, and if possible, to weaken their hands in carrying out the duties entrusted to them.” Ongoing controversy led to a Royal Commission chaired by ex-Premier and Attorney-General Charles Lilley.

The Commission’s investigator went to Victoria where a fully secular Education Act had been operating since 1872. The report recommended that Queensland adopt Higinbotham’s Victorian model (see previous chapter). The Commission declared that:

> dogmatic religious instruction is the business not of the State but of the several churches, and that the State is neither committed nor required to

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5 *The Queenslander*, June 5, 1869, 4.
6 *The Queenslander*, October 23, 1869, 4.
7 *The Queenslander*, August 3, 1872, 3.
10 *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 1874, 951, Fraser.