



THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

, IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

The thesis analyses the development of religious education in South Australia. The analysis is political, historical and sociological. It is divided into three major chapters, one which covers the period up to the 1940 Education Act, the second which concentrates on the post-1940 changes leading to the introduction of religious education into South Australian schools in 1975, and a third which offers a theory with which to assess the significance of the legislative and educational changes. Two other short chapters provide an introduction, including a brief survey of the literature, and a conclusion.

The pre-1940 chapter introduces two arguments: firstly, that from its colonial beginning, the history of South Australian education has been overtly and closely tied to a Christian tradition of social morality and work ethics, and secondly, that while Christianity has provided a dominant source of social, occupational and educational theory, that dominance has not been attained without a struggle. Indeed, the sheer battle to survive as a significant influence has ensured that the various churches have had to modify some of their stands, seek unlikely alliances, defer some of their goals and re-orient some of their practice - in short, to play politics not only with the state but also amongst themselves.

These arguments summarise the development of religious education in this state - the stolid legislative progress, the intense inter-denominational conflicts (over such issues as, the use of the Bible as a text-book in schools, the involvement of the clergy in the school time-table) - and the precarious political balance in which the various churches co-existed, mindful of their role in helping to maintain 'order' and 'unity' in a state undergoing significant economic developments. The latter thesis is predicated on the theory that the production of a work-force willing and able to share and endorse the hegemonic values of the day is a function of education.

The post-1940 chapter extends the argument that while Christian ethics

remained at least the implicit basis of schooling, the explicit programmes of religious instruction continued to pose problems for the different denominations. It has three points of focus:

- (a) the period 1940-1969, during which time church membership and attendance declined and religious instruction became unworkable,
- (b) the strategy adopted in response to this by the protagonists of religious education, and
- (c) the counter-strategy used during the same period by their opponents.

In tracing the story of the introduction of religious education, I note that its implementation was assisted by the composition of the Steinle Committee, the availability of interstate and overseas reports on religious education, the sympathetic stance of the Education Department, the Education Minister and the Premier, denominational unity on the question of religious education and, I shall argue, a concern amongst a significant proportion of people in this state that social morality (including the work ethic) was under some threat. In examining the strategy adopted by the opponents of religious education, I suggest that while they had limited overt backing, they were able to articulate the interests of a sizable minority and, in fact, provide an effective counter to the pro-religious position.

The essence of the argument in this chapter will be that the various denominations experienced difficulty in maintaining the struggle to influence social values and that, in order to survive, the Methodist Church especially (and the others, to a lesser extent) used whatever resources they could muster in an attempt to regain their influence. Those resources included some, which had been utilized prior to 1940, namely, public displays of political strength and clandestine schemes of political intrigue; as well, they sought to broaden their base of influence by getting the state and alternative socio-political movements to take up their causes.

The 'theory' chapter examines the role which christianity plays in an industrial, capitalist society; I note the limited work done in Australia

on this question and then compare the Marxist and pluralist theories of religious influence. My conclusion is that, taken alone, neither is an adequate explanation. Instead, I suggest that, while generally, christianity tends to work in favour of 'order' and 'unity' in an economic, political and social sense and that this tendency is of some advantage to the state, in detail, the various churches compete in educational, social and political conflicts and vary their strategies to suit the strength or weakness of their respective position in the denominational battle. I further argue that since both the 'state' and the 'churches' operate in a society in which economic and ideological factors tend to have a dominant influence, then both institutions use each other when it is expedient to do so; and, therefore, in essence, tend to rely on each other for their respective economic and ideological survival.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference has been made in the text itself.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

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