

D A M O N M A Y R L

## *Administering Secularization: Religious Education in New South Wales since 1960*

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the development of religious education policy in the government schools of New South Wales (Australia) since 1960. The New South Wales religious education curriculum features three components: (1) teacher-led “general religious education” (GRE); (2) right-of-entry denominational instruction provided by visiting clergy (“special religious education”, or SRE); and (3) occasional additional devotional exercises such as hymns and prayers. Between 1960 and 1980, this system underwent a partial secularization. GRE was transformed from a straight-forward course in Christianity built around government-produced Scripture readers to a flexible curricular component built around the academic study of multiple religions. At the same time, SRE was strengthened and had its position in the curriculum secured; and devotional exercises were allowed to continue only in those settings where they formed an “appropriate” match with the community. I find that “secularizing” reforms were most consistently driven by teachers and administrators with practical motives: avoiding controversy, improving working conditions, and facilitating class management. This finding both challenges and complements recent works that interpret secularization as a political process driven by politicians and professionals primarily interested in enhancing their power or prestige at the expense of religious actors.

*Keywords:* Secularization; Religious education; Australia; Government Schools.

F O R C L A S S I C A L S O C I O L O G I S T S of religion, few axioms were more central than the idea that religion would inevitably wither away as societies modernized (Berger 1969; Weber 1946). Over the past twenty-five years, however, evidence that religion remains a vital, and frequently a prominent and influential, feature of public life in many Western countries has sparked a reexamination of these assumptions and a productive period in secularization theory. Social scientists have largely abandoned the idea that secularization is an inevitable by-product of modernity, and have begun to formulate alternative

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Damon MAYRL, Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley [mayrl@berkeley.edu].

*Arch.europ.sociol.*, LII, 1 (2011), pp. 111–142—0003-9756/11/0000-900\$07.50per art + \$0.10 per page©A.E.S., 2011

conceptualizations of what secularization is (Chaves 1994; Casanova 1994; Dobbelaere 1981), and new theories of why and when it comes about (Berger *et al.* 2008; Casanova 2006; Martin 1978, 2005).

As part of this reevaluation, a number of scholars interested in macro-level secularization – that is, the institutional differentiation of religious and secular spheres, rather than the decline of individual belief and practice – have begun to argue that secularization should be understood as a political process (Gorski 2003, 2005; Martin 1978, 2005; Smith 2003b). These analyses view secularization as the product of intentional struggles among religious and political actors for control over political and cultural institutions. These studies have successfully reintroduced questions of agency to the secularization debate, and have made important strides toward answering two key questions: 1) Which actors are responsible for secularization? And 2) What motives and interests guided those actors as they pressed for more secular public institutions?

In this paper, I use a case study of secularization in the public schools of New South Wales, Australia, to expand our understanding of the agents and motives behind secularization. I find that existing works are correct in seeing secularization as a process driven by interested actors who are enmeshed in politics. However, I also contend that these analyses have tended to obscure the potentially important role of administrators and civil servants who can contribute to secularization in the course of implementing formal policy; and, consequently, have focused too heavily on actors with self-aggrandizing or antireligious interests, thereby overlooking how secularization can also be a response to practical administrative difficulties.

Australia is an interesting case to examine precisely because it has long been overlooked by secularization scholars. To the extent that they have examined it, most typically observe that Australia falls somewhere “in-between” the United States and Europe in terms of religion (Martin 1978). Yet this very “in-betweenness” makes it an interesting and profitable case to analyze in greater detail. It is similar to the United States in many of the respects thought to explain European-American differences: both nations are federated democracies, both constitutionally separate church and state, both nations are historically Protestant yet feature a high degree of religious pluralism, both have high rates of immigration. Yet in their educational policy, Australia and the United States are quite different: Australia permits religious education in its public schools and provides substantial financial support to religious schools, while the United States does neither. Australia thus represents something of a paradox: “American”

conditions with a “European” outcome. Gaining a better understanding of this paradox can yield important insights into why and how secularization occurs.

The case of education in New South Wales reveals an instance of political secularization, the process by which public institutions develop greater autonomy from religious authorities. Yet this secularization was only partial. Religion was not completely driven from the schools: denominational instruction by visiting clergy was allowed to continue. But formal instruction by schoolteachers in Christian Scriptures was replaced with an objective “religious studies” curriculum, and the conditions under which religious exercises could be held were increasingly circumscribed. In this regard, the close connections between state-sponsored education and the historically dominant Christian churches were substantially weakened.

As I will show, however, this partial secularization did not occur primarily through deliberate campaigns by politicians or professionals; nor did it primarily stem from hostility to religion or the straightforward pursuit of power. Instead, secularization developed as an administrative response to the practical difficulties arising from the growing mismatch between a fundamentally Christian system of religious education and an increasingly pluralistic and ecumenical social context. Although a number of groups with diverse motives shaped the political context in which religious education was negotiated in the 1960s and 1970s, it was wary administrators charged with managing religious education, and teachers interested in protecting their working conditions, who were most responsible for the secularizing developments that occurred. Accordingly, I argue that our understanding of secularization and the motives behind it should be broadened. While secularization may at times take the form of a “secular revolution” (Smith 2003b), in other cases it can be a much more mundane and undirected process, advanced through inaction, informal adjustment, and evolutionary tinkering.

### *Agency and motive in secularization*

Social scientists generally agree that secularization occurs on at least three levels: at the level of individual practice, at the level of religious organizations, and at the level of societal institutions (Chaves 1994; Dobbelaere 1981). For most of the past twenty years, those

sociologists who study secularization have focused on whether and to what extent religious beliefs and practices among individuals have or have not been declining (Bruce 2002; Stark and Finke 2000). Recently, however, scholars have expressed renewed interest in the macro-level secularization of societal institutions. These authors have investigated the processes whereby specialized social institutions break free (“differentiate”) from religious authority, and whereby religious institutions come to develop and specialize in a specifically “religious” function (Casanova 1994, 2006; Gorski 2005; Martin 2005; Smith 2003b).

One important consequence of this renewed interest in institutional differentiation has been increased attention to how secularization has been shaped by interested parties. Three recent studies have placed questions of agency and motive at the center of their analysis. Anthony Gill’s (2008) rational-choice approach to the emergence of “religious liberty” examines the development of state policies toward religious minorities in colonial British America, Latin America, and Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> Incumbent politicians are the central actors in Gill’s narrative, and he focuses on the political and economic constraints facing politicians when confronted with decisions regarding policies toward religion. In his view, politicians’ actions on religious matters derive from their attempts to ensure their own political survival and to increase economic development. Thus, Gill (2008, p. 52) argues, “to the extent that political survival, revenue collection, economic growth and social stability are hindered by restrictions on religious freedom or subsidies to a dominant church, religious regulation will be liberalized”.

By contrast, the contributors to Christian Smith’s (2003b) edited volume *The Secular Revolution* examine the secularization of a wide array of American public institutions – schools, courts, universities, journalism, etc. – in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Smith argues that secularization in the United States should be understood as the end product of a deliberate “secular revolution” undertaken by intellectual elites at the turn of the twentieth century. Smith argues that secularization came about as the result of a strategic campaign waged by actors whose interests lay in delegitimizing the

<sup>1</sup> GILL (2008, pp. 10–12) defines “religious liberty” as “a matter of government regulation”, which includes both “negative restrictions” on religious minorities and “positive endorsements” of “favored religions”. Thus,

“religious liberty” would encompass such “secularizing” changes as the disestablishment of a state church or the elimination of particularistic religious symbols from public institutions (pp. 20–21).

Protestant Establishment and asserting the primacy of academic and non-religious knowledge in public culture. The key figures in this “secular movements” account are cultural elites, especially intellectuals, who developed new, non-religious forms of knowledge in order to “increase their own cultural authority and class autonomy – and to reinforce their own intellectual identities” by overthrowing the dominant Protestant establishment in Victorian-era America (Smith 2003a, p. 37). Although these secular revolutionaries were driven by a “complex mix” of motives, including self-interest and belief in progress (Smith 2003a, p. 2), antipathy to religion – either to religion in general or to the Protestant establishment more specifically – and material gain feature prominently in the case studies that make up the book.

Most recently, Ahmet Kuru (2009) has examined the development of divergent understandings of “secularism” in the United States, France, and Turkey. Kuru’s work builds on earlier analyses, which have suggested that individual-level secularization (*i.e.*, disaffiliation) occurs in inverse relation to how closely church and state are allied. Gorski (2003, 2005; *cf.* Martin 1978, 2005), for instance, argues that when church and state are closely identified, protest and opposition will tend to take on an anticlerical character, leading to religious disengagement; by contrast, when there is separation, opposition may be expressed in religious terms, leading to higher levels of engagement. Kuru (2009, pp. 22–23) extends these insights to macro-level institutional secularization, and argues that political reformers’ need to overthrow a caeseropapist *ancien régime* led to “assertive secularism” in France and Turkey, whereas the absence of such an *ancien régime* meant that a less strict “passive secularism” evolved in the United States. Kuru focuses on political insurgents and the ideologies they develop in the course of their struggles with existing authorities. The closer church and state were tied in a previous regime, the more “anticlerical” – and thus more assertively secular – the new regime is likely to become.

While they vary in emphasis, all three of these studies focus on actors consciously and deliberately engaged in active political gamesmanship around religious policy. The incumbent politicians that Gill focuses on treat religious policy as a means of perpetuating their own power. The secularizing actors that Smith and (to a somewhat lesser extent) Kuru focus on are insurgent movements of professionals and politicians, respectively, who are engaged in asserted campaigns to challenge the established religious order. Unsurprisingly, they find

that these strategically-minded actors are primarily motivated by some combination of instrumental self-interest and antireligious motivations.

While this focus on concerted action by politicians and professionals is understandable, it has, all the same, created an incomplete picture of the actors and motivations behind secularization. In particular, these studies have tended to underplay the actions of administrators and civil servants, the functionaries of the state charged not only with carrying out policy in a smooth and efficient manner, but often with developing it. These administrative actors, who typically work behind the scenes, have their own autonomous interests that derive from their position as bureaucrats (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985). This is not to say that their actions are apolitical. Far from it; their actions are informed both by formal politics and by the internal politics of the bureaucracy. Nevertheless, a fuller picture of the actors and motivations behind secularization requires a focus on these kinds of agents. Thus, in this paper, I place political institutions and the administrative officials who work in them at the center of the analysis. In so doing, I reveal a very different and consequential set of motives that enlarges our understanding of the causes of political secularization.

### *Background and methods*

New South Wales is the oldest and most populous state in the Commonwealth of Australia. It has two important characteristics which are relevant to our story. First, it has a highly centralized system of public education. There is no tradition of local school boards in Australia. Instead, public schools are part of a hierarchically organized administrative bureaucracy operated at the state level (NSW Department of Education 1978). Decisions regarding curricula, staffing, and organization are made in central offices and handed down in a uniform fashion to individual schools (Turney 1972). This feature both gives administrators considerable informal power over policy, and also insulates them to a degree from political pressures.

Second, New South Wales has a relatively high degree of religious pluralism. Before World War II, this pluralism was almost entirely intra-Christian, with a wide array of Protestant denominations as well as a sizable (about 20–25 percent) Catholic minority, and a very small

(about 0.5 percent) Jewish community. This religious diversity increased dramatically in the postwar era. After World War II, the Australian government significantly relaxed its immigration policy, leading to a flood of new immigration from a diverse array of sources. One consequence of this was that the last half of the twentieth century saw massive increases in the number of non-Catholic, non-Protestant religious adherents, most notably Eastern Orthodox, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus (Bouma 2006, p. 53). The period between 1960 and 1980, then, was one of significant religious diversification in New South Wales, which was to have an important influence on educational policy vis-à-vis religion.

This paper draws upon a variety of historical documents, including official government reports, departmental syllabi, curriculum statements, and committee reports; the official journals of the New South Wales Department of Education (*Education Gazette*) and the New South Wales Teachers' Federation (*Education*); and archival materials housed at the State Records New South Wales in Sydney, the Noel Butlin Labour Archive at the Australian National University in Canberra, and the Archive of Australian Judaica at the University of Sydney. It also draws on published secondary sources on the history of religious education in New South Wales and Australia.

*Tracking the transformation: changes in religious instruction since 1960*

Religion's position in New South Wales public schools has been transformed since 1960. Traditionally, religious education was provided through a dual system of "general religious teaching" (GRT), consisting of authorized Scripture readings provided by classroom teachers; and "special religious instruction" (SRI), consisting of denominational instruction provided by visiting clergy. While SRI was provided at both the primary and secondary levels, GRT was provided only at the primary level, thanks to difficulty reconciling Scripture reading with the content-centered secondary curriculum. Each type of instruction was typically given weekly, and was supplemented by occasional devotional ceremonies in classrooms and school assemblies. Parents' right to withdraw their children from both GRT and SRI was codified in law and regulation alike (Langdon 1986).

The SRI portion of the system continues relatively unchanged. Today, Department regulations state that Special Religious Education

(or SRE, as it is now known) “should be an integral part of school activities, taking place in school hours and under the jurisdiction of the school” (NSW Department of Education and Training 2011, p. 3). In primary schools, SRE is required to be timetabled in such a way that it does not conflict with other activities. Continuous with policy since the nineteenth century, schools are required to provide SRE if any parent requests it for their child (ICCOREIS 2011, p 2-2). The one major difference in the provision of SRE reflects the way it is timetabled. Whereas in 1959, SRI was carried out on a strictly denominational basis, once a week, today the organizational patterns are much more varied. Most Protestant denominations are taught together under an agreed syllabus, and such organizational forms as block teaching, seminars, conferences, and one-day programs are used in various places (NSW Department of Education and Training 2011, pp. 5-6).

In other respects, however, religion’s place has changed dramatically. Most striking is the change in GRT. In 1959, GRT was provided as the “Scripture” component of the social studies syllabus, and it had an overwhelmingly Christian cast. Teachers gave weekly Scripture lessons out of Department-produced Scripture readers that introduced children not only to the “historical” material in the Old and New Testaments, but also to the Christian miracles (NSW Department of Education c.1966). The official syllabus told teachers that “Christian ideals and values should permeate all school and classroom activities” and that they should “present selected Bible stories simply, beautifully and reverently, to unfold God’s revelation of Himself to men”. Through the teacher’s efforts, children would learn, it was hoped, not only about “God’s love for His children,” but also “what God would have us do” (NSW Department of Education 1959, p. 3, 10). By the late 1980s, this prescriptive, thoroughly Christian interpretation of GRT had been abandoned in favor of an objective “religious studies” approach. General Religious Education<sup>2</sup> (GRE) was taught as part of the social studies curriculum with the goal of “exploring, comparing, and appreciating religious and moral beliefs and values” (Metherell 1989, p. 16), and the Department enforced a strict distinction between “education *about* religion” and “education *into* religion” (Langdon 1986, p. 36). These features continue to characterize GRE to this day (NSW Department of Education and Training 2011, p. 1).

<sup>2</sup> Indicative of the shift away from a prescriptive Christian syllabus, its name was changed from “General Religious Teaching” to “General Religious Education” in the early 1990s.



A somewhat different transformation took place with respect to other religious exercises, such as the singing of hymns, saying of prayers, and corporate worship at assemblies.<sup>3</sup> In the 1950s, devotional exercises, while not universal, were certainly widespread, and received official encouragement. A 1958 review of New South Wales schools observed that “acts of worship” and “occasional combined church services” were being held in some schools (Wigney 1958, pp. 72-73), and the 1959 primary syllabus recommended weekly and daily assemblies for all grades that would include “prayer, morning hymn, and a class talk” (NSW Department of Education 1959). Today, the official policy takes a more reserved approach to these exercises. Prayers are permitted, but teachers are instructed that they are “to be interdenominational Christian or multi-faith to reflect the diversity of the school community”. It further specifies that “Individual religious groups should not be pressured to compromise their beliefs for the sake of holding such a service. If compromise is necessary, it indicates clearly that the service should not be held” (NSW Department of Education and Training 2011, pp. 10-11). In short, the Department had adopted a stance that religious ceremonies should only be held where “appropriate to the local situation” (NSW Department of Education 1980, p. 66).

Thus, between 1959 and today, New South Wales public schools underwent a partial secularization. Most dramatically, the prescriptive, Christian General Religious Teaching was abandoned in favor of an objective “religious studies” approach, and departmental support for other religious exercises was increasingly qualified. The remainder of this paper illuminates the factors that contributed to this partial secularization. It begins with a discussion of the initial shock that would lead to the transformation of religious education: a political row over the GRT syllabus between 1962 and 1964. In response to this crisis, Department officials stopped promoting GRT, took steps to head off potential religious controversies, and passed the buck to local schools for many decisions regarding religious education. As a result, teachers slowly (and extra-legally) began to stop providing GRT, and the once-uniform religion policy became increasingly fragmented. By the late 1960s, the problems surrounding GRT were overshadowed by a crisis in the SRI program that monopolized the attention of teachers

<sup>3</sup> Today, such exercises are typically treated as an extension of GRT. However, well into the 1950s, prayer and other religious exercises were treated as legally distinct from

the GRT provisions of the Public Instruction Act. Indeed, the Rawlinson Report of 1980 treated them separately as well. I parse them out here for this reason.

and administrators alike. When an official departmental committee was formed in 1974 to reconsider religious education policy, the controversies and informal changes of the 1960s and early 1970s informed their decision to transform religious education.

*Cracks in the system: conflict over the social studies syllabus, 1962-1964*

The transformation of religious education in New South Wales began quite suddenly in the summer of 1962 with a controversy over the GRT provisions of the social studies syllabus. The 1959 syllabus was, in one respect, a departure from previous syllabi, in that it incorporated the Scripture requirements – previously issued as a more-or-less independent section at the back of the social studies syllabus – into the body of the syllabus as the first section of the social studies curriculum for each grade. However, integrating scripture and social studies both created difficulties for parents who wished to exercise their right to withdraw their children from Scripture lessons, and also apparently encouraged some teachers to begin examining their students on the content of the Scripture lessons, something the Department had not intended (Harman 1975, p. 92).

Although Jewish leaders complained privately to Department officials as early as 1960 about the new syllabus (Rutland and Caplan 1998, p. 108), it was not until 1962 that the syllabus became a matter of public controversy. In 1962, the Secular Education Defence Committee (SEDC), an offshoot of the New South Wales Humanist Society, issued a 13-page report denouncing the social studies syllabus' Scripture provisions as a vehicle for the "indoctrination" of innocent children into Christianity (NSW Humanist Society c.1962, p. 1), and commenced a spectacularly successful publicity campaign to have the syllabus rescinded and revised. Within weeks, they received the support of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation (NSWTF), who called for the separation of scripture and social studies syllabi, and the confinement of scripture to "the reading by pupils of authorised scripture lessons" (NSW Teachers Federation 1962a, p. 150); and the condemnation of Protestant leaders, including the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney (Harman 1975, pp. 93-94). By December of 1962, the Department – possibly in fear of a lawsuit – had agreed to revise the syllabus.

However, the new syllabus that emerged – after a year and a half of revisions – set off another uproar. In 1964, the Minister for Education, Ernest Wetherell, issued two new syllabi that separated out religious education from social studies. The new social studies syllabus was relatively uncontroversial, but the “General Religious Teaching” syllabus was a radical departure from previous syllabi. It eschewed any prescriptive detail, redefined GRT as “the teaching of ethical principles”, called upon teachers to think of the Bible as merely “a rich source of teaching material” for ethical instruction, and encouraged teachers to “seek suitable additional material in writings of other religions” (Wetherell 1964, p. 4). In short, it made the study of religion objective. The humanists rejoiced, but the churches erupted in protest. The Council for Christian Education in Schools (CCES), speaking on behalf of the Protestant churches, denounced the syllabus as a “radical re-interpretation of the 1880 Public Instruction Act” (Langdon 1964, p. 68), assailed its lack of specific content, and singled out in particular its suggestion that other religions might be taught on an equal basis with Christianity. CCES instead insisted that “the community’s pro-Christian sympathies need to be translated into active Christian faith and positive Christian living” through a strong GRT program (Langdon 1964, p. 82). Chastened by the Archbishop of Sydney, the Premier of New South Wales overruled Wetherell, withdrew the syllabus, and ordered a new “General Religious and Moral Education” (GRME) syllabus to be drafted.

The GRME syllabus essentially recreated the 1959 syllabus, minus the parts that had caused offense. Although it instructed teachers that material was to be “treated in such a way that they teach children about Christianity”, and that “Stories are to be presented objectively”, it continued to rely exclusively upon the official Scripture readers as its sole text (NSW Department of Education 1964, p. 5). Accordingly, there was little agreement on what it actually meant. Protestants lamented the loss of some of the additional content, but saw the new syllabus as essentially a satisfactory return to the pre-1959 status quo (Langdon 1973, p. 19). Jewish leaders, by contrast, denounced the new syllabus as little more than “a course in ‘general Christian teaching’, or perhaps, ‘Scripture according to the Christian belief’” (NSW Jewish Board of Deputies 1965, p. 4), and announced they would systematically withdraw their students from GRT (Rutland and Caplan 1998, p. 110). And the NSWTF clearly understood the syllabus as endorsing an objective approach to “teaching about” Christianity; the Federation representative told the NSWTF Council upon the issuance of

the GRME syllabus that “There are many, many people who do not believe in Christianity. The Committee felt that by teaching about Christianity, including the scripture section, we have honoured as far as possible the Education Act” (NSW Teachers Federation 1964, p. 178).

With the issuance of the new GRME syllabus, the controversy largely died away.<sup>4</sup> However, the syllabus controversy revealed two facts that were to influence departmental policy greatly over the ensuing decade. First, it demonstrated that there were profound divisions within the community at large over the propriety of religious instruction in schools. No longer could the Department treat religion as a taken-for-granted aspect of the curriculum; it was always a potential source of controversy. The SEDC and their humanist allies were the most visible manifestation of these divisions, as they were opposed on ideological grounds to the teaching of any religion in the schools. The Jewish community also objected. They saw GRT as irreducibly Christian in character, and consequently discriminatory against their own children. However, they were not entirely opposed to religion in the schools. In fact, in private letters to Department officials, they pronounced themselves “whole-heartedly in favour” of the SRI system as the appropriate means of providing religious instruction, and suggested that, “If the present single weekly [SRI] lesson is inadequate, then additional time for such lessons should be made available” (NSW Jewish Board of Deputies c.1964).

Second, it revealed that teachers were increasingly concerned about religious education. Although the Teachers’ Federation supported revising the syllabus to separate scripture from social studies, teachers were not uniformly opposed to religious instruction per se; in fact, up to the time of the syllabus controversy, teachers were almost entirely supportive of the existing system (*Education* 1952, p. 78; 1956, p. 3; NSW Teachers Federation 1959, p. 328). Nevertheless, by the early 1960s, some teachers were beginning to speak out against the Department’s religious education policies. Some were frankly anti-religious; in addition to a tradition of communist influence associated with the trade union movement (Mitchell 1975), there was some overlap between the Humanist Society and active members of the NSWTF. These teachers argued that “There can be no part of the ‘secular’ curriculum that requires the suspension of the spirit of inquiry and the substitution of an attitude of belief” (Palmer 1962a, p. 3), and their

<sup>4</sup> A follow-up legal challenge by the SEDC was resolved in 1976, when the New South Wales Supreme Court upheld the legality of

Christian religious instruction in public schools (*Benjamin v. Downs* [1976] 2 NSWLR 199).

strident criticisms certainly contributed to the NSWTF's increased attention to religious education in the early 1960s.

A more consistent and consequential objection, however, was that the religious education curriculum was beginning to compromise teachers' working conditions. Practically, it created a set of operational difficulties with respect to examinations and the right of withdrawal. Corporate worship at assemblies came in for particular criticism. Teachers in Coffs' Harbour implored the Federation to petition for a syllabus revision, noting that its members struggled with "the impossibility of preparing a meaningful 'Act' satisfactory to all faiths" (NSW Teachers Federation 1962b, p. 545). During the Council's 1962 debate on whether to call for a revision of the 1959 syllabus, NSWTF President Don Taylor criticized the syllabus' support both for a corporate act of worship and for its merging of GRE into social studies, since "It would be impossible to exclude children from general assembly, or social studies lessons" (NSW Teachers Federation 1962a, p. 149).

More importantly, because all teachers were required to give Christian instruction irrespective of their own beliefs (or lack thereof), GRT was viewed as a violation of teachers' right of conscience (New South Wales 1984, p. 322). The NSWTF was already fielding complaints that GRT was "yet another infringement on the rights of teachers" in the summer of 1962 (Davies 1962; see also Palmer 1962b). Concerns about teachers being forced to teach students material in which they did not believe were voiced frequently enough that Wetherell was compelled to state, in March 1963, that "No teacher will be expected to give any opinion on the truth or otherwise of any matter involving a spiritual belief" (quoted in Palmer 1963). By 1964, the teacher's right of conscience had evolved into a sacrosanct industrial principle; after the final resolution of the GRME syllabus in 1964, the NSWTF representative on the syllabus committee told the NSWTF council that "Those people who say that the teacher should teach Christianity are ignoring the trade union or industrial principle that you cannot ask a teacher to teach that in which he does not believe... The only way a teacher could be expected to teach this would be by imposing a religious test before employment and this could not be done" (NSW Teachers Federation 1964, p. 177).

In short, the syllabus controversy had revealed two key administrative difficulties with New South Wales' system of religious instruction: it was potentially controversial among the general public, and it stirred discontent among teachers by creating practical and

industrial problems. These realities would become highly consequential in the decade that was to come, as both GRT and SRI would reach a crisis stage. As I discuss below, officials in the Department of Education were motivated above all by the desire to avoid controversy and to ensure that official policies advanced, and did not disrupt, the smooth operation of the schools. It was these motives that would be most consequential for the future shape of religious education.

*Controversy avoidance and the informal demise of GRT*

Department officials were keenly aware of the costs of political controversy: responding to the syllabus affair had absorbed a great deal of the Department's time and attention, and officials were determined to avoid any steps that might rekindle the dispute. Thus, throughout the mid-1960s, the Department's desire to avoid controversy on religious matters was a foremost preoccupation, visible in a wide array of departmental actions. In some cases, the Department moved to exclude religion when it threatened to become politically explosive. For example, when the British & Foreign Bible Society approached the Department in 1967 for permission to distribute Bibles to schoolchildren, their application was rejected. The Director of Primary Education expressed concern that "Public controversy still surrounds the traditional forms of religious education in primary schools. The presentation of New Testaments and a Christmas selection of scripture to each child may not be favourably received by families of certain religious convictions or no such convictions" (Beckenham 1967). In other instances, officials maintained religious practices out of fear that removing them would be still more controversial. In 1966, for example, complaints about the use of religious radio programming in schools were dismissed; the Director-General thought a ban would be "impolitic" and risked "drawing attention to a session which has gone unquestioned for some three or four years" (Wyndham 1966).

Not surprisingly, this dynamic decisively shaped the Department's attitude to its formal program of religious education. From 1964 onwards, therefore, Department administrators groped towards a policy on religious education that would allow them to avoid stirring up another public controversy, and which would placate teachers' concerns about their working conditions. Their approach had two

primary components: First, downplay their support for GRT; and second, devolve greater authority over religious education to teachers and principals.

*The unmoored politics of GRT: formal support, informal abandonment*

The 1962 controversy over a previously unobjectionable aspect of the curriculum rattled the Department. Department officials feared a lawsuit from the humanists if they allowed too much Christian content in the syllabus (Wood 1964). On the other hand, Department officials were also aware that the Christian churches had great political strength, and that the Department could not formally abandon the GRT syllabus – as the Director-General of Education remarked (presciently) in 1963, “There are certain elements in the long-established provision of Scripture stories and reading which cannot be abandoned... without great public outcry” (Wyndham 1963). Yet officials realized that they did not have to actively promote Scripture reading either. Accordingly, their solution was to scale back any efforts to promote GRT, even as they allowed it to remain on the books.

In the immediate wake of this controversy, a number of active supports to GRT were quietly abandoned. The first to go was continuing education. Throughout the 1950s, the Department had regularly sponsored post-college courses such as “The Value of Scripture Teaching”, “Effective Scripture Teaching”, and “The Gospel Environment”, specifically designed to improve teachers’ skills in the provision of GRT. These courses were no longer advertised in the official departmental newsletter after 1962.<sup>5</sup> More strikingly, the Department also appears to have quietly abandoned the production of additional Scripture readers at some point in late 1965 or early 1966, despite the fact that they were central to the GRME syllabus.<sup>6</sup> By the late 1960s, then, while still formally supporting the syllabus, the Department had effectively curtailed ongoing training of teachers in GRT, and had stopped producing the materials that sat at the heart of the syllabus. And as the 1960s turned into the 1970s, GRME essentially

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., *Education Gazette*, 1 October 1952, p. 339; 1 July 1954, p. 161; 1 September 1959, p. 304; 1 September 1960, p. 356; 1 July 1962, p. 377.

<sup>6</sup> Requisition forms and requests up to 1965 bore the heading “School Readers and Scripture Books;” beginning in 1966 they

referred only to “School Readers”; Likewise, through 1965 “Scripture Stories – Junior” and “Scripture Stories – Senior” were regularly included in calculations regarding how many additional copies to order, but these disappeared beginning in 1966 (cf. JOHNSTON 1965; CURNOW 1966).

disappeared from departmental correspondence and planning documents.

Small wonder, then, that in 1975 the Committee to Consider Religious Education (see below) received many plaintive letters from teachers inquiring whether the GRME syllabus was still in effect, and lamenting both the lack of department policy on religious education and the absence of adequate training in religious education (NSW Department of Education 1980, p. 26). Although the GRME syllabus was still technically in effect, a lax departmental attitude had rendered it effectively unknown.

*The fragmented politics of GRT: defusing tension through delegation*

This quiet abandonment of departmental support was compounded by moves to devolve authority over religious education to schools and principals, ultimately granting teachers greater autonomy regarding the interpretation of the syllabus and the content of GRT.<sup>7</sup> This was, in and of itself, fairly radical. New South Wales teachers traditionally had very little autonomy. Syllabi were highly prescriptive, and regular visits by departmental inspectors – whose reports determined prospects for promotion – gave teachers incentives to follow them to the letter (Cleverley 1972). Indeed, through the early 1960s, inspectors' visits “ensure[d] that Scripture [was being] satisfactorily taught according to the syllabus requirements set down by the Department of Education” (Burns 1963, pp. 260-261).

The granting of greater autonomy initially emerged out of inaction. After the withdrawal of the original 1959 syllabus, teachers reacted with confusion at the lack of clarity regarding the scripture requirements. In August 1963, the NSWTF wrote to Wetherell to inform him that “Many teachers have expressed their concern that as yet no advice has been issued to them as to how the present scripture books are to be used, and feel that in the absence of any official direction to do otherwise they should continue scripture lessons in accordance with the 1959 syllabus” (Lancaster 1963). A month later, with no reply received, the Newcastle Principals Association asked the

<sup>7</sup> This devolution of authority was of a piece with a broader trend toward decentralized decision-making within the Department (CONNELL 1993, pp. 203-207; HUGHES 1999, pp. 88-93). Yet the delegation of authority over religious education preceded the

heyday of decentralized authority by nearly a decade, indicating that other factors more specific to the dynamics of religious education were in play in this aspect of educational policy.



Federation “to approach the Department for a statement on the teaching of this subject in schools” (NSW Teachers Federation 1963a, p. 386). The Director of Primary Education finally told a deputation in November 1963 that « only those sections of the [Scripture] books included in the new syllabus » were to be used; however, as the syllabus had not been printed, he did not provide a copy of the syllabus to the NSWTF (NSW Teachers Federation 1963b, p. 474). The following year saw the row over the Wetherell syllabus when it was finally released in August. By the time the 1964 General Religious and Moral Education syllabus was released, teachers had already been operating in a somewhat undirected atmosphere for nearly two years.

The 1964 GRME syllabus formally gave teachers considerable authority over the content of GRT, specifying that teachers were « free to select topics in these [Scripture] books for presentation when and where they are considered appropriate to the needs of [their] pupils » (NSW Department of Education 1964, p. 5). At a stroke, this move both took the responsibility for the content of GRT out of administrators’ hands, and addressed teachers’ ongoing concerns about conscientious objection. Department policy had clearly been influenced by teachers’ regular appeals to conscience. In a memorandum prepared for the 1964 committee to create the new GRME syllabus after the Wetherell syllabus had been withdrawn, the Director-General of Education, Harold Wyndham, noted that “because of the varieties of denominational adherence and of unbelief among teachers in public schools, there was a definite limit to the extent to which any direction could be given in regard to classroom treatment... It cannot be said that more specific directions can be given to teachers under present conditions” (Wyndham 1964, pp. 1-2).

While hard data on teacher practices is unavailable, it seems likely that this curricular autonomy diversified the provision of GRT. In 1967, the Minister for Education, Charles Cutler, advised the NSW Council of Churches that GRT was being provided “under quite elastic conditions” because of “the variety of belief and of religious affiliation or lack of it, among the staff concerned” (Cutler 1967). This elasticity grew more pronounced as it became more entrenched, to the point where the Director-General, by 1974, was advising principals that GRT merely “derives from the topics” set forth in the syllabus, “but is not restricted to it” (Buggie 1974).

As with GRT, decisions about prayer and religious services were similarly passed on to the schools. Cutler (1967) observed that one reason why no “formal decision” had been made to implement

a “corporate act of worship” at the beginning of the school day was that “the establishment of such a practice in any school, to be of value, must be on the initiative of the school principal and with the support of staff and parents”. Over time, especially as the general trend toward administrative decentralization accelerated in the early 1970s, the entire question of how much religion, and of what variety, to provide students fell to local schools. By 1975, one parents’ group observed, with some displeasure, that “It appears that it devolves upon the individual school to develop its own policy” in regard to religious education (Frame 1975, pp. 2-3).

*The effects of departmental neglect: the slow demise of GRT*

The ultimate effect of these two strategies was to encourage the extralegal abandonment of GRT. Lack of departmental support, encouragement, and training meant that fewer and fewer teachers were made aware that GRT was a formal part of the curriculum. Over time, this led to a collapse in the number of teachers teaching GRT. By 1977, an official survey of teachers found that 43 percent of infants (kindergarten) and 61 percent of primary teachers never provided GRT, while only 19 percent of infants and 10 percent of primary teachers were providing it on a weekly basis as required by the Department. Almost one-third of primary school teachers, including majorities of those with less than five years’ experience, were not even *acquainted* with the official departmental syllabus (NSW Department of Education 1980, p. 43, 201).

If ignorance of formal policy kept some teachers from providing GRT, increased autonomy meant that other teachers faced virtually no consequences when they stopped providing GRT. In the first years under the new GRME syllabus, those teachers who were overtly hostile to GRT in the first place took advantage of this flexibility to drop GRT altogether (Langdon 1976, p. 4). In schools with large numbers of non-Christian teachers or students, too, the religious component of the GRME syllabus was typically quietly dropped (NSW Jewish Board of Deputies 1965, pp. 3-4). Others, in the absence of clear departmental directives, appear to have begun to avoid “an aspect of the curriculum about which they were unsure” (Langdon 1976, p. 4). Still others appear to have downplayed or dropped Scripture reading in favor of the less controversial moral education, eventually dissolving GRT into an objective component of their social studies curriculum

(Craig 1977b, p. 15).<sup>8</sup> In any event, this flexibility clearly contributed to teachers' ability to abandon GRT extralegally in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By 1976, a NSWTF ad hoc committee on religious instruction concluded that "in the primary schools even the present provision is being ignored [as the result of] less prescriptive curricula requirements" (Marks 1976, p. 1).

In short, departmental administrators, motivated by the desire to avoid controversy either in the public at large or within their discontented teaching staff, adopted strategies that allowed them to minimize the possibility of further controversy. While these strategies at times required the active exclusion of religious elements from the schools, more frequently they simply involved inaction and delegation. Although these strategies allowed officials to keep the peace, they also provided plenty of space for religious education policy to fall into abeyance.

*Navigating disorder: the crisis in special religious instruction*

A second set of motivations and strategies is evident in the department's actions toward the second prong of religious education, Special Religious Instruction. Clergy visits became increasingly irregular after 1968, leading to substantial practical administrative difficulties. Teachers grew restive due to the effects this had on their teaching environment. Administrators were thus deeply concerned with finding ways to maintain SRI while placating their workforce and ensuring the smooth operation of the schools. Ultimately, teachers and administrators responded through a set of practical adjustments and bottom-up innovations that altered SRI's form.

The crisis in SRI, which began in late 1968, had its roots in two major trends: the rapid expansion of the educational system as it attempted to keep pace with the Baby Boom, and a crisis of faith among the churches in the propriety of SRI, spurred by ecumenical trends in the religious field (Black 1975; Hill 1971). SRI had never been particularly robust, but by the early 1960s it was already clearly under strain. The system relied upon visiting clergy from each separate denomination visiting each school within their jurisdiction on a weekly

<sup>8</sup> This was feasible because the GRME syllabus' "moral education" component overlapped considerably with the revised social

studies syllabus (*cf.* NSW Department of Education 1963, pp. 9-10; NSW Department of Education 1964, p. 9).

basis. As the number of schools increased, churches began to have difficulty keeping up, especially in rural areas where there were fewer ministers to teach in often far-flung country schools. By the late 1960s, the churches' inability to cope had reached crisis stage. SRI was becoming increasingly irregular, as many clergy missed their appointed visits due to conflicts with other pastoral duties, and large and unruly classes prevailed (Barcan 1980, p. 324).

The increased demands on clergy were compounded by a growing concern in many Protestant churches that the public school, religiously diverse as it was, was an inappropriate place for religious education (Rossiter 1981, p. 11). In 1967, the Methodist Conference of New South Wales declared that the existing system of religious education was out of touch with "a pluralistic society and [...] shrinking world" (quoted in Rixon 1973b, p. 201). Some Anglican dioceses, such as the Diocese of Canberra-Goulburn, concurred, arguing, in recognition of the Church's diminished position in "a pluralistic society", that "the emphasis on religion studies in the schools should be placed [...] squarely upon the presentation of information as part of the culture and not upon the exploitation of 'an evangelistic opportunity' or the establishment of 'a Christian presence'" (quoted in Rixon 1973a, p. 32). Not all churches took this position, of course; the more conservative Diocese of Sydney continued to argue for the traditional Scripture-based GRT as "an essential ingredient in the public school system if that system is to remain a suitable vehicle for the education of Christian children" (Rixon 1973a, p. 35). However, the increased ambivalence toward SRI among some churches contributed to problems in its provision during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

*"Chaos, usually once a week": the practical consequences of the SRI crisis*

Beginning in late 1968, teachers began to complain about the negative impact SRI was having on their working conditions. At the NSWTF Annual Conference in December 1968, the Federation resolved "that members of the clergy be requested to give a firm undertaking to the schools that they will be present each school week, or have representatives to take lessons". The sponsor of the amendment prefaced his support by stating that it "is not to reflect in any way upon the clergymen, in whom I have the greatest of confidence", but rather that it was necessary to "clearly define our industrial attitude toward this situation" (NSW Teachers Federation 1968, p. 153).

According to the NSWTF's journal *Education* (1969), this solution reflected the belief that "this whole question was a matter of good manners and of public relations between the clergy and the school".

Yet the deteriorating industrial situation was increasingly problematic. Missed SRI caused disruption on several fronts. Primary teachers testified that absent ministers disrupted the entire school: "the class is split up into five religious groups [...] the school's split up [...] and then, after waiting perhaps five, ten minutes, you get a notice, or perhaps sometimes a message, that the ministers are not coming. This does throw a school, however small or large, into chaos, usually once a week" (NSW Teachers Federation 1968, p. 154). More common, however, were complaints from teachers in secondary schools, where the problem of missed lessons was much more acute. When visiting clergy missed SRI lessons, teachers became responsible for supervising the students in what would otherwise have been a period freed for preparation or a break.

Accordingly, SRI became an increasingly pressing point for teachers. It also began to take on important symbolic meaning. During this period, the Federation had been waging an extended working conditions campaign as part of a broader effort to assert teachers' professional status. Teachers refused to work alongside untrained staff, demanded less restrictive regulations and inspections, and called for the provision of clerical staff to conduct non-educational "extras" that teachers were providing at the time. "By refusing extras, teachers are demanding the right to teach in a professional manner," declared one teacher; "They do not want to be child minders" (Hoggan 1972, p. 100). As the SRI crisis dragged on, scripture supervision was increasingly understood as an insulting "extra". In 1970, the NSWTF incorporated scripture supervision into its working conditions resolution, and called on teachers to refuse extra periods or additional pupils, "including scripture periods where there is no visitor" (*Education* 1971, p. 7). Over the course of the following year, teachers in school after school rebelled and categorically refused to supervise SRI classes.

*The administrators' dilemma: financial constraints and bottom-up innovation*

For Department officials, this all created an enormous headache. Internal staffing reviews showed that the amount of extra time devoted to SRI supervision by teachers grew from the equivalent of

10 teachers' time to 45 teachers' time between 1969 and 1972 (Booth 1969; Buchan c.1972). Education officials were already suffering from financial constraints imposed by the state government, and were having great difficulty meeting staffing needs as it was (*Education* 1967, p. 154). Department officials were thus faced with a dilemma: recognize scripture supervision as part of teachers' teaching load, in which case they would need to hire still more teachers, or muddle along and face growing protests from teachers and principals. They elected to do the latter.

By 1972, the situation had deteriorated to the point where the Department was willing to make some concessions. Historically, the Department had been strongly opposed to variations in the format of SRI. In the 1930s, for instance, a proposal to conduct SRI on a combined Protestant basis was shot down (Anonymous c.1937). However, as the crisis deepened, some schools had begun to experiment by allowing SRI to be conducted less frequently, or in alternative formats such as assemblies or seminars. By 1972, the Department was willing to condone these bottom-up innovations, sending a memorandum to secondary principals advising them that in the case of recurrent problems with scripture, the school week might be reduced, or assemblies introduced, to reduce the strain on secondary staff (Buchan c.1972).

Yet even these organizational changes were too little too late. In July 1973, a survey of secondary schools found that only 47 percent of pupils (39 percent of non-Catholics) were receiving SRI, even though only 4 percent had requested withdrawal. The administrators reported that many principals had pleaded that "something needs to be done to alleviate the growing problem of scripture" (Lindsay c.1973). Facing increasing pressure from all sides, the Department convened an official committee to reevaluate the entire religious education curriculum in October 1974.

*From informal response to formal policy: the Rawlinson Commission*

The Committee to Consider Religious Education, popularly known as the Rawlinson Commission, met throughout the late 1970s and released its recommendations in 1980. The Commission was charged with overhauling the religious education curriculum to improve its organization and to bring it into line with the more diverse

religious context of contemporary New South Wales. In this task, it was above all concerned with finding ways to accommodate religion while allowing the Department to contain any potential controversies. Rather than reinventing the policy out of whole cloth, the Commission instead drew selectively upon the developments and compromises that had emerged during the period of administrative drift and crisis management in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In its deliberations, the Committee explicitly grappled with the problem of religious pluralism that had thrown up so many practical obstacles to religious education. Concerning the position of GRT, it became clear fairly quickly that there would be no return to the days of a relatively didactic Christian syllabus. The Committee acknowledged the impossibility of coming up with “certain common data” for GRT given increased religious diversity: “how can you demand teaching about Christianity in predominantly Jewish or Muslim communities?” (Craig 1977a, p. 2). To solve this, the Committee advocated a shift from General Religious Teaching to General Religious Education, a “broader concept [...] which aims to provide understanding of the major forms of religious thought and expression characteristic of our society and also of other societies in the world” (NSW Department of Education 1980, p. 73). The move effectively laid the groundwork for a new course designed to teach *about* religion in an objective sense. In so doing, the committee moved to align religious education with reforms in other areas of the curriculum that emphasized diversity and less prescriptive curricular statements (NSW Department of Education 1974).

However, the Committee was unwilling to eliminate religious practice altogether. The Committee feared that eliminating all religious observances “would be in conflict with the [larger] community’s cultural norms” and would thus invite discord by creating “a gulf between the school and the community” (R.E. Subcommittee 1978). Accordingly, the Committee decided to maintain religious exercises while working to insulate them from controversy by emphasizing local decision-making and reasserting denominational SRI as the appropriate means of providing religious instruction. Localization was seen as a particularly valuable means of avoiding controversy around religious observances. Accordingly, it advocated putting the decision in the hands of local schools, such that “religious observances as are appropriate to the local situation should continue to be permissible” (NSW Department of Education 1980, p. 66). Any observances which occurred should “reflect the general view of parents and teachers”,

who would have “the opportunity to consult with the school staff on the types of religious observances, if any, which will take place”. Moreover, schools should “employ forms of observance which maximize corporateness and minimize divisiveness”, the precise character of which would be entirely context-dependent:

While the Committee recognizes that, in certain closely-knit communities with religious homogeneity, corporate acts of worship in school might be an appropriate expression of the life of the community, it nevertheless considers that, in many cases, the goal of corporateness will be best achieved through a movement away from situations requiring public worship and commitment towards situations which allow for acts of respect and private prayer, reflection or meditation. Thus in a school serving a multi-religious local community, it cannot be assumed that teachers and pupils will believe in any one religion and could therefore, with good conscience, meaningfully share in corporate worship. In such a situation the proper place for religious worship would be in the context of Special Religious Education or in voluntary meetings.

Thus, concluded the Report, “different practices will occur in different communities” (NSW Department of Education 1980, p. 67).

Even SRI was cast in terms of the policy of adapting religious education policy to local circumstances. In the context of recommendations for an objectivized GRT and religious exercises carried out on an as-appropriate basis, SRI was reconceived as a firewall that would contain particularism within the school by providing a setting in which particularistic religious education could take place while allowing the school as a whole to become multifaith (NSW Department of Education 1980, p. 75). Moreover, the Report rhetorically repositioned SRI as a beneficial buttress for vital pluralism: “by allowing students to study in their own tradition, the school is catering for the religious plurality of the community [...] In adjusting to a new culture, [migrant] children could be reassured by the teaching of their own particular religious heritage in the same setting as their general schooling” (NSW Department of Education 1980, p. 74). Denominational instruction was cast as a positive good that would help to sustain religious pluralism while defusing any potential controversy.

In many respects, the Committee’s recommendations essentially endorsed practices that had been developing informally since 1964. Thanks to the withdrawal of active support by the Department, teachers had already largely abandoned Scripture-based GRT as a separate curricular component by the late 1970s. And, with the quiet encouragement of Department officials, individual schools had already begun to experiment with new, more collective means of providing SRI, such as seminars, assemblies, and interdenominational



lessons, in the early 1970s. Department policy, in other words, had already been substantially decentralized and diversified in practice, and the Committee's formal recommendations merely gave an official imprimatur to these developments. Since these informal developments had shown themselves to have worked in practice, and since they had not led to any substantial public outcry, it is not surprising that the Committee found them ideally suited for the more pluralistic, manageable religious education curriculum they sought to create.

### *Discussion*

Between 1959 and 1990, religious education in New South Wales was transformed in ways that made it both less Christian and more heterogeneous. Increased religious diversity and a rapidly expanding educational system created a raft of practical problems in the old system: teachers claiming conscientious objection, political controversies in the wider community, and the collapse of the visiting clergy system. Religious education, in this context, was not simply a pedagogical or epistemological battleground; it was also an administrative minefield. With educational decisions insulated in a centralized bureaucracy, religious and antireligious interest groups had limited direct influence on the shape of religious education. Instead, it was slowly transformed from within by teachers and administrators.

This case study thus provides a very different picture of the types of agents and motives behind secularization from those revealed in other analyses. The key carriers of secularization were not political or professional campaigns, but instead were the functionaries and agents of the state charged with the actual implementation of policy. In a context where political leaders provided limited guidance or attention to religious matters, these officials became *de facto* policy-makers in the breach. Likewise, administrative officials were driven primarily not by self-aggrandizing or antireligious motives, but instead by the more prosaic desire to find solutions to a series of administrative problems generated by the mismatch of policy and population. Far from resembling an organized and deliberate movement, administrators' actions were instead piecemeal and uncoordinated, developed on an as-needed basis in response to operational difficulties with the religious education curriculum. They were guided

above all by *practical motives*: the desire to avoid controversy, and the desire to ensure the smooth operation of the schools.

The case of New South Wales clearly demonstrates that secularization has an important practical dimension. Practical motives are important to the study of secularization because they work according to a different logic than either ideological or political motives. As a result, they have the potential to influence policy independently, thereby checking, reversing, or abetting would-be secularizing actors in the broader society. In New South Wales, for instance, political leaders were largely disengaged. However, to the extent that they were involved in policymaking during this period, their preference was to maintain traditional GRT, as evidenced by the Premier's order to withdraw the Wetherell syllabus and restore a pro-Christian GRME syllabus in 1964. Yet practical motives within the Department led to the slow decline of GRT all the same. Simply focusing on political motives, in this case, would provide an incomplete and inaccurate picture of what transpired.

While practical motives are important to the study of secularization, I am not arguing that they will always be decisive. On the contrary, administrative actors are most likely to contribute to secularization under particular conditions. Most importantly, bureaucratic officials must have enough autonomy from political actors to allow their own motivations to become significant. When religious policy becomes a matter of formal politics, administrators are likely to be subject to greater interference, scrutiny, and formal policy change from elected officials, thereby reducing their ability to influence policy. Thus, the more autonomous administrators are, the more likely practical motives will affect their own policymaking toward religion. In New South Wales, administrators had a relatively high degree of autonomy, making their actions particularly salient.

Additionally, administrative actors are more likely to contribute to secularization in conditions characterized by religious pluralism and operational difficulty. This is so because their actions are likely to produce two main secularizing mechanisms: *informal adjustment* and *inaction*, both of which are abundantly evident in the case of New South Wales. Yet these mechanisms are best thought of as catalysts that typically produce secularizing effects in conjunction with other conditions, such as religious pluralism and operational difficulty. In the absence of pluralism, or in situations where, with or without controversy, the status quo functions well, these mechanisms may not lead to secularization. Several examples from American history

suggest this. In nineteenth-century New York City, individual schools responded to sectarian conflict over Bible reading by making informal adjustments. Yet in predominantly Catholic schools, the Protestant King James Bible was simply replaced by the Catholic Douay version (Justice 2005). Thus, secularization did not occur, although the content of religious instruction changed. Similarly, Dolbeare and Hammond (1971) found that administrative inaction was the most common response among Midwestern superintendents to the Supreme Court's decision banning school prayer. But because school prayer was typically an unproblematic aspect of the curriculum, the ultimate outcome more often than not *inhibited* secularization by allowing traditional practice to continue.

In many respects, then, New South Wales represents something of an ideal case for examining the influence of administrators and practical motives on secularization: a religiously diverse community where current policy clearly poses practical difficulties and administrators have substantial autonomy. Future studies should investigate to what extent administrators and practical motives impact secularization in situations where some of these conditions do not apply, as well as the other kinds of conditions that might interact with administrative mechanisms to produce more or less secular outcomes.

Secularization is not an inevitable concomitant of modernity; it is actively advanced by agents who choose more secular policies. Yet those choices need not imply a strategic desire to diminish religion; they may instead reflect a practical path to greater institutional tranquility. Attending to agency and motive in all their diverse forms is critical in improving our understanding of religion's place in the modern world. This essay has shown that we should attend not only to the highly visible politicians and professionals with ideological and self-aggrandizing motives, but also to the unsung actors and practical motivations of administrators and civil servants charged with implementing policy regarding religion.

### *Acknowledgments*

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2009 meetings of the Association for the Sociology of Religion. I would like to thank Phil Gorski, Hans Joas, Margaret Weir, Alan Black, Lynne Gerber, and Nick Wilson for helpful comments; and Marianne Dacy, Pennie Pemberton, Margaret Avard, Kate Musgrave, and the other archivists

at the Noel Butlin Labour Archives and State Records New South Wales for their help in locating documents. This research was supported in part by the National Science Foundation (Dissertation Improvement Grant #0727814); the University of California Office of the President Pacific Rim Research Program; the Institute of International Studies and Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley; and the Social and Political Theory Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University. I thank them for their generosity.

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## Résumé

L'article porte sur l'évolution de la politique d'éducation religieuse dans les établissements scolaires publics des Nouvelles Galles du Sud depuis 1960. Trois volets : l'éducation religieuse de base dispensée par un maître, le droit pour les dénominations d'offrir un cours spécifique dispensé par un prêtre ou un pasteur, et enfin les expressions circonstanciées, hymnes et prières. Entre 1960 et 1980 une sécularisation partielle a remplacé le catéchisme avec manuel officiel, par un cours flexible d'introduction scientifique aux diverses religions. Les enseignements dispensés par des ministres d'un culte ont vu leur place dans le curriculum consolidée. Ces réformes ont été conduites à partir d'un point de vue pragmatique et dans un souci d'harmonie. Elles vont à l'encontre de l'idée selon laquelle sécularisation irait nécessairement avec idéologie antireligieuse et luttes de pouvoir.

*Mots clés:* Sécularisation ; Enseignement religieux ; Australie ; Écoles publiques.

## Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag erörtert die religiöse Erziehungspolitik in öffentlichen Schulen Neusüdwales seit 1960. Drei Aspekte werden beleuchtet: der von einem Lehrer erteilte Religionsunterricht, das Recht einer besonderen Unterweisung durch eine katholischen oder evangelischen Pfarrer und schließlich gelegentlichsgebundene Ausdrucksformen, wie Hymnen oder Gebete. Zwischen 1960 und 1980 hat eine Teilsäkularisierung zur Abschaffung des Religionsunterrichts mit offiziellem Unterrichtsmaterial geführt, der durch einen flexiblen Unterricht mit einer wissenschaftlichen Einführung in verschiedene Religionen ersetzt wurde. Der jeweils von offiziellen Vertretern einer Religion erteilte Unterricht wurde im Weiteren verstärkt. Sowohl pragmatische Ansätze als auch Harmoniegedanken haben zu diesen Reformen geführt, die widerlegen, dass die Säkularisation hauptsächlich ein politischer Prozess sei, der von Politikern und anderen Akteuren geführt würde, um ihre eigene Macht oder ihr eigenes Prestige auf Kosten der Kirchen zu stärken.

*Schlagwörter:* Säkularisation; Religionsunterricht; Australien; Öffentliche Schulen.