

NEGOTIATING SECULAR
(AND RELIGIOUS) SETTLEMENTS

Damon MAYRL, *Secular Conversions: Political Institutions and Religious Education in the United States and Australia, 1800-2000*
(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016)

The role of religion in education has always been contentious. It has also been recognized as a gauge of the degree of secularization of a country. When it comes to religion and education, France, Turkey and the United States have drawn most of the attention in comparative terms, essentially because of an initial distinction made between those countries hostile to, or friendly towards, religion. The example that is frequently cited with regard to education and religion is that of French *laïcité*, which was entrenched with the 1905 law of the separation of church and state—prohibiting state funding of religious schools, banning religious symbols in schools and controlling the school curriculum. While this particular case was labeled a “hostile” separation of church and state, by the mid-twentieth century with the Debré Bill, France had increasingly become more like other European nations where state support of religious schools had been negotiated.¹ The other case of hostile separation of religion and state was Turkey with the Atatürk reforms, but there as well, the role of religion increased in the post 1980 period. Today, in Turkey schools have seriously altered their curriculum to incorporate a heavy dose of religious teaching. Therefore, we can see that the initial hostile positions, which were so resolute in their commitment, have been either moderated or traded off for equally unyielding positions. The role of religion in education is often dependent on political factors.

Mayrl’s book is notable for a variety of reasons. First, in breaking away from traditional comparisons and bringing Australia, a less-known case, into the study of this relationship, he is able to tease out a more complex and nuanced argument. Second, it is also particularly relevant as it emphasizes politics as the main driver of decisions that inform the inclusion of religion by educational institutions. The analysis of the role of politics underlines the particular structure of the state and its relative ability to negotiate the demands of different institutions and actors at distinct historical moments in deciding what

¹ Alfred Stepan, 2001, *Arguing Comparative Politics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

role religion should have in education. Third, Mayrl also wants to redefine how we study secularization as he significantly narrows down its purview with the introduction of “secular settlements,” which he defines as policies that govern the role of religion in public life.² He proposes that we focus on the outcome of the relations between societal actors and state actors on the role of religion in public life and, in this case, in schools.

The thesis of this book is driven by the differences in secular settlements between Australia and the United States prior to 1975. Mayrl argues that despite many similarities between these two cases, which might have led one to expect similar policies on religious education, the two countries differ substantially. While Australia allows public funding of religious schools, the US is known for its secular approach to public schools. Such outcomes are explained through a historical institutionalist lens that pays attention to political processes that unfold through the interaction between various actors embedded in and influenced by their institutional context. For Mayrl the outcomes are directly linked to the way secular settlements were achieved in both countries, respectively. Relying on the concept of secular settlements is useful since it does not imply a unidirectional path towards secularization, but varying trajectories that slide along a scale of secular policy outcomes. In addition, by studying secular settlements, Mayrl is able to focus on one aspect of secularization, and therefore acknowledge how a policy outcome on education that allows for religious flexibility can be paired with a policy outcome on another issue that is quite secular, and inflexible.

The author identifies three processes that organize the path towards secular settlements. The three processes—state-building, professionalization and religious conflict—reflect best what is happening in each country, but with different causal pathways. In each of these processes he identifies key differences that interact and make for divergent outcomes. The process of state-building in the US was brought about by cooperation between state and religious leaders, resulting in an open and decentralized approach to religious education. In the Australian case, state-building resulted in a centralized state at odds with the religious leadership. Similarly, professionalization directed the cases into divergent trajectories. These are detailed in a fascinating chapter, where Mayrl describes how American

² Damon Mayrl, 2016, *Secular Conversions: Political Institutions and Religious Education in the United States and Australia, 1800-2000* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

educational professionalization led to openness, incorporation and innovation in education; and how, in Australia, a centralized and rigid state structure led to conformity and compliance, and halted professionalization per se. Religious conflict, the third process, is perhaps the most fascinating part of this argument since it yields interesting and counterintuitive outcomes.

Mayrl provides a fresh perspective on today's debates regarding religion and education in the United States as he relates them to these particular processes that led to the secularization of schools in the 19th and early 20th centuries. He argues that by the 1960 Supreme Court decisions, the three processes had actually transformed religious education in US schools. First, the broader context of decentralization, where local institutions were vital in wresting control over education away from the center, together with the influence of a new category of individuals, such as the school superintendent, gave power to local policies to develop in a bottom up manner. Second, the story of religious conflict is highly important. This was a struggle between Protestants and Catholics and less importantly, Jews (who would become much more significant in the 20th century) about control over the curriculum. As such, Catholics successfully opposed the Pan-Protestant devotionals as they were slowly integrating into American political culture. The secularization of schools was a by-product of this struggle to assert one religion's dominance over another. Third, what notably aided the outcome of the religious conflict, Mayrl explains, was the role of professionalization and expertise in education that steered American education towards more scientific, more progressive services, while religion—as it was now seen as a non-scientific, absolute and non-democratic form of knowledge—lost out.

In the 20th century, this path only consolidated further with the impact of the Supreme Court decisions brought about by a series of cases where a coalition of progressive Protestantism, Judaism and Civil Libertarianism increasingly fought for the application of the separation of church and state in public education. Here again, the same processes of the earlier period, continued decentralized decision-making, religious conflict, rising expertise and professionalism as well as the impact of the Court locked in important transformations that ensured a strict separation, and the elimination of devotionals in American public schools.

The exposition of the American case is not only excellent, but it also highlights a particular American enigma often revealed, but not well explained. That is, many observers and critics of American

education argue that it is quite secular, while America itself is incredibly religious. How can we explain this? Mayrl helps us by setting the path. First, we have to point to the restricted focus on the notion of “secular settlements.” By choosing to concentrate on this narrow concept, Mayrl can explain why schools can be quite secular while, in other areas, religiosity can be high. So, the religious settlements in different domains clearly emerge from different institutional contexts and state society relations. Second, Mayrl points out the unintended consequences of religious groups being too invested in their religions to come to a consensus on how educational institutions should conduct themselves. As a result, secularity became a viable option since it appears to bring a better outcome than having schools become bastions of one religious denomination. What he does not say, however, is that this is a process that is privy to democratic societies and where minority religions are incorporated into the public realm. In many deeply religious societies institutions will reflect the religiosity of the dominant group because minorities will rarely have a voice.

As Mayrl tries to explain the reason for extreme religious contentious politics in the United States, he again focuses on the role of the state and the fragmented political structure of the American state, formulating the relative weakness of the government and the deep religiosity of the people into an explosive configuration. What he underplays is the particular history of American political cultural divisions: the deeply engrained divisions that were established at the moment of emergence; the existence of two deeply held narratives of American national development that have sometimes united this country under the banner of “civil religion” but that have also often been at the root of division and strife.³

It is this particular division that has intensified and reconfigured a gulf within American society along the lines of conservative religious and liberal religious factions that are at odds today on the matter of the role of religion in education. The type of religious conflict that was waged to secularize schools, is now being waged to recast the role of religion in schools. What Mayrl is successful at describing in his last chapter is the blurring and concealing that has occurred through the

³ Robert Bellah, 1967, “Civil Religion in America”, *Journal of the Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 96 (1): 1-21; Denis Lacorne, 2011, *Religion in America: A Political History* (New York, Columbia University Press); Philip

Gorski, 2017, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

introduction of multiple “solutions” to the problem of education in America, such as charter schools and tax credits, that provide the institutional mechanisms for the reintroduction of religion into education. The increasing alliance between charter schools and churches is bound to change the balance between religious and secular education.⁴ Research shows that in many places religious schools close and reopen as charter schools with exactly the same teachers and set up.⁵ This is simply a ruse to emphasize a religious curriculum without clearly saying so and to obtain state funds for it. Also, since 2000, the complex, traditionalist and ambiguous rulings of a more conservative court have added to the lack of clarity of the role of religion in education.⁶ This allows for multiple loopholes for religion to be reintroduced in public schools.

To sum up: a decentralized education system, grassroots organization, religious conflict—all morphed their way to the 21st century to allow religious groups to struggle for control over the school curriculum. These struggles base their arguments on the religious freedom guaranteed by the First Amendment, mirroring the struggle for public school secularization. The discourse on religious freedom led to the formation of such local grassroots organizations as the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, which, naturally, advocates teaching the Bible in public schools. Although interfaith religious conflict might remain, the biggest conflict is occurring on the secular *v.* religious front. This change away from direct interfaith conflict on the ground of public institutions could be explained by the differentiation of schools based on ideology. It is no longer necessary to fight which Bible is going to be taught, if any organization can easily create a publically funded charter school that is only seemingly secular. Therefore, the precise reasons for secularization of public education in the US (permeable state from the top and conflict from the bottom) might have been laying the foundations for increasing religiosity in public schools.

Therefore, what Mayrl identifies as key processes for the secular settlements of the first period in fact work perfectly well to explain the slow dismantling of secular settlements in the 21st century. Whether

⁴ Justice Benjamin and Colin MacLeod, 2016. *Have a Little Faith: Religion, Democracy, and the American Public School* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press).

⁵ Allie Gross, 2017, “The Schools Blurring the Line Between Church and State”, *The Atlantic*, May 24, 2017. [https://www.](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/05/the-school-blurring-the-line-between-church-and-state/527418/)

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⁶ James W. Fraser, 2016, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in Multicultural America* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press).

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the outcome will look like Australia is difficult to predict, especially since Mayrl hesitates to include the specificity of the cultural dynamics of American religiosity and extreme polarization along religious, racial and ideological outlooks today.

Regardless, this is an extremely important, thoughtful and perceptive analysis that I suspect will be widely discussed.

K A R E N B A R K E Y